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Erosion, Sediment, Fragment: Tracing Layers in Moyra Davey's Writing and Photographs

Tilo Reifenstein

Moyra Davey's photographs from the past twenty-five years often seem to show little. They focus on ordinary, quotidian life, without the need to transform it into a monumental epic or story of deprivation. There are people on the subways, a microwave sits on top of a fridge, and dust gathers on wooden floorboards (fig. 1). Chris Kraus (52; italics in original), in a chapter on Davey's writing and photographic work, described Davey's writing as "informed by illness, but [not] *about* illness. Life isn't personal. She offers herself as protagonist to lead us toward recognitions that arise through correspondence." What corresponds is not a direct connection or aboutness; rather, it involves a slow layering of elements that let something recognizable emerge.

Reading Davey, especially in the recently compiled Fitzcarraldo edition *Index Cards*, which gathers fifteen essays from 2003 onwards, gives the impression of a collection of that often repeats itself, sometimes verbatim, or rehearses the same ideas numerous times in nearly identical ways. True to the etymology of the term "essay", this engagement exhibits a tentative incompleteness, or rather, an openness to its own recourse to the ideas of others. This makes reading an encounter with recurring fragments, whose compilation points to its own inconclusiveness but also manifests that *this is all there is*.

Davey is "drawn to fragmentary forms" (*Index* 49) and returns, time and again, to Walter Benjamin, Jean Genet, Susan Sontag, and others. She does so sometimes in combination, sometimes individually, and sometimes using primary sources, while other times referencing

Accepted version

their words through the works of others. Davey acknowledges this layered fragmentation when she writes admiringly of Leo Tolstoy, Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove Knausgård and Hervé Guibert, noting that "[t]hey circle back over the material again and again each time refracted through a slightly altered prism" and that "[t]here is comfort in their repetition" (*Index* 217).

The fragments Davey brings together do not add up to a whole, at least not in a mathematical sense, nor is their accumulation a completion. Rather, the fragment opens up the seeming contradiction of its own completeness in incompletion. It betrays a resistance to completion, to being absolutely or fully determined; yet it marks an exhausted, though not exhaustive, end without ending. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy similarly consider the fragment in relation to its own part- and wholeness: "La totalité fragmentaire [...] ne peut être située en aucun point : elle est simultanément dans le tout et dans chaque partie. Chaque fragment vaut pour lui-même et pour ce dont il se détache" (64; Fragmentary totality […] cannot be situated in any single point: it is in the whole and in each part simultaneously. Each fragment stands for itself and for what it detaches from). The fragment refuses to come to a point that may be found beyond itself and yet points by way of its incompleteness beyond itself.

While we might be best advised to "toujours gard[er] des réserves à l'égard d'un certain culte du fragment et surtout de *l'œuvre* fragmentaire" (Derrida, *Points* 311; italics in original; always ha[ve] some reservations with regard to a certain cult of the fragment and especially of the fragmentary *work*), Davey's interest in the fragmentary – both in literature and photography – provides a productive, if inexhaustive, entry point. Davey is a fragmentary writer in the much the same way her photographic work captures glimpses of the mundane. Her photographs are not stagey; there are no elaborate setups, no camera crew or set design, no halted traffic, no lightboxes, no giant glossy prints, no bloat. Davey's staging often lies in

Accepted version

the relationship between her photographs and the text. Regularly, her works are accompanied by writing, usually in essay form, like those compiled in the Fitzcarraldo edition. The fruitful relationship between writing, reading, and photography is acknowledged in the artist-writer's blunt assertion that photography is more interesting in its relation to a text (*Index* 48–49, 149). Writing and photography layer upon each other to the extent that "reproducibility in book form is part of the vocabulary of the photograph" (*Index* 48).

The *Copperheads* are an ongoing series of photographic prints for which Davey took microscopic pictures of American one-cent coins, pennies, using raking light to cast Abraham Lincoln's face in a rich, textured landscape (fig. 2). The original work consisted of 100 photographs taken between 1989 and 1990, shortly after the artist had settled, penniless, in New York. Davey's fascination was with money's capacity to affect mindsets. She was particularly intrigued by the story of Emanuel Ninger, a nineteenth-century German-born sign painter-turned-counterfeiter. Ninger arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey, with his wife in 1882. Not long after, he bought a farm, gave up his day job, and began producing his own dollar bills in pen and ink (Bloom 91–101; Stevenson 57). He purchased his paper from the government supplier Crane & Company, stained it with coffee, and cut it to fit $20, $50, and $100 bills. On the last Friday of each month, he would travel to New York and turn his work into cash. The counterfeiter's career lasted fourteen years and was ended when the ink of one of his $50 bills, by then notorious, began to run between a wet bar top and the saloon-keeper's hands. Although Ninger had carefully omitted the Bureau of Engraving and Printing credit line on his works, he was nonetheless sentenced to six years in Erie County penitentiary.

Accepted version

With the reasonably cheap production values of copy-stand photography and cost-effective printing in a Chinatown lab, the small, white-bordered prints became Davey's exploration of the multivalent exchange capacity of reproduced money.

> Though I was not making much revenue from them, I thought of the Copperheads in some way as my own counterfeit, a deeply satisfying reverie of self-sufficiency, a bit like the shit-to-gold fantasy whereupon the dirtier and grimier the penny, the greater its potential for transformation and surprise. (*Copperheads* 18)

The *Copperheads* have become part of the artist's wider practice of using photographs as mailers (also referred to as aerograms and aerographs). Typically, they are "shot on film, scanned, and digitally C-printed. Folded into letters they get dropped into mailboxes where they sail off for a few days or weeks and have a secret life of their own before turning up at their destinations" (*Index* 147). Folded in half along a line that skims just below Lincoln's nose or bisects it, and then again into thirds, the photograph comes to enclose itself, showing itself as a third of itself – one-sixth on each side as an envelope. The photograph not only becomes its own wrapper, covering itself with itself, but it also accrues the marks of exchange and journey that it already carried as macrographic document.

Initially an expedience (Lebovici & Davey n.p.), the mailer was sent to friends and gallerists and unfolds as a mini poster. Cutting the colorful tape that binds the open edges in four places and unfolding the paper turns the stamps, addressee and addresser label, along with the other traces of packaging, trade, traffic, travel, and arrival, into an expanded system of the photograph's formal marks. The penny's movement in perpetual exchange and circulation exhausts itself in scratches, grazes, scores, and furrows on Lincoln´s relief effigy, the field and edge of the coin, and its inscriptions. Its verifiable use stands in for the trust in legal tender and exchange while remaining an isolable token of it. The letters' comparable, though

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shorter, passage accumulates its own layers of time – traces of a life between hands and machines that remain secret and unknowable, yet whose anonymous marks come to constitute them.

The *Copperheads* layer onto themselves. The work is neither singular nor finite; it is ongoing. Any arbitrary, countable end would merely indicate an uncountable continuation of exchanges and traces. The coins in the photographs continue their erosive journey unseen, while the letter's sedimentary deposits grow and wear away. As fragmentary, incomplete, yet all there is, fragments are ends unto themselves, but not endings. No single fragment necessitates another; no totality of them can constitute completeness. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy note that "[l]e fragment [...] comprend un essentiel inachèvement" (62; [t]he fragment […] involves an essential incompletion), an endless deferral of a resolution of events. The coin defers the touch of myriad hands and apparatuses; the photograph defers an incomplete monetary exchange that has been momentarily frozen. The *Copperheads* enter a postal trade that submits their status and arrival to transmissive vicissitudes, further diverging each penny's journey. Unable to finish (*achever*) their exchanges, the essential incompleteness goes to their heads (*ad-capus-āre*).

As material things, the iconographic value of the pennies and photographs is held in abeyance by qualities that sediment and erode. The photographs are pictures, not images, and the pennies are things, not objects. Their relations to us may be determinable in the context of monetary exchanges, yet our relations to them exceed this objecthood, remaining heterogeneous, unspecifiable, and enigmatic (Brown 3–9). As mailers, the photographs' entry into the ubiquitous and mundane systems of communication and correspondence opens them to the failure of arrivals – not the failure not to arrive, but the failure to arrive at their destination, to arrive at another place. Jacques Derrida writes that he "di[t] toujours 'une

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lettre *peut* toujours *ne pas* arriver à destination, etc.'" (*Carte* 135; italics in original; always say[s] 'a letter *can* always *not* arrive at its destination, etc.') This "adestinate" arrival, an arrival somewhere, though not necessarily at its destination, is not merely Derrida's observation of the potential and real unreliability of the postal service but harbors the impossibility for any missive to *arrive*. The photograph, the letter, and the conversation all rely on go-betweens: language, image, gaze, touch. These couriers— "je cours je cours et je tombe tout le temps" (*Carte* 28; I run I run and I fall all the time)—run between addresser and addressee, even an addressee who was not addressed.

In Davey's "epistolary practice" (Latimer 194) the letter-photograph, like a postcard, shows itself to the intermediaries of a system of conveyance and may still remain closed to its recipient, failing to arrive. It may, after all, fail to correspond. It is part of the structure of the photographic letter for its secrets to remain readable to the other and incomprehensible to the addressee. The photographer's picture and the writer's letter or book become consignments whose dispatch ensures that no code is secret and that all messages may be read, especially because their iterability ensures that the work doesn't belong. It neither encloses itself nor belongs to an other. It is always already divided and divisible.

> Dès lors que, à la seconde, le premier trait d'une lettre se divise et doit bien supporter la partition pour s'identifier, il n'y a plus que des cartes postales, des morceaux anonymes et sans domicile fixe, sans destinataire attitré, lettres ouvertes, mais comme des cryptes. Toute notre bibliothèque, toute notre encyclopédie, nos mots, nos images, nos figures, nos secrets, un immense château de cartes postales. (Derrida, *Carte* 60)
>
> (As soon as, in a second, the first stroke of a letter divides itself, and must indeed support partition in order to identify itself, there are nothing but post cards, anonymous morsels without fixed address, without legitimate addressee, open letters,

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but like crypts. Our entire library, our entire encyclopaedia, our words, our images, our figures, our secrets, all an immense house of post cards.)

This is not to suggest that Davey's works, or any other (artistic) practices, function on the level of language as an abstract ideality of communication. Rather, they partake in writing as a practice that exceeds private or public language and the notion of communication. Iterability demands that the work partakes in a shared customary practice, inevitably opening it to be read. Moreover, it broaches any artistic or readerly limitations or constraints as a material practice. Neither the writer-maker nor any interpreter-reader can restrain the workings of iterability. The picture and writing inaugurate and constitute that which cannot be limited in practice and interpretation. They are not static remains of unchanging historicity; sedimentation and erosion continue to write and rewrite. What remains are abyssal postcards, opening gestures of an essential incompleteness. Correspondence is not a simple matter of effective communication but rather the work's incompleteness as envoy.

Hence, this essay, too, serves as sediment alongside pennies and postcards. It layers, incompletely, a stratum that writes about, with, across, against, through, and so on, other strata of the work. In this way, history, theory, and criticism rewrite the work as part of the sedimentation and erosion of practice. In recent years, Davey's literary and photographic work has garnered renewed interest, especially due to its fragmentary combination of autobiographical mode and broader theoretical and literary gestures. Lauren Fournier situates Davey's work within a broader American and European history of practice that joins autobiographical accounts with philosophical and theoretical concerns, which she calls autotheory. As a form of "performative life-thinking", Davey's work thinks from a position of lived, embodied experience where "[l]ife and art, theory and practice, and their interrelationships become objects for, and sites of, theorizing" (Fournier 14, 67).

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Margaret Iversen, at first glance, might be seen to sharpen this autotheoretical perspective by aligning Davey´s work with a "diaristic mode" of contemporary practice that owes much to Roland Barthes, particularly his "Death of the Author" essay and the notion of the "writing self" (799). Although Iversen references Fournier (805 *n.*25), she seeks to move away from "both the egoism of autobiography and the arrogance of theory" by highlighting the "citational" qualities of Davey's diaristic work (799, 815). What I described as Davey's fragmentary practice is similarly understood here as a sampling and reworking of encountered (found/sought) material, through which the "artist[…] open[s] the authorial 'I' to others" (820). The technological and mediated notion of profligate image-and-text flows in the age of bidirectional broadband is picked up in Holly Willis's carefully tracing of Davey's work through photography, video and writing, bookended by references to the artist's Instagram feed (*moyradavey*). Davey's cycling through topics is mapped against her medial diversity across writing, video and photography. Willis (26) reads this (interest in) "[p]romiscuity and heterogeneity [… as] gestures toward queerness and a desire for proliferation and abundance rather than singularity and sovereignty, while also signaling her investment in a sense of emergence."

The traversal of different artistic modes and the ease of taking up and letting go of ideas do not implicate Davey's work in whimsy or speed. As Jane Simon explores, Davey's work exhibits a deliberation attentive to "waiting, long durations, and failures, and map the passing of time" (8). Simon is particularly interested in Davey's photography of her apartment vis-à-vis life narratives and domesticity. More broadly, however, Davey´s work encounters the everyday: New York newsstands, people on subways, café and library scenes, empty bottles. These quotidian aspects of lived experience become careful documents of the passage of time and, inevitably, the finitude of human activity. Dust becomes the first quotidian layer of a geological formation that settles on human life.

Accepted version

Helen Molesworth, curator of the 2008 “Long Life Cool White” exhibition of Davey’s work at the Harvard University Art Museum, framed the *Copperheads* within the economic and political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. For Molesworth, Davey’s microscopic engagement with the smallest denomination of American currency cleverly investigated the promise and dream of freedom in a capitalist system that keeps on crashing and yet was instrumental in the events leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In Molesworth’s reading, the period’s mediatization of the fall of communism appears as a self-aggrandizement of American might, captured in through the surface of the coin.

> In more concrete ways the photographs attest to the circulation and use of the coin, as each one depicts a nicked, scarred, gouged, tarnished and rusted surface. Often the coin’s face is so mutilated that Lincoln’s profile is difficult, if not impossible, to discern. The *Copperheads* look like poisonous landscapes – aerial views of strip mines, the surface of the moon. (Molesworth 11–12)

The penny becomes fragmentary evidence of the uncountable lives and experiences through which the coin passes on a limited earth. Each person leaves a mostly imperceptible trace, inscribing themselves anonymously as part of an unrecognized group, except for, perhaps, as a user of things of hardly any value. The penny pincher, the person who needs to turn over a penny, the collector of coins – each absorbed into and part of the historical sediment of a transitory object of exchange. The undetectable trace of an I, a life, a story, a biography, momentarily tarnishes or scratches the surface of a shiny metal disc before daily use buffs out its memory, layers it with deeper gouges and darker grooves. Myriad lives lived, brief blips in time, forgotten, layered over, rubbed out. Erosion is here also an extractive, exploitative, gendered, ableist, and racist Ponzi scheme of capitalism, where faceless traces are left on and by people and planetary “resources.”

Accepted version

The photographic mailer redoubles this accretion (fig. 3). Labels of an addressee and return-to account open a glimpse of an individual within the frozen moment of innumerable anonymous handshakes. Stamps and their marks of validation return it to the machinery of commerce and traffic. The envelope, as photograph, passes through another set of hands and machines to finally – perhaps – arrive at its destination, showing itself as both a document of and a document to the sedimentation of transit, commerce, exchange, and life. Four colorful tabs, one on each short side and two on the long one, must be cut—by an individual—to unfold. The tape itself becomes a marker across the space of each single image and their accumulation in the exhibition grid. They impose a rhythm that breaks the lattice work of homogeneity while reconnecting each rectangle across the space of the wall, around corners, and towards the other side of the exhibition space.

The sedimented strata on the coin are both deposited and depositing in the photograph, which is further layered in each fold, stamp, tag, adding another stratum to the grid's layers on the gallery wall, connecting instances of one layer with those from another. However, this is no linear stratum super stratum. Layering and attrition can counterfeit merely accumulative models of stratification and challenge any presumption of historical hierarchy.

The gallery-wall installation, initially a record of $1 through 100 little Lincolns, also harbored hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of more invisible portraits. In the repetition of profiles, George Baker recognizes the work's recall of photography's beginnings in the studio portrait and its extended participation in the systematization and categorization through typological studies. In the ebb and flow of erosion and sedimentation, the profiles are not only in the process of being worn away but also constitute and (re)build. There is an emergence of form that is part of the erasure of form. For Baker (327) "[t]he *Copperheads* are photographs of destruction and resurrection, loss and potential rebirth, at once." Davey

Accepted version

recognizes photography's reliance on the people within them and returns to Walter Benjamin´s thoughts on this matter in various essays. Part of the artist's 25-year abstinence from photographing people (*Index* 145) stems from the historical preeminence of the portrait and her engagement with photographic critical theory in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program:

> The reminder was occasioned by George Baker quoting Walter Benjamin who said: "To do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations." I couldn't stop thinking about the truth of this statement, something I know first hand from the pleasure I take in looking at pictures of people […]. (*Index* 144)

Davey's frequent return to Benjamin's words through a range of (near enough) formulations, whether in quotation or paraphrase, is not surprising, given that even her works without people appear to be concerned with the lives of those absent. Benjamin had the "entgeltliche[...], repräsentative[...] Portraitaufnahme" (paid-for portrait photograph) in mind when he mused that "der Verzicht auf den Menschen für die Photographie der unvollziehbarste unter allen [ist]" (310; the renunciation of people in photography is the most infeasible of all). Davey's abstinence has facilitated the emergence of the portrait through the work's attention to "desultory things […] link[s] nominally worthless paper and metal objects while contrasting their mode of circulation to that of paperless capital flow" (Witkovsky 218). The work points to its "own a frugal worldliness" (Mannes-Abbott, para. 2) while also engaging with the extractive and exploitative logic of capitalist consumption. Robyn Adams imagines the "sediment of reading," caught in the "central gutter of the pages" of a book, as the rich evidence of past chin-stroking cerebration or strained rubbing of eyebrows (36). Depositing secreted sweat, shed skin cells, and hair becomes a reader's way of (in)voluntarily

Accepted version

leaving a trace of ownership, perusal or care. The sediment of passage and transaction – both the postal service's and the coin's – layers lives in the things of life.

In its first iteration, *Copperheads* was shown alongside Davey's Super-8 film *Hell Notes* (1990), which focuses the artist's concern with money in a particular way. Natalie Harren (n.p.) describes the film as a "non-narrative essay" that serves "as a meditation on the relations between money, food, and excrement". The film meanders through different sites in New York: the domestic space of Davey's apartment, the public spaces of Central Park, a tourist ferry, public toilets, and the commercial, private space of a gold vault. Through these settings, the artist explores familiar stories around financial concerns. In one part,

> titled "Meatball Hero Lecture", Davey explains to a friend, who gradually loses interest in his sandwich, Sigmund Freud's and Martin Luther's theories about the unrealized potential value of shit. "If money were shit, which then became food," she says, "then it would fully gratify the infantile desire." Later, we gaze at a sauté pan in which a bunch of pennies sizzle in a foaming bed of lard—indeed, looking quite like shit, and you certainly wouldn't want to eat it. (Harren n.p.)

Copperheads effortlessly navigates the abstract and concrete of global financial systems and their effects on people who are hard-pressed by financial woes. The simple gesture of a photograph as a letter also signposts the international flows of a costly, heavily insured, and climate-controlled art shipping business. At once, the prints layer transportational contingencies onto the documented layers of thousands of hands fumbling for change. Or, at least, they do so in the abstract, as the work's absorption into the world of gallery consignments means they now partake in a different mode of transportation. Here, as in her writing and reading, Davey is drawn to the metadiscourse and the metawork. As photographic work, it names the gallery through its address label. Yet, the naming is – in contemporary

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installations of the work – always historical. The gallery name and exhibiting gallery rarely match, indicating the work's own transitory position within an international art market. As Davey puts it,

> As I struggle to write about photography, I remember how much easier it seemed to write about reading and writing, and how much I love to read about both these subjects. I begin to wonder if it's not just the modernist paradigm kicking in, that a metadiscourse is always more satisfying: painting about painting, photographs about photography, and writing about writing. I can always be engaged by discipline- or medium-specific metaproductions. (*Index* 45)

This is where *Copperheads*, as metadiscursive photographs, address themselves as photographs that address the world. Layering and sedimentation are continual, perhaps continuous, in Davey's work. They both provide and are provided by a self-reflexive engagement with the history, theory and practice of the medium. The sedimentation that the photographs document and that constitutes the photographs is meta because it layers. Meta is sediment because it seeks to envelop.

Erosion is sedimental; its accretion is not just building up but removal. Within the artist's practice, erosion and sedimentation become two facets of the same contingency. Not one as (a) whole, unified, absolute, but as different in their inseparability. Erosion sediments. Sedimentation erodes. Sedimentation is death and rebirth. It covers, silences, caresses, and suffocates what it touches. It reshapes, re-orients, and re-forms as renewal and obliteration. The fragment is the impossible end of sedimentation and erosion. The fragment is what remains – a testament to the contingency of incompletion.

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Accepted version

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Accepted version

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Accepted version

Figures

Fig. 1: Moyra Davey, *Floor*, 2003. C-print, 24 × 20 inches. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Buchholz, and greengrassi, London.

Fig. 2: Moyra Davey, detail: *Copperheads No. 101–200, Clock, Tate Liverpool*, 1990–2013. 100 C-prints on fuji crystal archive paper, tape, postage, ink, each 45.7 × 30.5 cm, overall dimensions variable. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz.

Fig. 3: Installation view: Moyra Davey, ‘Hell Notes’, Portikus, Frankfurt, September 2017 – January 2018. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz. Works from left to right: *EM Copperheads No. 1-*

150, Galerie Buchholz, 1990–2017. 150 digital C-prints on fuji crystal archive paper, tape, postage, ink, each 45.7 × 30.5 cm, overall dimensions variable. *Copperheads No. 201–300, Eclipse, Portikus*, 1990–2017. 100 C-prints on fuji crystal archive paper, tape, postage, ink, each 45.7 × 30.5 cm, overall dimensions variable. *Copperheads No. 401–470, Janis J., Portikus*, 1990–2017. 70 C-prints on fuji crystal archive paper, tape, postage, ink, each 45.7 × 30.5 cm, overall dimensions variable.

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