

Bonjour, Mademoiselle Collins, Blake Stimson, 2004

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Photography has long been an existential medium. This is not its only quality, of course—we need think only of the everyday snapshot, the occupational portrait, the promotional image, the journalistic or technical document, or, even, the travel souvenir, to realize otherwise—but the modern combination of unabashed nerve and raw self-doubt that has served as the mark of existence held out has a value unto itself has played an important role, particularly as photography has made its claim to be art. This is most evident when we realize that the world the photographer travels to in order to stake that claim is one that frequently looks back with a peculiar gaze, one that recognizes her not as family or friend, proselytizer, service provider or tourist but as someone or something quite fully other, as a dark continent only barely recognizable and yet still largely known. Indeed, if given half a chance the world brought into view by the art photographer will always look back—will always *stare*, really, as she sets up tripod and camera, determines exposure, adjusts focus and framing, smiles

nervously or otherwise ingratiates herself to the subjects at hand and exposes one or two or three sheets of film—stare, that is, at the strangeness of someone without a home.

Figure 1

Of course the romance with such homelessness has regularly held modernists of all stripes in thrall and particularly so the artists. Witness, for example, even such a matter-of-fact modernist as Gustave Courbet: “In our overcivilized society, I must lead the life of a savage,” he wrote to a friend in 1850, concluding triumphantly, “I have, therefore, just started out on the great, wandering, and independent life of the gypsy.” It is the greatness of this life that Courbet would

subsequently thematize in his 1854 painting titled *The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*, albeit now no longer in the figure of savage or gypsy but instead by assuming the great, wandering, and independent life of the Wandering Jew. In all three models—savage, gypsy, and Jew—that wandering is itself assumed to be an ethical procedure, a movement away from modern European life in order to gain a critical view. In Courbet’s painting the meaning of wandering is triangulated between three compartments: the straight-on carriage of bourgeois entitlement of Courbet’s patron Alfred Bruyas, the head cast down in subservience of Bruyas’s servant, and the head held high in a bodily declaration of autonomy by Courbet himself. The artist as wanderer, we are to understand, realizes his independence from “overcivilized society,” his proud if harsh homelessness, not by foregoing the trappings of the industrializing world, but instead through a form of class vagrancy.

The question that raises itself for us here is what happens in the transition from the modernist ideal of *savage/gypsy/Jew/artist* to that of *savage/gypsy/Jew/photographer*, from the wandering outwards towards otherness of Monsieur Courbet to that of Mademoiselle Collins? That is, what does the ethical wandering given by photography have to say to that given by art? The first and most obvious factor to consider is the mechanical difference and its implications for the encounter between artist and photographer and his or her subjects. Where the artist typically experiences that encounter over time—think of Bruyas modeling

for Courbet, for example, not to mention the extensive relations of patronage necessary to support the production of even a single painting—the photographer’s relationship with any subject is far more likely to be only momentary. To illustrate this we need only imagine a photographer like Jacob Riis sneaking into a tenement house in the middle of the night to startle its impoverished tenants with his magnesium flash before fleeing from the brickbats flying in response, or Cartier-Bresson arriving here or there just in the knick of time to capture its “decisive moment,” or Robert Frank stealing a shot on the fly as a “solitary observer,” in his characterization of this mode of wandering, “turning away after the click of the shutter.”

The photographer distances herself from the world very differently than the artist. In a sense she is simply *more* itinerant as she skips from one fleeting click of the shutter to the next than is the artist whose movement is in reaction and therefore always anchored on either side by the relatively stable rankings of the social order. Casting herself into the moment to sink or swim without such social quays for her subjectivity, the photographer’s homelessness can only realize itself fully as a kind of “shame,” as Sartre once termed it, a discomfort born of “the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the other is looking at.” The photographer’s version of the modernist dare is to immerse herself in that look which “embraces [her] being and correlatively the walls, the door,” even, Sartre says, “the keyhole” through which she gazes in return. Indeed, given in every passage from life as lived to “life on film,” at least when that passage rises to the level of art, is a kind of brutal honesty—a confession almost—that speaks to the social conditions of knowing. It is only a momentary shame, of course, and one largely lost to posterity once recorded, but for a brief but vital moment photography is experienced most fully in its existential condition: as an index of experience with all the power and all the poverty of its close relations information, data and statistics.