

Precarious Art and the Aesthetics of the Precarious Gaze

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Abstract

Precarious art refers to depictions of the economically underprivileged which invite the assumed non- or not-yet-precarious onlooker to face the other of class. In looking at these images, the privileged are forced to acknowledge the suffering of the underrepresented. Precarious art thus does what moral philosophers have urged us to do: it pleads for an emphatic and affective involvement in the suffering of others. The resulting gaze, however, always risks turning into voyeurism. This article explores the dilemma of voyeur-

ism by delineating the concept of the “precarious gaze,” a class-based viewing structure that unsettles the onlooker by disturbing, albeit momentarily, his or her sense of sovereignty. By closely analyzing Tom Stone’s photographs of homeless people, which trigger a precarious gaze, this article contributes to contemporary political critiques of precarity and tries to bridge the gap between the visual arts and the sociopolitical and economic order that has produced mass precarity in the first place.

In our times of rapid gentrification and economic segregation, class-based and political polarization dovetails with a widening cultural divide. The precariat and its other—like cosmopolitan liberals and rural white supremacists—live in separate worlds. This is where the arts—and specifically those artworks that depict the precariat—come in. By offering a symbolic terrain for encounters between individuals who might otherwise live worlds apart, the precarious arts, to coin a new term, can bridge the gap between those at the bottom of the social stratum and those closer to the top. This article is interested in those (rare) moments when the “comfortable class” looks at, or reads about, those who lack economic or cultural capital. It examines the kind of gaze(s) images of the precarious class evoke in those who care to look. Do images of the underrepresented necessarily trigger a voyeuristic gaze, or do they also unsettle our sense of security, as a “precarious gaze” aspires to do?

For more than a century, the visual arts have provided a space where the economically secure might learn more about the invisible class. Paintings such as Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*, or documentary photos like Dorothea Lange’s *The Migrant Mother* or Sebastião Salgado’s photo series *Workers* have bridged the economic divide, allowing the bourgeois subject to vicariously connect with the precarious class. A mass of images, some of which leave a lasting impression, while others border on cliché, can be subsumed into this category. Precarious art depicts individuals or groups lacking social, cultural or economic capital as a result of (gang or police) violence, drug addiction, incarceration, the effects of ecological disasters, extreme debt, or poverty. These images generally address individuals who can afford, among many other things, to attend art exhibitions and theater performances. Their mediated, rather than social, engagement with the precarious class is and has always been, therefore, a one-sided affair. It is also a short-lived, momentary encounter that has, with a few exceptions (e.g., in the case of Lange and Jacob Riis), no immediate political effect. But is it necessarily a bad thing if a non-, or not-yet, precarious subject takes an interest in the lives of the precariat?

Let’s take a short look at American cultural history to assess the role of the arts in collective efforts to raise class consciousness. The Black

Arts Movement undoubtedly played a pivotal role during the Civil Rights Movement, but it also laid the groundwork for dismantling the racist cultural hegemony in favor of more inclusive, multicultural, and sensitive ways of recognizing the racially marginalized. Likewise, contemporary hegemonic views on gender and sexism have, in part, been anticipated by pioneering feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman, since they implicitly questioned essentialist views of gender and sex. Along those lines, I believe that portraits of America's precariat—whether in the form of photographs, films, plays, novels, computer games, or poems—invite the (middle-class) subject to acknowledge the other of class. By vicariously encountering the precariat and class-based oppression, the (middle-class) viewer overcomes the collective neglect that normalizes precarity.

Social documentary photography has been particularly effective in bridging the gap by informing some of the plights of others. Pioneering photojournalist Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant in 1890s New York, depicted the plight of Manhattan's poor population in order to inform America's affluent "half" about the mass precarity of his age. His photobook *How the Other Half Lives* (1895) not only showed the sad faces of the poverty-stricken, but actually spurred social reforms. During the Great Depression, FSA photographers informed American (middle-class) voters about the dire conditions in the rural South and Midwest in order to muster support for President Roosevelt's New Deal policies. These federally-funded photographers were equally successful in bridging the economic gap. Thereafter, many American art photographers—among them Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Joel Meyerowitz, and Gary Winnogrant—produced (usually black-and-white) photos depicting the working and precarious class to appeal to magazine readers and art connoisseurs.

While I want to caution against an enthusiastic embrace of the political power of the arts, as well as an enthrallment with Adorno's aesthetic theory of negativity, this admittedly cursory glance at the history of American visual arts gives evidence to the fact that these artistic interventions matter. The (visual) arts offer a symbolic terrain where the

privileged class can meet the economically, politically, and culturally marginalized.

Such vicarious cross-class encounters are particularly important in times of excessive socio-economic inequality. In the long run, some artworks are capable of raising their viewers' (class) awareness. Therefore, we cannot afford to dismiss the arts' potential to metaphorically bridge the class divide that neoliberal governance has stealthily created and continues to widen (cf. Brown). For these artistic cross-class encounters to take place, an image has to appeal to the bourgeois subject so that he or she is willing to face the precarity of others.

Recognizing Precarity

Before we discuss how visual artists have depicted the precarious class, if they chose to do so, let's take a moment to dwell on the ethical dimension. A number of philosophers have insisted on the ethical duty of the self to recognize the other, and many have used the metonymy of the face to elaborate on this civic duty that involves an affective engagement. In his foundational essay "Ethics and the Face," Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes the appellative function of the *face* in bonding with another human being: "The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation" (198). He goes on to argue that this relation involves a recognition of destitution, as *the face* is "appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal" (200). Judith Butler writes that Levinas's ethics of the face rests upon "an apprehension of the precariousness of life, one that begins with the precarious life of the Other" (xvii-xviii). Butler takes up Levinas's insistence on the need to acknowledge/face the precariousness of others, and uses it to meditate on our interrelations with others. "[W]e are implicated in lives that are not our own," Butler states, arguing that this *implication* or "bondedness," as she also calls it, hinges on the very act of *seeing* another human being (28).

In "Facing Precarity," Chris Rudge builds on this philosophical concept to bring the conversation to the economically destitute. To him, the ethics of the face requires us "to act charitably and emphatically,

to afford a measure of recognition to those who live precarious lives: the marginalized, the destitute, the poverty-stricken” (2). He evokes the politics of recognition and pleads for an emphatic and affective involvement, for “[t]o ‘show one’s face’ is to petition for care, to ask for empathy” (2). In other words, avoiding callousness to the destitution of others means, literally, not averting our eyes. This is emotionally draining and we are not always capable of doing the right thing. But if we choose to relate to, or reflect on, images of precarious subjects/faces, we are invariably confronted with images of suffering. If we engage with these images emphatically, as Rudge says we must, we risk viewing them as “disaster porn” (Dickey, qtd. in Rudge 6) or “poverty porn” (Amy McQuire, qtd. in Rudge 7). This observation brings us to the thorny issue of voyeurism and gets us to the crux of the well-intended project of facing the precariat.

The Dilemma of Voyeurism

Any artistic attempt to bridge the socio-economic gap has to deal with the power imbalance between someone who has access to a means of production (such as a professional camera) and resources (e.g., time and know-how) and someone who does not. To take portraits of the poor is a hazardous affair, not only for the sitter, but for everyone involved.

Bruce Davidson’s black-and-white portraits of impoverished New Yorkers, for example, deliberately play with a voyeuristic gaze. His photo *East 100th Street* gives a glimpse into a rundown bedroom, showing a woman lasciviously stretching out on a dirty mattress. She seems to enjoy being the object of the gaze; no wonder that the scholar Christoph Ribbat accuses this photograph of committing a “scopophilic sin” and “re-humiliati[ng] those already humiliated by poverty” (180). Ribbat goes on to argue, however, that the opposite of scopophilia, an unwillingness to look, leads to ignorance and indifference towards the poor and is therefore not necessarily a better alternative. This touches on the essential conflict inherent in social documentary photography between the desire to expose something that is hidden or neglected and the voyeuristic gaze.

While voyeurism in the arts and voyeurism in the social sphere function differently, in the hegemonic class hierarchy in Western societies, a socially inferior subject is likely to experience embarrassment or shame when exposed to the photographer's, and later the public's, eye. Yet voyeurism is not necessarily a perverse way of seeing.

The precarious subject can be represented in two basic ways. Scholars have come up with various labels to distinguish between the two basic operative modes of objectifying the sitter to the status of being looked at, as Mulvey puts it. In a different context, Susan Sontag differentiates between a "beautifying" and an "uglifying" mode of representing the vulnerability of others. "Uglifying" denotes a photographic approach that shows "something at its worst" (*Reading the Pain*, 78). "Beautifying," by contrast, means that the subject is presented in a positive light or romanticized. Uglifying, to Sontag, "is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response" (78). It aims at shocking the onlooker.

Sontag's oppositional pair overlaps with Joseph Entin's binary between the "sentimental" and a "sensational" mode of representing poverty in modern fiction and photography. The sensational mode highlights the absence of sanity, safety, and self-esteem to bring out the abject, the grotesque, and the corporeal side of poverty. In that case, the sensationalizing mode undermines the photographer's own intention to use his art to fight poverty.

This paradox informs the sensational mode and its attendant "aesthetics of astonishment" (Entin 17), which draws on spectacles to shock the onlooker. As they "uglify" the poor, bringing out the depravity, violence, and cruelty of abject poverty, sensational photos elicit a voyeuristic gaze (Entin 17). This gaze resembles the racist, the exotic, the colonial, and the male gazes because it turns the poor into passive objects to excite the onlooker's scopophilia. This mode insulates the viewer against her own vulnerability by objectifying the other of class. It instills a sense of sovereignty on the part of the privileged onlooker, ultimately reaffirming the power hierarchy that documentary photography ostensibly tries to subvert.

The "beautifying" or sentimental mode might be less humiliating, but it objectifies the precarious subject just as much. Photos that bring

out the humanity, beauty, and dignity of the indigent risk downplaying the harsh conditions that material deprivation engenders. The sensational and the sentimental mode, to use Entin's terms, constitute the Janus-face of poverty portraiture.

If the class-based gaze were *invariably* exploitative, operating only at the expense of the poor and to the benefit of the non-poor, it would follow that the non-poor should not look at such images and, by extension, the poor themselves. Since very few of the secure class take an interest in the plight of the precariat, to shun images thereof would exacerbate the segregation. In that case, any ethical claim of the kind Levinas and Butler articulated or is implied in the documentary project would be ungrounded. To avert the gaze and ignore the reality of the precarious class, however, leads to an attitude in which the secure class perpetually disregards the existence and omnipresence of precarity. Hence, let's face two individuals and, indirectly, their precarious lives.

Tom Stone's Portrait of Gabriel: Facing His and Our Precariousness

Among the many documentary artists who depict the homeless and economically marginalized, such as Paul Hynes-Allen, Lee Jeffries, Michael Pharaoh, Matt Black, and Joe Ramos, Andres Serrano, Lee Godie, Tom Stone has produced the largest archive capturing the diversity of this population.¹ His series *Outsiders* includes more than a hundred portraits of street people. He always presents them in a medium close-up, thereby bringing the middle-class viewer face-to-face with the indigent. This artistic choice of framing his subjects has to do with his self-declared intention "to connect" the public with those who "aren't really seen and don't really belong."² Before taking his mostly black and white portraits Stone usually talks to his subjects. By disseminating these photos on social media as well as through more traditional venues

¹ Matt Black's photos depict people and objects that are marked by destitution. The captions indicate where the image was taken and what the poverty rate in those towns is. Black's photos are immediately recognizable and rarely resonate with ambiguity. His oeuvre does not qualify as precarious art in the sense that I use the term here. See <http://www.mattblack.com/the-geography-of-poverty/>.

² See the artist's statement on www.tomstonegallery.com.

like magazines and art exhibits, Stone draws these (underrepresented) individuals into the public sphere, inviting (middle-class) viewers to face their precarity.

Conscious of the power imbalance and the problem of voyeurism, Stone never presents his subjects in a denigrating manner. He understands his photos as a “compliment” to those he portrays (Lemke 2011). The choice of words suggests a power imbalance, but he avoids beautifying his sitters. The stories that come with the portraits are all based on conversations Stone had with his subjects, many of whom he became acquainted with. The captions, written by the artist himself, reveal personal details and are an indirect way of letting the subjects speak. Yet, Stone makes clear that the texts reflect the language of the artist since he uses unconventional orthography (the stories are written entirely in lower case letters), short sentences, and an almost lyrical style. Each photo suggests more than meets the eye.



Figure 4.1 Tom Stone, *on the road* (2006)

In *on the road* (2006), the subject is a young man with a lip piercing and a woolen cap. He does not show signs of destitution. His eyes are his most salient feature. It might be difficult to tell what these eyes communicate exactly but they are undoubtedly arresting.³ To use Barthes' terminology, they "prick" the viewer and trigger *something* that might be difficult to determine but is nevertheless felt (Barthes). Without the caption ("gabriel from portland sitting on the sidewalk panhandling. traveling the

³ One viewer explicitly commented on the saliency of the eyes that is a common characteristic in many of Stone's portraits.: "Look into the eyes of your brothers and sisters in the images below [Stone's portraits]. Some eyes still have hope, some are brimming over with pain or anger, and some look past you to a world only they know." <http://bearmarketnews.blogspot.de/2010/02/homeless-in-america-tom-stones.html>

west coast. when he goes back to portland, figures he'll get 'some sorta mill job'"), the spectator-reader would probably be unaware of Gabriel's destitution. This unexpected information changes the way we perceive Gabriel, not least by signaling his class background. Is this image not an apt illustration of Emmanuel Levinas's statement about "the face [that] speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation?" (198). Now consider Stone's portrait of Gabriel entitled *in memoriam* (2006).



Figure 4.2 Caption: Tom Stone, *in memoriam* (2006)

This photo of Gabriel is comparatively darker in tone. Without the buoyant upward glance, Gabriel looks straight at the viewer, but his

eyes seem more sullen. In effect, this portrait conveys a graver, almost gloomy aura, which is reinforced by the captions:

... he's sitting on the corner. like it's his. he's panhandling.
waiting for a friend to bring back food.
i sit beside him.
as people pass, he's always noticed. some stop. some
continue.
we talk about the road. about home. about life. about
girls.
he's gentler than you'd think. more interested in things
you say. and he cares more too.
he's not sure what's next; but says now's good. his friend re-
turns.

...it's october 17. 2006.
it's his gun.
it's his choice.
farewell.

gabriel joshua wolrab, may 3, 1985 - october 17, 2006.
for his mother, his sisters, his brothers, his friends.⁴

The first section is a flashback of the conversation between Gabriel and Stone, in which Gabriel comes across as a gentle man who cares about other people and their views. The second section informs the spectator-reader of his suicide in a dry, laconic, and slangy prose: "it's his gun. it's his choice. farewell." The colloquialism does not hide the bereavement that *in memoriam* communicates and that contrasts with *on the road*.

The juxtaposition of the image and the text as well as between the two portraits of Gabriel Joshua Wolrab confronts the viewer not only with the fatal consequences of poverty but also with our limitations in adequately detecting signs of Gabriel's despair. This symbolic encounter, willingly or unwillingly, connects us to Gabriel's fate, and indirectly to the photo-

⁴ See http://www.tomstoneartist.com/outsidere--kids/Outsidere_Street_Kids-4/.

grapher whose mission it is to overcome the separation that marks us as humans. “The original human trauma is our separation,” Stone writes in his artist statement, and continues to conjure up a collective by using the first person plural in a long list (“we are, we rely, we are alone, we try to belong, we form bonds”) that culminates in the declaration: “But it is all precarious. We come together and we drive apart [ibid]”

In Stone’s understanding of the precariousness of human relations, the busier and more successful people are, the less inclined they are to care for those who “fit too poorly.” Thus, the hypothetical collective “we” gives way to the dichotomous “us versus them.” As a result, the homeless “stand apart.” In the social world, this form of othering precipitates self-hatred, which ultimately cements the class divide. Art, on Stone’s account, provides a bridge to reconnect with these outsiders. Indeed, Stone’s photos provide a symbolic bridge that allows the viewer to overcome the general disconnect. This makes his portraits, technically speaking, into something other than mere representations (of the person portrayed); they are *articulations* in the original sense of the word (*articulo*; affecting the joints) because they join one part to another: the middle-class viewer to the precarious subject.

Stone tries to join two worlds and two classes by producing what art critic Christine Ross calls “precarious images.” According to her, such images

attempt to give a face to the faceless, in ways that disrupt their media representation as elements of threat, they convey [...] “the precariousness of life,” if only so that ‘some keener sense of the value of life, all life, takes hold.’ [...] [and gives way to] a form of interdependency in which autonomy of the self is perhaps lost but where the precariousness of life is experienced as what “begins with the precariousness of the Other.” (14)

The notion of precarious visualities put forth in the volume of the same title, edited by art historians Olivier Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross, cites Levinas’s exploration of what he calls “the pre-

cariousness of life” to insist on the interdependency between humans. Stone’s image-texts offer an excellent illustration of precarious visuality because they acknowledge the vulnerability of the precarious subject, the interdependency between the precarious (Gabriel) and the more powerful onlooker as well as the vulnerability of the (privileged) onlooker as they confront us with our own ignorance. Looking at *on the road*, we might not have *seen* Gabriel’s precarity. *Reading* about his dire living conditions, we might be willing to acknowledge it. When looking at the second portrait, we might *feel* Gabriel’s despair. As we *read* on, we might be shocked by his tragic end. But at the same time, we are confronted with our own inability to detect Gabriel’s suffering in the first place. Unable to notice it when I first looked at his face, Gabriel’s “face resists possession,” as Levinas puts it, it “resists my powers” (197).

On that note, let’s consider Stone’s color portrait of a homeless man, entitled *no alternative to life*.



Figure 4.3 Tom Stone, *no alternative to life* (2006)

On first glance, *no alternative to life* does not seem disruptive, although its title is certainly indeterminate. Again, it is the eyes that attract the viewer's gaze, but the bright blue eyes of this dark-skinned African American, framed by a hazy, bloodshot eyeball, are exceptionally striking. The man's piercing gaze and the fact that he looks straight at the camera interpellates the spectator to look directly into his eyes. He stares at us, as we stare at him. His self-assertive, confrontational gaze is almost uncanny as if he were not only looking at but also through the spectator in knowingness. Looking at him brings to mind Levinas's statement: "In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends" (262).

Reading the text that goes along with the image turns this mysterious, lithe man whose name is John Quinn, into a *hungry man* who is deprived of his health, home, clothes, and his teeth. "he has only a single tooth. he lives in a nearby 'poorly ventilated' low income hotel. he just got out of the hospital." Underneath his leather jacket he wears his hospital gown although it is in the middle of winter. We also learn that Mr. Quinn has "an animation in him" and an "intelligence that surprises." Highly opinionated and well-versed in different subjects, "he talks of South Africa's 'honorary whites', India's untouchables, and Sartre." When he talks about Nelson Mandela's refusal to accept President Botha's offer of prison release if he were to renounce his resistance, Mr. Quinn identifies with Mandela for his courage to pursue his political ideals.

The title of this image/text then articulates a plea for an uncompromising life, suggesting that there is no alternative to a committed life. The portrait challenges Sontag's "uglifying/beautifying" binary because the tension between the *visual* text and the *written* text instigates a rupture or rift in the representation: the *image* shows a man in a leather jacket, the *story* reveals that he wears hand-me-downs. The photo exposes piercing, miraculous eyes whereas the text describes him to be "grim." The photo shows a man who seems content, the narrative talks about his vulnerability, hunger, as well as past successes ("we talk about his graduation from Berkeley, his acceptance to law school"). His earlier accomplishments also clash with the current deprivation: his ill health,

the lack of a home and warm clothing. Mr. Quinn might have little but he is rich when it comes to opinions, philosophical views, and political convictions. The dissonance between what we see and what we read makes this image/text disconcerting.

Giving out mixed signals, it draws attention to the image/text itself, while soliciting a gaze that invites at least two responses. One is to imbricate the spectator by eliciting a gaze that invites us to immerse ourselves in Quinn's world. Accordingly, the reader/viewer becomes "a vicarious participant of [the subject's] experience" (Stott 38) and gleans a "vicarious pleasure" (Stott 39). The vicarious gaze this image solicits, however, is undercut by the tension between the visual and the written text. The disruption of the voyeuristic gaze, I argue, animates this portrait, which promises a connection to the precarious subject, but subsequently unsettles our vision and thereby disrupts the symbolic attachment with the depicted. This perturbing aesthetic engagement stunts the vicarious and voyeuristic engagement and fosters a precarious gaze.

The Aesthetics of the Precarious Gaze

My starting point for delineating what I call the precarious gaze is a statement Robert Coles made in *Doing Documentary Work*. When Coles confides that in doing documentary work, he often felt ashamed at "the sight of others utterly down on their luck" (6). Likewise, Susan Sontag suggests that "to take a photograph [of someone in pain] is to participate in another person's [...] mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (*On Photography* 15). In other words, witnessing the suffering of others triggers one's own vulnerability. This makes documentary photography a potentially troublesome affair to the (economically secure) artist who, by interacting with the under-privileged, experiences a sense of illness or psychic pain.

If the encounter between the more privileged artist or reporter and the precarious class makes the former experience the accident of their own privilege, then it unsettles the power dynamic. The onlooker's gaze turns from being voyeuristic and visually pleasurable into a gaze that unleashes discomfort in the more fortunate. In that case, witnessing the

pain of others would not allow for the pleasure that a voyeuristic gaze affords. It would exceed the default mode by which a spectator tries to reassert his or her superiority—i.e., the uglifying vs. beautifying or sentimental vs. sensational binary—triggering a precarious gaze.

What characterizes the precarious gaze is its disturbing effect: the uncanny feeling one has in noticing that Gabriel was dead at the time we looked at *in memoriam*; the disconcerting feeling one has when they realize the dissonance between John Quinn's lack of shelter, adequate clothing, and professional health support, on the one hand, and his vast knowledge, his political and philosophical views, on the other. The dissonance between what we see and what we read makes Stone's image/texts disconcerting. Our vicarious pleasure is stunted, disrupted by the tension between the visual and the written text. Moreover, John Quinn's face confronts us with our own dysrecognition. His confrontational gaze puts us face to face with his stare. We are lost in translation, in a state of ambiguity. Such a state of limbo is characteristic of precarity as Levinas understands the term. To Levinas, precarity designates a "moving limit between inviolability and degeneration," and Runge takes his definition to define precarity as a "condition of limbo between peak optimism and failure, between trauma and relief [a condition that is] ever teetering on an unsteady edge" (20). If looking at a precarious subject produces such a volatile psychic state, the sense of superiority a voyeuristic gaze affords is shattered. Unlike all those gazes—the voyeuristic, the male, the colonial, the imperial, the patriarchal—which are defined by their sense of supremacy and autonomy, a precarious gaze makes the (economically secure) onlooker feel uncomfortable.

A precarious image elicits an interrelation that gives way to an interdependency between the self and the Other. At this point, terminological distinction matters for precarity. Strictly speaking, precarity is a socio-political and -economic category, whereas *precariousness* refers to an ontological state (as humans, we depend on others and are exposed to the fateful twists of human existence). Philosophers and art critics tend to write about precariousness as a correlative of precarity. Of course, financial insecurity enhances a sense of general (socio-psychological, ontological) insecurity.

A precarious aesthetics, then, confronts us with both precarity and precariousness. By instigating communication across the class divide, a precarious aesthetic can help close the gap between the classes. To Ross, the artistic aim of a precarious visuality is “to give a face to the faceless” (14) while disrupting received media representation by allowing for ambiguity and indeterminacy. Unlike the didactic political art of the social realist tradition, precarious art represents the economically marginalized in a way that avoids either idolizing or victimizing them. And unlike most bourgeois representations of the poor, which tend to sentimentalize or sensationalize, beautify or uglify, precarious art intentionally undercuts the inclination to derive aesthetic pleasure from objectifying impoverished subjects. While bringing the privileged into contact with the precarious, these artistic expressions try to preempt dysrecognizing the precariat by unsettling the visual pleasure of the economically secure onlooker. A precarious aesthetics, as I have tried to show in my reading of Stone’s photos, momentarily deprives the economically secure viewer of his or her sovereignty by deliberately thwarting a potentially voyeuristic gaze. A precarious aesthetics tries to combat easy consumption, inviting instead visual resistance.

At the same time, by the very fact of eliciting economically secure spectators to face precarious lives, precarious art upends an important sociocultural feature of precarity, namely the lack of recognition. When done properly—that is, precariously—representations of the poor can highlight their subjugation and powerlessness without contributing to it. In that case, they evoke a sense of precariousness in the (middle-class) spectator. Representations of precarious subjects and settings that are themselves, formally speaking, precarious open up a space that allows the (sensitive) spectator to do what Levinas and Butler are calling for: realize the interdependency and vulnerability of the other in ourselves.

This aesthetic experience lends itself to using the arts as a means to mobilize the political will necessary to instigate socio-political and -economic reforms. With a precarious aesthetics, interdependence is no longer an ethical category to be striven for; it has become integral to the very act of reading and looking. In apprehending precariousness and interdependency (even if mediated by an image), the economically secure

overcome—albeit only symbolically and temporarily—the long-standing collective denial of class inequity.

Tom Stone's photos discussed above certainly recognize the precarious conditions of the individuals they depict. Stone connects, or reconnects as he has it, the (affluent and middle-class) viewer with the homeless, but more importantly, he produces a dissonance between the visual and written, thereby perturbing the viewer. This makes his photos exemplars of a precarious aesthetics. In each of the three portraits, the cross-class encounter between us and *them* is evoked *and* repealed. Moreover, all three photographs undermine the binary mode of representing poverty. They depart from the "sensational" vs. "sentimental" modes that Joseph Entin described, just as they disrupt the uglifying vs. beautifying binary that Susan Sontag thought to be basic to depicting the pain of others. Characteristic of a precarious aesthetics, these photos unsettle the binary of *the rich* versus *the poor* and unleash a multiplicity of evocations, which in turn, are essential to the photo's aesthetic power. The combination of indeterminacy and dissonance provokes a gaze that oscillates between co-existing opposites. Whatever aspect the viewer focuses on, the gaze wanders from one reality or meaning to another. The simultaneity of divergent qualities amounts to a troubling viewing experience. As it thwarts a condescending as well as a sympathetic attitude, it deprives the economically secure spectator of their sense of sovereignty.

Precarious photos perturb because they defy easy deciphering. Visual complexity and ambiguity might evoke repulsion or attraction; in any event, the encounter with precarious visualities turns the act of looking into a troubling affair. When the desire for identification with the subject is foreclosed, when it becomes difficult to grasp not only the connotative signification, but also the denotative signification of the image, the viewer's gaze enters into a precarious state.

A precarious aesthetics turns the subject into an *aesthetic* object that engages the viewer by unsettling stable modes of looking. Precarious photos are not shock photos, as Roland Barthes has it; they often contain a *punctum*, a detail that disrupts the viewer's gaze. While a precarious aesthetics defies provocation, it also thwarts the vicarious pleasure

of identification. The unresolved tensions arrest the viewer's gaze without allowing for any resolution to the quandary of emotional responses provoked by a precarious portrait.

In contrast to the voyeuristic gaze, the precarious gaze recognizes the limits of intelligibility and interpretative competence. It elicits an aesthetic experience that transcends the conventional modes through which the middle class faces the class Other—denial, arrogance, respect, sympathy, or pity. Since the precarious gaze unsettles claims to knowledge and voyeuristic power, it ushers the viewer into a third space between condescension and identification. The very inability to disambiguate generates a precarious aesthetic experience, whereby the middle-class viewer apprehends his or her own vulnerability. By means of this process of recognizing one's own precariousness through the eyes of the Other, *on the road*, *in memoriam*, and *no alternative to life* offer paradigmatic depictions of our precarious existence that concurrently generate a precarious gaze. This constitutes a kind of visual pleasure, as I demonstrated above, that *moves* the onlooker. Something in the image resonates with us while, simultaneously, a sense of dissonance undercuts the easy consumption of that particular art work thereby rendering it *precarious*. It is this artistic experience and the critical interest in that kind of art, I believe, that helps us to combat a culture of carelessness that has taken over during the decades of neoliberal governance. If such a culture were to become hegemonic, political and economic polarization will continue to widen. And in that case, nobody would care to look at precarious art.

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Biography

Sieglinde Lemke teaches American Studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany. She is the author of *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford UP, 1998), *Vernacular Matters in American Literature* (Palgrave, 2009), *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary*

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