You've Lost That Loving Feeling: Rineke Dijkstra After Empathy
Johanna Burton
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Let's start with three pictures taken by Rineke Dijkstra.[1] Here are new mothers Julie, Tecla, and Saskia, all photographed in the Netherlands in 1994. Julie was photographed immediately after delivery. Tecla was photographed the day after giving birth, with evidence of that recent event still visceral in the blood running down her leg. Saskia, who had had a Cesarean section, was not photographed until a week had passed, because Dijkstra was reluctant to force her onto her feet until her body had some time to heal. Much has been made of Dijkstra's *New Mother* series and, moreover, of the attention these images give to the topic of motherhood, which has typically been sublimated into so much religious lore or, more often, hidden away completely.[2] The postpartum body, along with its attending postpartum mental blur, is placed front and center in these three pictures that—perhaps more remarkably—manage at once to unveil something of the base rawness of the birthing process and still re-present something of the clichés that the images would purport to do away with. The poses, in other words, while casual, cannot help but be read through the culturing lenses they (perhaps unconsciously) mimic; and, for all their newness, and nudeness, even the babies themselves have already entered the realm of representation.

To that end, the pictures collectively form a kind of unwitting holy trinity at the heart of a larger body of work by this artist, in which we frequently encounter such a flicker between what might be read as unmediated access to a subject and that subject's *always already framed-ness*.[3] This oscillation is made even clearer, for instance, in another two-part work of the same year, *Tia, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 23 1994* and *Tia, Amsterdam, Netherlands, November 14 1994*.

Here, a new mother is photographed twice in an identical classical pose—from the shoulders up, in a close cropping that is somewhat unusual within Dijkstra's oeuvre—but the first portrait of Tia was taken in June, three weeks after having given birth, and the second some five months later. The transformation in the woman's image is notable, if difficult to describe, and once a viewer knows the context for the pictures, it is nearly impossible not to project onto every shift in Tia's countenance. In the first instance, the work is typically discussed as showing the deep, extreme fatigue that accompanies having a small infant—an effect of constant night feedings, diaper changes, and the general terror born of new parenthood. The sharp edges of the woman's face, too, would seem to attest to her diligence and commitment to these serial tasks, her biological and psychological imperatives having kicked in to protect her offspring despite the personal stress. The second image gives over a slightly more relaxed, softer face, a gaze that has focus, skin that carries a flush.

I have spent a good deal of time looking at these images in the last months, not least, I'm sure, because I recently went through the experience of childbirth myself, a fact somewhat unfathomable to me still. I suppose this circumstance accounts, in a way, for my dwelling on pictures that I previously found interesting, but which didn't *hold* me as they do now. I use the word "hold" as Roland Barthes does in *Camera Lucida*, where he famously defines the punctum as both that which "pricks" the viewer (imparting a kind of minor trauma on her) and that which "holds" her.[4] The word "held," in this sense, suggests both captivity and care. Thus, I am held by these images now. I search them

1   These are *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994; Saskia, Harderwijk, Netherlands, March 16 1994;* and *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16 1994.*

2   Of course, there are notable exceptions. Mary Kelly's *Antepartum* (1973) and *Post-partum Document* (1973-1979) are touchstones in the history of art, both extending and critiquing the purview and limits of conceptual art. Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) sought to foreground the central but rarely represented aspects of quotidian, domestic experience in women's—and particularly black women's—lives. Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004), like much of her work, questions assumptions around what constitutes a family. These are just three examples among many more, and it is no coincidence that these artists aim in representing some aspects of motherhood to challenge others.

3   As Barthes famously describes it, when a subject poses for the camera, one "imitates" oneself, transforming "in advance into an image." See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 10–11.

4   Barthes, 13.

with a consciously shifted eye, not because I find myself there but because I can understand less abstractly now something of what is shown: The time immediately after birth. The next day. The following week. Three weeks after. Five months. Those time markers—not my own but Julie's, Tecla's, Saskia's, and Tia's—are markers I have some mode of connecting to, whereas they were, prior to my own having lived through them, merely generic stamps, untethered to my lived understanding.

Dijkstra has discussed the imperative for many of her works as stemming from a desire to photograph her subjects in extreme moments, usually just after they have experienced physical or mental events that leave them open or more vulnerable than usual. Such un-guardedness is often fueled by exhaustion, distraction, pleasure, or pain. Yet while seeking out such fleeting states of being, the artist is also explicit that her own method of taking pictures is tedious and laborious, which inevitably shapes the images of her subjects. Specifically, she uses a large-format, 4×5 camera whose setup and need for an extended exposure time—given the instrument's light requirements and its demand that the photographer obtain light readings using relatively analogue means—are more in keeping with antiquated photographic techniques than those of today's point and shoot digital cameras. As a result, sitters are never caught instantaneously. Instead, there is a necessary lag produced by her mode of image-making—a "decelerating factor," as she puts it, describing this literal slowing by and in front of the camera.[5] And this allows for, and even somewhat produces, some of the cinematically awkward scenarios that made the photographer's early series of bathers so very odd and compelling. Indeed, as Dijkstra says, her subjects inevitably "become aware that they are posing," and find themselves grappling in front of the lens with their simultaneous desires to both pose and avoid posing. The artist has aptly named the effect akin to a "display…of introversion."[6] These two elements, then—her focus on the exhausted or distracted subject, and the "decelerating factor" of the slow camera setup—create in combination something of a signifying system for Dijkstra. Even in the artist's video works, this system holds true, even if, of course, these mediums functionally decelerate quite differently (I would still argue that, when it comes to Dijkstra, elongating the operation doesn't change—so much as place—the impact of deceleration within another genre of reception, one where posing/not posing takes the form of task-based seriality).

The signifying system I describe, however, has a third term—beyond the deceleration of the tool (the camera) and the exhaustion of the subject (what curator Sandra S. Phillips has otherwise called "personal transitions")—which might best be termed the deferred effect of language.[7] To explain, Dijkstra's images, however fully and immediately present they may be for the viewer, are, like most images, nevertheless subject to the language that frames them. In this regard, most explanatory or mediating material existing around the artist's now decades-long practice presses into use details about the sitters or situation that might be understood as necessary for our capacity to map meaning onto what we see. In the case of the three images with which I began, one might argue that the salient details are clear at a glance. But it is not enough, I think, to say that what is pictured here are postpartum women, since the pictures are as much about the time that has elapsed between the event of birth and the image's capture as about the photographic image itself. Yet this distance is necessarily missed by us, and, for that matter, by the camera, which is, after all, bound up in layers of the deceleration that Dijkstra privileges in the shots themselves. Only language delivers us to this gap—and to the contours of that gap—that not only holds us away from these images, but also "holds" us, confined and cradled, as we look at them. In this respect, the fact that the titles for the works themselves offer only the name, place, and date of their subjects adds yet another layer of complication, another deferral. Rather, it is only in reading institutional or critical language *around* the work (an extended label, a catalogue essay, a Museum web page, an interview with the artist) that we are given access to the factual details that substantiate our intuitions. What was *felt* in an image is then *known*, but only by way of looking away from it.

In such literature, the *New Mothers* series is often placed into conjunction with another series from 1994 produced in Lisbon, titled *Bullfighters*. Setting aside the strange equation here—that one finds the best equivalent for childbirth in the savage ritual of bullfighting—I want to approach the language question again. The images portray young men whose wounds are clearly the source of a quiet pride they share. Yet without knowing the context for the images, which is partially established through the seriality of the men themselves (the activity begins to define itself by virtue of the shared costume, shared posture, shared wounds), a viewer finds affective information on the faces they

5   "Realism in the Smallest Details," Rineke Dijkstra interviewed by Jan van Adrichem in Rineke Dijkstra, Sandra S. Phillips, and Jennifer Blessing, *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective* (San Francisco and New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museum, 2012), 47. For more on the theorization of deceleration in contemporary photographic practice, see Sabine Eckmann, "Times and Places to Rest." *Lunch Break.* (Saint Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum and Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, 2010), 23-29.

6   "Realism in the Smallest Details," 47.

7   See Sandra S. Phillips, "Twenty Years of Looking at People," in *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 13-28.

see. But the legibility of that data is tenuous. I call attention to language—or, in some cases, context, which does the work of language—in order to begin to plumb something I will concentrate on for the remainder of this essay. So far, I've suggested that particular images by Dijkstra resonate at particular times for different viewers—an obvious enough point to make, but one that foregrounds how we look at images, which is to say *unevenly*. But here I wish to point to how language and context also make meaning in these images, effectively disallowing the position that we have immediate access to any of the subjects we look at. Perhaps better said, such access is formidably enhanced by language or context. Language aims our gaze more precisely. Yet such precision both allows and forecloses that access. Obviously, this idea has been long debated within histories and philosophies of photography, perhaps most famously by Walter Benjamin and Barthes. But in this respect, it is particularly notable that most literature on Dijkstra ignores such discussions, leaning heavily instead on narratives surrounding the sitters without calling into question how those narratives operate within the exhibition and reception of the works themselves. It is useful, in this vein, to recall the Soviet director Vsevolod Pudovkin's famous 1920s experiment (discussed by Merleau-Ponty in a 1945 lecture titled "The Film and the New Psychology") in which he screened the same close-up of an actor's inexpressive face three times, interspersing those shots with over-determined images (a bowl of soup, a dead woman in a coffin, a child with his teddy bear).[8] Audiences were wrongly convinced they had witnessed subtle changes of expression in the actor's face. Similarly, while Dijkstra's framing narratives are of course "real," they are no less instrumental in how we read her photographs.

To that end, I am interested in how Dijkstra is herself typically framed. The lion's share of scholarship and criticism around the artist's work places her squarely within the genre of portraiture, utilizing traditional, if updated, conventions and hewing closely to humanist ideals around representation. While linked at least generationally to the students and followers of Bernd and Hilla Becher (Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, etc.), Dijkstra's practice is most often argued away from what is categorized as their "conceptual" strain of photography (described by Phillips as having less need or desire to relate to their subjects "on a personal level") and toward predecessors including August Sander and Diane Arbus.[9] While this genealogy is somewhat helpful, it's also troubling in ways. Indeed, while Sander is understood by many to have developed a project of producing sympathetic group portraits of different parts of society, he has also been read as establishing dangerously essentializing physiognomic race- and class-based categories.[10] And Arbus, for her part, bucked against the (still prevalent) notion that her difficult photographs should be read as gently or sympathetically embracing their subjects. Indeed, she considered photography something "we subject each other to," and categorized it as sometimes bringing out the "cold and harsh" in addition to the unconventionally beautiful.[11]

Yet rather than try to establish alternative genealogies for Dijkstra or propose contemporary artists with whom she might have affinities (though I would suggest that considering her projects alongside those of, say, Phil Collins, Sharon Lockhart, Collier Schorr, and Christopher Williams could indeed be fruitful), I would like to ask whether the framing of Dijkstra's own practice—beyond the images themselves—might also be thought as an object or, better, as an aspect of that practice, which subsequently can and should be analyzed. The curators of Dijkstra's 2012 retrospective—the aforementioned Phillips and Jennifer Blessing—turn repeatedly to the word "empathy" to get at the working process employed by Dijkstra (that is to say, how she approaches her subjects) and the effect produced by the photos themselves. Further, both emphasize that the artist, in her often-stark work, "makes no judgment."[12] I'm interested in this twinned imperative for empathy and lack of judgment, not only in terms of Dijkstra's own work, but also as those factors seem to be privileged pervasively in discussions of other artists today—particularly those who utilize photography or other modes of portraiture. I'm curious to know, in other words, why empathy is held up as a goal or an ethics, and to know how we might productively challenge any assumption that empathy is the only mode for responsibly taking or looking at images of other people. Indeed, a consideration of Dijkstra's work might be especially generative for a more complex understanding of the stakes attending any such assumption, leading to a more nuanced sense of empathy.[13] If, for example, Blessing's definition of empathy with regard to Dijkstra is the "honest connection between people"—the result of an urge with historical links to feminism and the "ethics of giving voice to individuals not cam-

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and the New Psychology," in Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 48-59.

9 Phillips, 25.

10 See, for instance, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture", in Melissa E. Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylania Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994), 56.

11 In Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel (eds.), *Diane Arbus* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 2; and quoted in Phillips, 22.

12 Phillips, 20.

paigning on their own behalf"—how can we also acknowledge the fraught terms for such protocols in an artistic practice, if only to advance such impulses more effectively?[14] We might only gain a much greater, and wanted, sense of potential in such photographic practices in contemporary culture.

After all, Dijkstra is hardly alone among contemporary photographers whose work has been attributed the character trait of empathy—and for whom such an attribution might be rendered problematic all too easily. I think in particular of Cindy Sherman, who is often discussed in the register of empathy, yet whose later work, in which she turns toward representing the aging female body, has proven resistant to such readings. Whereas no one was forced into defending Sherman's integrity in earlier series, in this instance suddenly writers were concerned that Sherman would be misunderstood as poking fun at the less-sexy than the *Untitled Film Stills* types—elderly art patrons, East Side ladies, West Coast Hollywood dimming lights, and the rest. Yet such anxieties underscore how the notion of "empathy" is frequently deployed to cast the artist in a positive light and make her "intentions" around any picture she takes ethical.[15] This proposition is deeply questionable from the outset, given that imparting an ethics to an image assumes that the image is wholly within the control of the artist or of the viewer—or better, that one can quantify such an impulse, regulate it, measure it. This tenuous assumption extends to the matter of whether such stated intentions can translate to any viewer's experience of a picture: Will, in other words, a picture be viewed ethically simply because it was executed with ethical intentions? Or do some very significant contingencies remain beyond the grasp of either party?

It also, perhaps inadvertently, reinforces spectatorial and artistic agency, in a sense "granting" a gracious look, or "giving voice," which I'm not sure one can ever do without also taking another voice away. As Saidiya V. Hartman writes astutely in her seminal 1997 book exploring representations of racial oppression, *Scenes of Subjection*, "[W]hat comes to the fore is the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy. Properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or 'the projec-

tion of one's own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one's own emotions.'"[16] To put an even finer point on the matter, Hartman cites Jonathan Boyarin's observation that the "ambivalent [or] repressive effects of empathy…can be located in the 'obliteration of otherness' or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we 'feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.'"[17]

By seeking to "give" the photographic subject a voice, then, an artist or viewer might only give greater voice to themselves. And, looking beyond the immediate sphere of photography to the larger art world, the number of fraught political implications increases from there, particularly given the symbolic dimension of art as it functions within a uniquely privileged economy. Per Lauren Berlant in her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*: "Projects of compassionate recognition have enabled a habit of political obfuscation of the differences between emotional and material (legal, economic, and institutional) kinds of social reciprocity. Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity are necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means for making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theater of compassion is emotionally intense. Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end to itself, an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone's intentions about maintaining political privilege."[18]

Through such references, I do not mean to do away with empathy, just to examine its contours. Empathy is, etymologically, "in feeling," a "feeling with" another. Unlike sympathy, which holds the other at a distance, empathy is a mode of identification—an "I feel like you, I feel with you"—though the limits of empathy demand that we locate our own narcissism within this act. To consider again how I began this essay, I opened by discussing three pictures of postpartum women—knowing that I would have likely started with very different images if I were writing some five years ago. Others would likely have related more to me then, even if I didn't realize I was choosing images—and being chosen by them—this way. And

13 Discussions around empathy also notably attend to what might be argued the most recent technological extension of photography: VR. Indeed, this immersive medium begs the question of where one person's experience begins and another's ends with unique urgency. See, for instance, "I FEEL YOU: Alyssa K. Loh on Virtual Reality and Empathy," *Artforum* (November 2017): 206-13.

14 Blessing, 34-38.

15 I take up directly the question of applied empathy with regard to Sherman's work in my essay for the artist's 2012 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. See "Cindy Sherman: Abstraction and Empathy," in *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 54-67.

16 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 18-19.

17 Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 86. Cited in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19-20.

18 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 182.

so, in this spirit, I want to suggest that even in the most empathetic image—one that ostensibly makes "no judgment"—there is, nonetheless, always *interest* worth taking into account. More specifically, this interest is affectual, and thus it is within the realm of the affectual that I want to place Dijkstra's images and their *effects*. This subtle shift in vocabulary helps, I think, articulate the kind of gap that arises in the making of her photographs, and gives new potential for our grasp of the relationships between photographer and subject, as well as between image and the viewer situated in the language around this artist's work.

In recent years, the stakes for distinguishing between photography's *effective* and *affective* dimensions have become more pronounced, as a growing body of scholarship has examined the medium and its relationship to the cusp of a variety of mental, perceptual, and somatic processes.[19] According to psychologist Silvan Tomkins—whose four-volume systematic examination of affect, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, helped to catalyze a so-called "affective turn" in the humanities in the 1990s—empathy is not an affect.[20] Instead, affects comprise nonconscious aspects in a manner distinct from emotions or feelings; they are not available for conscious modification. Perhaps most important, affects are relegated to neither the body nor to the mind, but rather, operate in a bridge between the two.

Here, and returning to the images with which I began, we might think again about Dijsktra, poised behind the camera while her subject waits for an image to be made, and a shift in perception—between occupying one's own body, and anticipating (or even participating in) its representation. Such photographs also conjure an *interested* viewer—one who, when asked to consider the image in terms of intention or empathy, will inevitably place such protocols in relation to their own lived experience.

What is so useful about the concept of affects, as the political theorist Michael Hardt has pointed out, is that they demand not only that we reconsider the passions as part of our intellectual matter, but also that we consider our own relationship of body to mind as one that occurs socially. Reflecting on a decade of renewed scholarship dedicated to affect theory, Hardt draws upon the legacy of seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose theorization of subjectivity hinged largely upon the relationship between the mind's capacity to think, and its correlate in the body's power to act.[21] Such power, Hardt notes, corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies, a process that immediately opens the self onto the social, and therefore political, dimensions of life, disrupting conventional notions of power. The more we can affect, that is, the more we can also *be* affected. Considering Dijkstra's work this way, even provisionally, suggests that we could, and should, look while also being looked at—creating the possibility for exchanges we cannot, as the barest conventions of empathy would otherwise have us propose, fully understand.

19 For more on the relationship between affect theory and photography, see Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (eds.), *Feeling Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), and Thy Phu and Linda M. Steer (eds.), "Affecting Photographies," special issue, *Photography and Culture* 2.3 (2009).

20 Writing in the early 1960s, Tomkins discerned nine affects: enjoyment/joy; interest/excitement; surprise/startle; anger/rage; disgust; dissmell; distress/anguish; fear/terror; shame/humiliation. See Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness. Volume I: The Positive Affects* (New York: Springer, 1962), and *Affect Imagery Consciousness. Volume II: The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 1963). These theories were developed across two subsequent volumes, published posthumously in 1991 and 1992. For more on the uptake and proliferation of Tomkins's theories, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (eds.), *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

21 Michael Hardt, foreword to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing The Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix-xii.

Joanna Burton, "You've Lost That Loving Feeling: Rineke Dijkstra After Empathy," lecture given at panel discussion for *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, September 21, 2012.

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