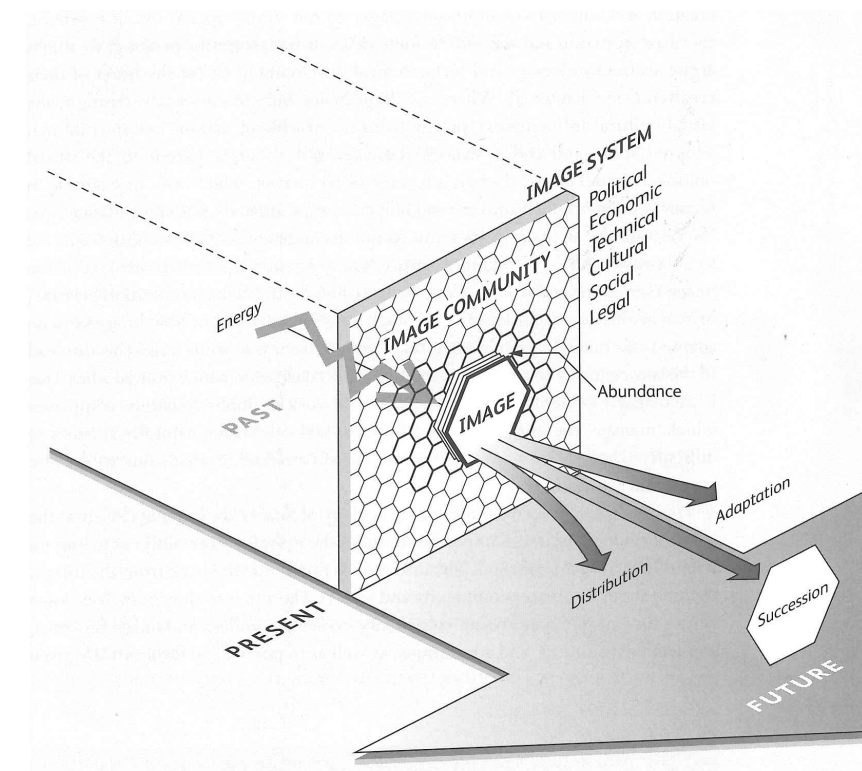# UNBECOMING: A FORMAL PLAN B

A.L. Steiner

. . . if taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency. . . there are gaping holes, empty landscapes, split silhouettes—the self unravels, refuses to   cohere, it will not   speak, it will only be spoken.[1]

AN ECOLOGY OF IMAGES
An image always exists in a set of contexts. It is part of an 'image community' which it works with or against, portrayed here with a honeycomb effect around the central image. Image community can be thought of in terms of genre and/or the modality of images. The image and its community will always be framed and mediated in specific ways. The square frame denotes the presence of an 'image-system' which can range across and interconnect with political, economic, technical, cultural, social, and legal discourses and systems. In addition, language and the body provide ways in which we frame, communicate and comprehend the image. Another crucial framing of the image is history. Past, present, and future are plotted on the diagram to clearly evoke a sense of process and evolution of the image. The image itself will be formed of certain 'energies' or precedents and prior insights, which relate to the fact that an image community and image systems are all historically determined. Abundance, succession, and adaptation are also key aspects for consideration.

Sunil Manghani, "Understanding Images," *Image Studies: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013)

1.   Halberstam, Jack, "Unbecoming: Queer Negativity/Radical Passivity", *Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture,* Ben Davies and Jana Funke (eds.) (Palgrave, 2011), p. 184, 192

Let's suppose that it's difficult to know why to take a picture. And if one does choose to take a picture, what to do with it, how to show it, where to store it, what it means, what is its history? Today, there are no easy answers to these questions in a world inundated with debt, violence, and exploitation, channeled through endless streams of finance crapital, weapons, and stuff that serves no purpose other than to reify the presence of the human species. Humans are certainly now assured of nothing other than our own vulnerability. We continue to produce in the midst of a Great Undoing for those of us here, now.

```
Images are more         real than anyone
could have supposed. And just because they
are an unlimited        resource,      one that
cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste,
there is all the more reason to apply the
conservationist remedy. If there can be
a better way for the real world to include
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```
the one of             images, it will
require an ecology not only of real things
but of images as well.²
```

Nine humans—Dan, Dannielle, Evelyn, Jenny, Jillian, Kathryn, Lacey, Luke, and Penn—were strangers to one another before 2016, and now count on one another for Mutually Assured Construction in a land replete of logic, empathy, and futurity. Formulating this thing we call consciousness is nothing but a monumental feat. An unbecoming. This consortium of persons, a constitution of selves, has made a proposal under the term *unbecoming.*

```
We started out with beliefs about the world
and our place in it that we didn't ask for
and didn't question. Only later, when those
```

2.   Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 180.

```
           beliefs were                  attacked
by new experiences that didn't conform to
                 them, did we begin to
doubt: e.g., do we and our friends really
understand each other?
```
[3]

Stop the clocks, let us be, let us think, no matter what the cost, to connect our im/materialities, sociologies, familiarities,   psychosexualities, economies, media tonalities, genealogies, political realities, worries.

```
Difference,          embodied and
spectacular, is a poor condition out of
which to construct
subjecthood, but can be an
effective position from which to perform.
```
[4]

Are their choices or expressions inextricable from their `freedom      to create under all difficult circumstances?`[5] The hegemonic objective to create is linked to production, value, and economic survival, whether it be personal, collective, universalist, utopic, useful, nihilistic, or dystopic. Will their artistic   expressions find cultural and/or financial translation beyond this institutional `intra-action?`[6]

```
       The paintings are . . . more group therapy
       than           individual sessions.
```
[7]

Photography is   pictures, a taxonomy that could be defined   as `being there;` or being `there.` Pictures also represent   everything that is not there. Photography often   adheres to a false-flag operation of an image, the single image.

3.   Adrian Piper, "Ideology, Confrontation and Political Self-Awareness" in *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena. An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978–1998,* eds. Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (New York: Critical Press, 1998), p. 87.
4.   Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), p. 1.

5.   A.L. Steiner and Chicks on Speed (Melissa Logan, Alex Murray-Leslie), Kathi Glas, Douglas Gordon, and Anat Ben David, "YES/NO Manifesto," 2008.
6.   Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 28, No. 3 (Spring 2003): pp. 801–31.
7.   Glenn Ligon in conversation with Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon: *Unbecoming* (ICA Boston, 1997), p. 51.

However, photography—in its essence—is never a formulation of the single image. Photography is an image in multiplicity, photography is images. Images, collectively.

The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities.[8]

What does image-consciousness produce? By looking, we are seeing. Seeing as artificial intelligence, offering questions without matter, irresolute answers, answers to future questions, unquestionable answers.

We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own. In this way, we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose.[9]

Photography is illusory activation, elucidation, propels consumption, motivation. Photography manifests desire, answers to desire; buries ideas, manufactures consent, maintains productivity. It lies, reveals, lies again, is serious, flexible, false, amenable, shocking, tells hard truth, hides everything, all while keeping itself together. It configures, confounds, escapes, determines, arouses, maintains, hypnotizes, is relatively friendly, easy to like and believe in.

8. Chantal Mouffe, "Art and Democracy: Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space" in *Open 2008/No. 14: Art as a Public Issue*, p. 9.

9. Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," lecture, Instituto Franklin de la Universidad de Alcalá, Madrid, June 24, 2014.

What's required is some attempt to think the relation between fantasy and nothingness: emptiness, dispossession in the hold; consent (not to be a single being) in the; an intimacy given most emphatically, and erotically, in a moment of something that, for lack of a better word, we call "silence," a suboceanic feeling of preterition—borne by a common particle in the double expanse—that makes vessels run over or overturn.[10]

Part of the picture is taking a picture, in the possessive form. As homo economicus[11] destroys and depletes the magnificence of planetary life, there are perhaps more photographs than any thing else. Photography is representational of our dysfunction, and part of it.

There is no resistance to an icon-laden world-for-us.[12] The photograph induces compassion fatigue,[13] passivity, data retrieval, stimulus overload, historical record, language, narcissism, conspicuous consumption. It functions as enforcer, inscriber, rectifier, nullifier, exploiter, oppressor, transcender, reflector, mirror, object, screen, scene, proof, punctum, bleed.

Taking, capturing, shooting.

The photograph loses its potency and happily regains it with time. Time is generous to the photograph, an object whose position and purpose we forget. A figment of our imagination, a tool, something we need, some thing we need. There are parameters around it, they are rigid and impenetrable, our frame for everything.

10.   Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," South Atlantic Quarterly 112: 4 (Fall 2013): p. 745.
11.   John Stuart Mill is credited with the development of this concept, based on his essay "On the Definition of Political Economy; and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It," published in the London and Westminster Review in 1836.
12.   Eugene Thacker, In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Vol. 1 (Zero Books, 2011), p. 5.
13.   Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, "The New Global Culture: Somewhere between Corporate Multiculturalism and the Mainstream Bizarre (A Border Perspective)," TDR/The Drama Review, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2001): p. 27.

Surface magic: reiterating our selves, defining our contours.

   Generational framing consolidates the
   orientation of
   criticism.[14]

Photographs have a   difficult time differentiating
themselves from one   another. They are similar
simulacra,
no gallery, museum or archive ARCHIVE   big
enough, no storage   space
reasonable, no cloud
supple enough, no scrapbook sweet enough. No book is
ever complete enough to mold these contents. Our hope,
our last memory, our   lost memory, the thing
between us, a fixed stare.

One is then like grass: one has made
the world,   everybody/everything, into a
becoming, because one has made a
necessarily communicating world, because
one   has suppressed in oneself everything
        that prevents us from slipping in
between things and growing   in the midst
of things. One has   combined
"everything": the indefinite article, the
              infinitive-becoming, and
the proper name to which one is reduced.
        Saturate, eliminate, put
everything in.[15]

14.   Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement" (Ill Will Editions, 2014), p. 20

15.   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 309.