

**“NEITHER PRESENT NOR ABSENT, NEITHER LIVING NOR DEAD”  
MATTHIEU BROUILLARD AND DONIGAN CUMMING’S HAUNTOLOGICAL  
TABLEAUX**

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“We are not idealized wild things. We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all.” – Joan Didion<sup>1</sup>

“To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows.” – Avery Gordon<sup>2</sup>

To encounter the work of Matthieu Brouillard and Donigan Cumming is to encounter ghosts. Haunts littered with the detritus of hard living, blemished with the effects of a society that has failed them, the ghosts are naked, stripped of clothes and of possessions, squatting the crevices of undergrounds almost void of human presence. Some are barely visible, while others are long dead. Photography brings them out of the shadows, evidences their presence in the face of the threat of their vanishing. Brouillard and Cumming are witnesses to a series of presents now past and the spectral traces that have collected in absence.

Through proximity, the ways by which each artist’s work can be read are irrevocably multiplied and changed, imbued with new clarity—coming through a proverbial fog. In mining the depths of their photographic oeuvres, Brouillard and Cumming present occasion to consider underexamined aspects of their work, offering but a small sample of the similarities and differences in their practices and thought. Until recently, the artists were unknown to one another. Brouillard discovered Cumming’s work in 2000, and Cumming first encountered Brouillard’s in 2005. Marking Cumming’s return to the communities that followed him through his first decade of photographic practice and taken in tandem with selections from Brouillard’s photographic undertakings of the last decade, this confluence represents thirty years of photographic production—three decades collapsed into the present. What was lurking just under the surface here becomes more striking than ever before.

The title of this essay evinces a spectre. Ghosts invade the realms of the living not strictly in the occult sense; they are productive as means not only to engage the dead, but also to address the discriminations of history. Literature presents opportunity to control time: to freeze it, speed it up, return to certain moments in it, to challenge its authority in

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 198

<sup>2</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17

moving into, through, and out of the world. Photography poses a similar challenge and is, in this way, a ghostly mechanism. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously identified what he perceived to be the very essence of photography, its adherence to a reality, at some past time: “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past.”<sup>3</sup> Barthes’s observation is so widely applied in photographic theory as to almost be banal, but the underlying issue of the relationship between trace, spectrality, and photography is generally limited to discussion of spirit photography, though neither Brouillard nor Cumming’s photographs fit altogether within the genre. Neither artist demonstrates intent to evoke the dead or even to engage or depict the figure of the spirit. They do, however, succeed in bringing the past to bear on the present—one of the spirit’s central tasks. There is a sense by which Cumming’s photographs appear before us as though timeless—if we can move beyond the fact that the objects that surround Cumming’s subjects appear out-dated—certain beer and cigarette brands, styles of furniture, appliances and electronics, and clothing, all betray the present. Brouillard’s subjects seem to be buried so deep underground—like survivors of some long-ago apocalypse—that concepts such as ‘night’ and ‘day’ cease to carry meaning, as though time stands still altogether. Art historian Tom Gunning notes the link between untimeliness and ghostliness, writing, “The ghostly represents a fundamental untimeliness, a return of the past not in the form of memory or history but in a contradictory experience of presence.”<sup>4</sup> Gunning echoes Fredric Jameson, who, similarly, has argued for the value of the study of ghosts beyond belief or disbelief in their existence, writing, “Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says ... is that the living present is scarcely as self sufficient as it claims to be.”<sup>5</sup> Brouillard and Cumming’s project culls discrete eras onto a singular plane in the present, where we, as viewers, struggle to make sense of the chronologies, anachronisms, and episodes precipitated by convergence.

Perhaps due, in part, to the established domain of spirit photography, the field of hauntology has received little attention in photographic discourse. The term, coined by Jacques Derrida (“hantologie” in the original French, a deliberate near-homonym of ontology), originally served Derrida’s deconstructionist project and encompassed his belief in Marx’s impact on post-Communist Europe, supporting his argument that the present day exists only with respect to the past. Positioning the study of ghosts as a conceptual tool for understanding the condition of being “neither present nor absent, neither living nor dead,”<sup>6</sup> Derrida called for examination of the past and consideration of the future in the face of what he perceived to be a totalizing preoccupation with the present, that which he articulated as transitory and inevitably heading in one direction or the other:

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[excerpt from the publication text, *Coming through the Fog*:

les rencontres de Matthieu Brouillard et de Donigan Cumming, 2012, *Sagamie édition d’art*]

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76

<sup>4</sup> Tom Gunning, “To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision,” *Grey Room*, No. 26 (Winter 2007), 117

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinkler (London & New York: Verso, 1999), 39

<sup>6</sup> Warren Montag, “Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida’s Specters of Marx,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 71