

Justine Varga, *End of Violet*.

*There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in the mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.*

- G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 1812.

Hegel wrote *The Science of Logic* a decade or two in advance of the invention of photography, but he might as well have had it in mind. Where else but in the photograph do we find, in such stark proximity, the mediations and reversals of a technological process – negative to positive, outside to inside, small to large – giving, at the end, onto the image of an index: the world, exactly as it is, and never shall be again? Where else but in the photograph does this final image obstruct (with what dazzling predictability) the whole sequence of mediations that have produced it? Most viewers of a photograph see an immediate record, not a complex, fissured thing. It is the hard white light of the world we see (or think we do), not the blackness of the dark room.

Justine Varga's photographs lever these contradictions apart. They put us back in the dark room, peering over the photographer's shoulder as she adjusts her apparatus to produce her print. There is no final image – no representation – to fool us with some pure immediacy. Loosed from worldly reference, colour writhes across these surfaces: crimson, bunched and knotted like wire wool; violet, indigo, magenta; clouds of brown and black, dark and greasy; reds, pinks, and olive greens spreading to the edges of the paper.

We learn to read such signs. Each coloured form speaks to some stage in Varga's process, some point on the route from a tiny negative, carried around in her palm, exposed to the light and painted with various materials – from spittle to nail polish – to the massive, vivid intensities of the final print. Translucent red curlicues, laid by threes over two of the images here, trace her gestures in pigment carried on fingertips over her minuscule canvases. Two partial fingerprints, side by side, one tar-black, the other bright white as if backlit, tell not only of the touches that left them, but of a second negative, a second touching. This was taken from the first and used for the final print: an internegative whose product is this doubling, this whiteness (four out of the five prints in *End of Violet* are made from such internegatives). A blaze of bright peach pink at the centre of one print, brighter than its surroundings, tells of a darkroom door left deliberately open, flooding the print with yet more illumination. The black squares that frame the centre of each image show the passage of unfiltered light as it seeped around the edges of each negative during the process of enlargement. Every mark, every colour, is a kind of index. They tell of bodily presence at a single unique moment: a moment of marking, touching, altering, enlarging, printing. But they also split each image, diachronically, into a series of such moments, such presences, none pre-eminent. Viewing each photograph, we are pulled in different directions, between temporalities.

What of the final image? It no longer stands in the way of the sequence of mediations that created it. It no longer blocks our view. Process is bodied forth in the very form of these prints. Each one pulses with the enlarger's black light. The faint serial numbers that run along their black edges are as frank an admission of the material, mechanical substrate – of the negative itself – as we are ever likely to find. And what does this add up to? As Hegel would doubtless have recognised, this new insistence on mediation, on making the photograph declare each procedure that went into it, does nothing to distance the viewer. Quite the reverse. Varga takes

the ruined, the broken, the nonconforming – the negative exposed to too much light, too much colour; smeared, scratched, painted, spat upon – and holds them up to us to see their beauty. She breaks the rules of photography, the better to show us their effects; effects that are so familiar that we don't usually contemplate them. In these images we can *see* the process of inscription, of exposure, of enlargement. Each image coalesces into a series of immediacies strung together like the links on a chain. There is a whole ethic implied in this substitution of praxis for product. These images celebrate touch over vision; the picture over the diagram; the broken over the whole; the excessively performative over the minimal and austere. Their marks and colours are the traces of life. In Varga's photographs, we see that life in motion, in the process of becoming, never frozen or fixed.

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