Project Muse

Humanity: An International Journal OF Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development, Volume 9, Number 3, Winter 2018, pp. 469-480 (Article)
Published by University of Pennsylvania Press.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2018.0025

For additional information about this article: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/714139

Access provided by University of Edinburgh (1 Feb 2019 10:49 GM)

Editors' Note: Dossier on Asylum/Home

In 2012, the Israeli artist Michal Heiman came across Hugh Welch Diamond's photograph (ca. 1855) of a patient at the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum in England, and amongst the photographs, found herself looking at a picture of her younger self. This encounter led Heiman to start a photography project looking at the conditions of possibilities for "return", asking how are our imaginative practices bound up with the process of political recognition. As Sharon Sliwinski asks in her essay included in this issue: "Is the asylum a place or a state of mind? How does one enter these gates? And how does one return home?" The *Return/Asylum: A New Community of Women, 1855–2020* now consists of over 150 photographs and 120 videos of asylum-seekers, political activists, artists, academics and others. The work explores photography's ability to penetrate traumatic experience and transport, through different strategies, subjects across time and place, in an attempt to create a new community. This dossier consists of four photo essays, two by Michal Heiman on the Return/Asylum project, and two further essays by Orna Ben-Naftali and Sliwinski reflecting on the work.

Sharon Sliwinski is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work bridges the fields of visual culture, political theory, and the life of the mind. Her first, awarding-winning book, *Human Rights in Camera* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), explored the visual politics of human rights. She has contributed broadly to the field of photography studies, most recently coediting *Photography and the Optical Unconscious* (Duke University Press, 2017). Her recent work investigates the social, political, and cultural significance of dream-life, which is represented in her book *Dreaming in Dark Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and online in *The Museum of Dreams*.

Sharon Sliwinski

The Woman Who Walks Through Photographs

In the opening moments of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice reprimands her little black kitten for the "grand game of romps" it just had with a ball of yarn. Do you remember the scene? In the midst of the scolding, Alice becomes distracted by the big mirror that hangs in the drawing room. Or more accurately she becomes preoccupied with the room that lies on the other side of the mirror—the room in the "Looking-glass House." She pauses to take note of the ways the room on the other side is almost identical to her own. All the familiar features from her drawing room appear there, too, albeit in reverse. The mirror-world fascinates Alice (as it fascinates all of us) and she climbs up onto the mantel to examine it more closely. Suddenly, without warning, the surface melts into a bright silvery mist, and in the blink of an eye, Alice finds herself on the other side (fig. 1).

Many adventures ensue, and by the close of Carroll's book, Alice is back in her own world, trying to convince herself that all the remarkable things that happened in the looking-glass world were only a dream. But Alice remains perturbed by the thought of exactly *whose* dream this was: "Who do you think dreamed it all?" she asks

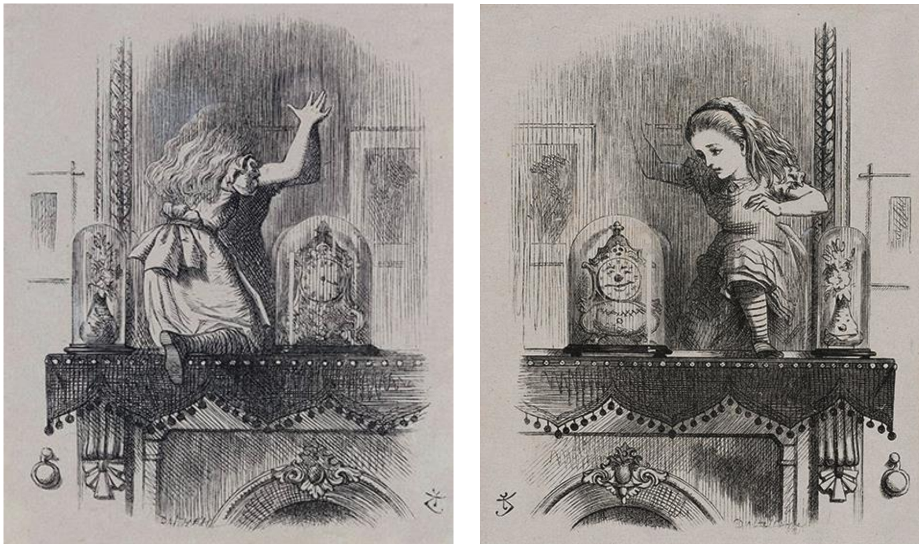

Figure 1. Print, illustrations from *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there*, engraved by Dalziel Brothers after Sir John Tenniel, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

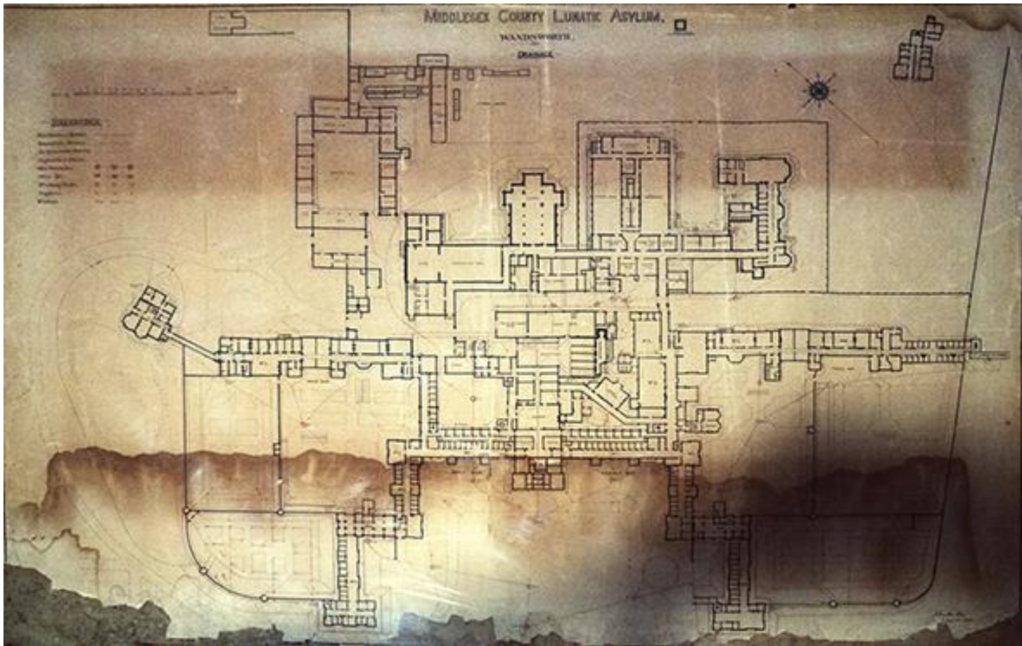

Figure 2. 19th century floor plan, Springfield University Hospital Museum, London. Photo: Michal Heiman, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

the naughty kitten, who reappears in the closing scene. When her query is ignored, Alice protests: "This is a serious question!" Was it her dream, or was it the Red King's? "He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!" The book ends before the dilemma is resolved. The story concludes on an unexpected and somewhat unsettling note: "Which do *you* think it was?"

These days it is rather easy to dismiss such queer questions. Who's got time for the world that appears on the other side of the looking-glass? Perhaps one might similarly be tempted to dismiss the Israeli artist Michal Heiman's remarkable claim that one day she stumbled across a photograph of herself in a book on nineteenth-century portraits of lunatics in the Surrey County Asylum in England. Admittedly, the idea of finding a picture of one's adolescent self among 150-year old photographs might seem a bit peculiar. How can one live in the past as well as in the present? Aren't photographs things to be looked *at*, rather than stumbled *into*?

Fortunately for us, Heiman allowed her mind to go wandering.[1] Indeed, rather like Lewis Carroll, she began inventing strategies to gain further access to the world she glimpsed on the other side of Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond's glass plates. She began by recreating the simple checkered dress that the female inmates from the asylum wore. Then she got hold of the architectural plan of the Surrey asylum where Diamond worked and where he photographed his patients. Heiman began to create her own images, including a short film, *Double Check (2016)*, which makes use of the asylum plan to bear witness to the institution's organizational structure and operating methods. The floor plans show separate areas for men and women, rooms for solitary confinement and punishment, sleeping halls, communal showers, and workshops (fig. 2).

Figure 3. Michal Heiman, *Asmait Yohannes (b. Eritrea, 1989), asylum seeker, Return: Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2020)*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Heiman also started making portraits. She photographed contemporary asylum-seekers, political activists, artists, academics, and others, including herself. Some of her sitters wear the dress she recreated (figs. 3 and 4). Some cover their faces with photographic-masks (figs. 5 and 6). To date, *Return: Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2020)* includes more than 150 photographs and 120 videos. Heiman also participated in a long-duration performance at Herzliya Museum in 2017, in which she invited spectators to speak with her and to imagine the asylum and its women through a collection of documents that she assembled. The conversations touched on issues such as refusal, ethics, law, the return of the oppressed, violence, regression, screen memories, dissociation, and the right to return.[2]

Figure 4. Michal Heiman, *Mhameed Mohamed (b. Nazareth, 1976), cleaner, lives in Umm El Fahem, Return: Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2020)*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

In effect, Heiman has created an extensive series of tools and techniques for imaginatively returning to the asylum. And she has enlisted the public's help in developing further strategies—new gestures for extending solidarity to people who have been subjugated by the institution, new ways of connecting with those individuals who have been bereft of legal rights to property, family, or public hearing. In its own way, the project poses several questions: How are our imaginative practices bound up with the process of political recognition? What separates one life from another? Whose dream is this? Is the asylum a place or a state of mind? How does one enter these gates? And how does one return home?

These are serious questions for our times as much for Dr. Diamond's era. Now, just as then, the words "asylum" and "return" can invoke multiple and indeed even violently contradictory meanings. Heiman's project aims to grant these contradictions

Figure 5. Michal Heiman, *Mask: Virginia Woolf (b. London, England, 1882–1941), writer, Return: Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2020)*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

the room to coexist. Like D.W. Winnicott, one of her theoretical references, Heiman asks for certain paradoxes to be tolerated and for them not to be resolved.[3]

It is an understatement to say that we live in a polarized political climate. How we remain connected to each other depends more and more on aesthetic encounters in so-called virtual communities. There is a great deal to be said about the way these encounters and communities open space for important political work—and conversely, how they constrain and confine it. Ever increasingly, our contact with the world beyond our doors occurs via images. To my mind, this means there is an urgent need for artists, those "great disturbers of the peace" who spend their time studying and surveying this imaginary terrain.[4] As counterintuitive as it sounds, attending to the imaginary dimension allows artists to register those parts of reality that have been obscured for one reason or another. Their work has the potential to bear us across the

Figure 6. Michal Heiman, *Mask: Claude Cahun (b. Nantes, France, 1894–1954), artist, photographer and writer, Return: Asylum (The Dress, 1855–2019).* Courtesy of the artist.

gulf that separates us and perhaps even to facilitate a kind of "benevolent surrender," to borrow Sarah Lewis's remarkable phrase. [5] At its best, art creates the conditions for emotional and psychological transformation, paving a way for the emergence of a new version of ourselves and of our common political world.

Photography as Object Relations

Michal Heiman's particular gift is akin to Alice's: she has the ability to access the world on the other side of the looking-glass. Among other things, *Return: Asylum* serves as a potent reminder that the photographic camera belongs to a long lineage of optical devices—tools that purport to produce a faithful representation of whoever (or whatever) appears before their unblinking gaze but in fact are a gateway to the imaginary world. Heiman's project leans on this idea but also sounds a warning: caution

and canniness are needed when engaging such devices. The images that appear on the surface of the mirror—or in the camera's viewfinder—are, in fact, only a tiny glimpse of a vast imaginary terrain that does not easily yield to sight.

Heiman's work has long been grounded in the rich intersection of psychoanalytic and visual theory. Among her previous works are videos based on case studies by Sigmund Freud and D. W. Winnicott, as well as two lecture/films, *Attacks on Linking* and *Daughtertype*, that engage the work of the British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion.

Return: Asylum highlights Heiman's preoccupation with D.W. Winnicott's work, and perhaps in particular with the psychoanalyst's insights about the relational dimensions of the human condition. One of Winnicott's signal contributions in this regard is his 1967 paper "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development." The paper involves a subtle critique of Jacques Lacan's well-known theory of the mirror phase. Lacan famously argued that, in the normal course of events, a baby will internalize the image that appears in the mirror as an imaginary representative of the self. For better or worse, he proposed, this "mirror phase" is crucial for developing a sense of a self.[6] Winnicott's critique involved pointing out that this early recognition is, in fact, a *relational* activity, and more specifically, as relationship that is facilitated by the mother.[7] It is in the mother's face that the baby first encounters an image of itself, which is to say, the mother's face serves as the original mirror. If all goes well, Winnicott observes, in the baby's first months, the maternal figure will project an image of the baby back to itself, which in turn, enables the baby to develop a sense of self.

The complexity and significance of this basic relational activity is all too easily taken for granted. Winnicott described several cases where this all-important recognition failed—occasions when a mother could not respond to her baby, often for reasons not of her own making. (He served as the psychiatric consultant for the child evacuation program in Great Britain during World War II.) Winnicott understood his psychoanalytic work as a kind of reparation for this early environmental failure. Therapy, in his view, consisted of "a long-term giving back to the patient back what the patient brings. It is a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen."[8]

Return: Asylum exposes the political stakes of this fundamental relational drama, showing how the human being requires the other's gaze in order to develop and maintain one's own sense of self and identity. Or, put differently, Heiman offers a radically different account of the social bond, one in which our very life and sense of existence is radically bound up with the other. In the relational view, we are always already tied together in a social bond that precedes and makes possible both of our lives.[9] Heiman both highlights and extends this profound psychological insight, mobilizing photography as a medium of object relations. She poses, and she bravely refuses to resolve the question of how photography can facilitate this important work of reflecting back what is there to be seen. In this respect, the project asks how our everyday forms of regard have manifest political effects—the ways photography can be used to reflect back what is there to be seen, but also how it can serve as a screen, blocking out any meaningful engagement with the world. Heiman challenges us to

Figure 7. Francis Bedford, Portrait of Hugh Welch Diamond from the Photographic Society Club album, 1856. Wellcome Collection.

consider how our forms of regard can become ossified in institutional practice and how citizens might develop new strategies for imaginatively *re-cognizing* those people for whom the process of social recognition has failed.

Difficult Returns

In order to animate these fundamental issues, Heiman returns to the primal scene, so to speak, the origin of photography's initial entanglement with the asylum: the Female Department of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum circa 1855. The gatekeeper to this particular world is the perpetually weary-looking resident superintendent, Dr. Hugh Welsh Diamond (fig. 7) Diamond studied medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons and later undertook his psychiatric studies at Bethlem Hospital, which was famous for its stringent forms of treatment (the hospital was better known under its sobriquet, Bedlam). Diamond expressed sympathy for the new, humane methods that were starting to take hold in Britain, but his particular contribution involved marrying his passion for psychiatry with his passion for photography. He was an early advocate of

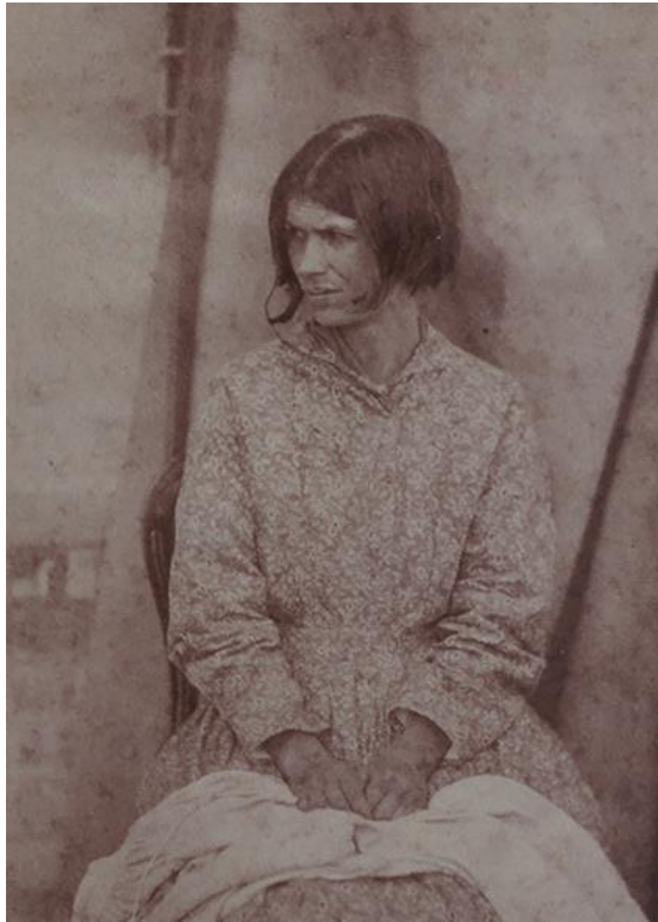

Figure 8. Plate 7, by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, ca.1855. From *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*.

the technology, helping to found the Royal Photographic Society and serving as an editor of its journal. His essays and notes on the medium were widely influential. By 1850, Diamond had built a small photographic studio in the Surrey Asylum, where he set about creating portraits of his patients, a first in the history of psychiatry (figs. 8-10). This project, like so many scientific contributions to the study of madness, involved its own form of delusion. Diamond believed, like many in his day, that the outward appearance of a person could provide evidence for the inward, psychological state. In 1838, Sir Alexander Morison had published *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*, which included illustrations of the many faces of madness, and Diamond believed that the camera could succeed in this illustrative function, securing "with unerring accuracy the external phenomenon of each passion."[10]

But apart from using photography as a diagnostic tool, Diamond also experimented with the medium as a method of treatment. He took note of the way that the experience of being photographed affected his patients, and he went so far as to suggest that the process could help facilitate a cure. In a lecture delivered to the Royal Society

Figure 9. Plate 31, by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, ca. 1855. From *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*.

in 1856, the doctor provides a brief account of such a treatment in a short vignette about A.D., a twenty-year-old patient who had come from Bedlam. Among other delusional symptoms, A.D. believed she was a queen. This was not entirely uncommon among the Surrey lunatics; Diamond provides a photograph of another woman who fashioned herself a crown, which she proudly wore to signify her status (fig. 11).

After some negotiation, Diamond reports that he managed to coax A.D. to pose for him by telling her that he sought to make portraits of all the royal personages under his care. A.D. initially scoffed at this idea: "Queens indeed! How did they obtain their titles?" Diamond replies, "*They imagined them*," suggesting that she, too

Figure 10. Plate 27, by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, ca. 1855. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

was suffering from this delusion. "'No!'" A.D. replied sharply, "'I never imagine such foolish delusions, they are to be pitied, but *I* was born a Queen.'" When A.D. finally allowed herself to be photographed, Diamond reports that she found the subsequent portraits amusing: "Her frequent conversation about them was the first decided step in her gradual improvement." After four months, A.D. was discharged "perfectly cured, and laughing heartily at her former imaginations."[11] If we are to believe Diamond's account, the experience of being photographed, the resulting portraits, and the dialogue about them seemed to help dispel A.D.'s delusional self-image. In Winnicott's terms, the doctor used his camera to reflect back what was there to be seen, facilitating a positive change in his patient's state of mind. One might be

Figure 11. Plate 32, by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, ca. 1855. From *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*.

tempted, in this respect, to read Diamond as a forerunner of the later tradition of talk-therapy.[12] It is certainly something of an exception to find evidence of a psychiatric patient's voice in the mid-nineteenth century. But as several scholars have argued, Diamond was not entirely distinct from the larger institutional apparatus that regularly imposed its discourse upon patients.[13]

This imposition is more obvious in Dr. John Conolly's series of extended commentaries on Diamond's portraits, which were published in 1858 in the *Medical Times and Gazette*. The two doctors were professionally acquainted, but there is no evidence that Conolly ever spoke with any of Diamond's patients directly. This did not seem to deter him from making diagnoses. Of the woman pictured in plate 7 (fig. 9), Conolly proffers the following narrative:

> Her story is but one in a larger chapter of such which London furnishes. She gained a small livelihood by the occupation of a sorter and folder of paper, and lived but poorly. After a confinement she had an attack of puerperal mania, lasting about six months [i.e., postpartum psychosis]; her conversation was generally incoherent, and her actions were sometimes impulsive and violent. She repudiated her

infant, declaring that it did not belong to her, and on one occasion she leaped out of a window fourteen feet from the ground. About a month after being received into the Surrey Asylum the excitement left her, and great despondency supervened. [...] The photograph, taken when the state of melancholy was passing into that of excitement, retains something of the fixedness of attitude and expression in the first state; as in the arms held close to the body, and the position of the lower extremities, and the downward tension of the cheek. The body is thin, and the hair lank and heavy. But the eyes are not lost in vacancy; they seem to discern some person or object which excites displeasure or suspicion. The forehead is wrinkled with some strong emotion, and the eyebrows, although corrugated, have not the tense contraction toward the nose which is observable in many cases of melancholia.[14]

Conolly's account reads like an exemplar of Michel Foucault's claim that "the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords evidence of a broken dialogue."[15] The Men of Reason issued their scientific statements from one side of a great discursive divide; on the other side, the Mad were relegated to silence.

Winnicott might help us describe this situation in visual terms: Conolly's engagement with the medium reads like a model of therapeutic failure—an occasion when the caregiver failed to reflect back what was there to be seen.[16] Instead, Conolly projected his own investments onto the images. And indeed, the medium seems to invite this particular defense mechanism; photographs all too easily perform as screens upon which viewers cast their projections. Not enough attention has been paid to the ways projection replaces apperception in the history of photography—all the ways we fail to see what was there to be seen. This form of "object-relating" seems to block what might have been the beginning of a significant exchange with the world.[17]

Thank god for the artists, who, as James Baldwin once observed, are present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey.[18]

Heiman's *Return: Asylum* teaches us to be rightly wary of this trap of visibility. Her project aims to emphasize the ways our ways of seeing and our forms of recognition are, in fact, relational. Heiman invites viewers into a profound engagement with these past figures, enticing us to establish imaginative identifications with these Victorian women; as a result, she encourages viewers to identify with others who might be subject to the contemporary institutional gaze of the asylum. The artist brings her nuanced understanding of psychological processes to political arena, and in so doing reminds us that our museums and exhibition halls can be important places to engage in the work of social recognition. Put more simply, exhibitions can provide one important venue where people can come to see and to be seen, to make an appearance on the world stage, to reflect on each of our varying degrees of visibility and exposure.

In her construction of a new community, Heiman asks us to attend to the boundaries that constitute the parameters of the public sphere—challenging us to think about the ways photography can serve and hinder this work. Her project also emphasizes the performative dynamics of the polis. This space of appearance must be continually recreated through embodied gestures and the human exercise of imagination. But perhaps most important of all, Heiman reminds us that the images in the

looking-glass are not static representations but dynamic gateways. Like Alice, she opens fundamental questions about the shared terrain of the imaginary. Whose world is this? You are part of my dream, of course—but then I am part of your dream, too.

NOTES

[1] As Oliver Sacks taught us, in the early sixteenth century, before reason anxiously walled itself off from madness, the term "hallucination" simply meant "a wandering mind." See Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), ix.

[2] Heiman's practice of speaking with museum visitors continues and elaborates her earlier artistic actions, such as *Michal Heiman Test (M.H.T) no. 1–4*, in which examiners spoke to visitors on her behalf, either individually or in groups, about their impressions of photographs they were shown, while completing personal questionnaires.

[3] In his introduction to *Playing and Reality*, D.W. Winnicott draws attention to the paradox involved in the use of an object, namely, that the baby both creates the object and that the object is also already there, waiting to be created: "My contribution is to ask for this paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved. By flight to split-off intellectual functioning it is possible to resolve the paradox, the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself." D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971; New York: Routledge, 2005), xvi.

[4] James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" [1962], *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 669.

[5] Sarah Lewis, "Vision & Justice," *Aperture* 223 (Summer 2016): 14.

[6] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I [1949]," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002). Lacan also argued that identifying with an external image will bring about a radical alienation. The danger, as Alice discovers, lies in the fact that the looking-glass world—the image in the mirror—is not, in fact, identical to the self. But Lacan nevertheless considered identification to be essential to the development of the human ego.

[7] D.W. Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development [1967]," in *Playing and Reality*, 149–59. Winnicott's theoretical intervention leans on Melanie Klein's extensive body of work, in which the psychic life of the subject is oriented around maternal functioning (in contrast to the Freudian/Lacanian universe, which centers on the role of the father).

[8] Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development," 158.

[9] Judith Butler has proposed a similar point in her 2016 Tanner Lecture, "Why Preserve the Life of the Other?," March 31, 2016, accessed June 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coBcQajx18I&list=PLqHnHG5X2PXCVsC0ji-oIdL5XjYOmqY4X&index=8&t=0s.

[10] Hugh Welch Diamond, "On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomenon of Insanity [1856]," in *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, ed. Sander L Gilman (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1976), 20.

[11] Ibid., 23.

[12] Sharrona Pearl argues: "Diamond pushed physiognomical principles in a dramatically new direction, one that established a discourse of internality, a concept echoed by later doctors Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud." Sharrona Pearl, "Through a Mediated Mirror: The Photo-graphic Physiognomy of Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond," *History of Photography* 33, no. 3 (August 2009): 290, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087290902752978.

[13] Elaine Showalter has severely criticized Diamond for being complicit with the institutional

violence, for joining the ranks of those doctors who, armed with the new technology of photography, imposed their fantasies on female patients. Showalter highlights the way these women were cast in the literary myth of Ophelia, in particular. See Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibility of Feminist Criticism [1977]," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985). In direct response to this lineage of criticism, Heiman's film *Plate 34 Line London* (2016) follows the artist's daughter Emily in the role of a time traveler, evoking the figure of Elizabeth Siddal, the famous model of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, who was immortalized in John Everett Millais's painting of Ophelia. Here Emily aims to gain entry into the institution precisely by embracing the figure of Ophelia.

[14] John Conolly, "Case Studies from *The Physiognomy of Insanity* [1858]," in *The Face of Madness*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, 45–46.

[15] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1988), xii. Conolly had his reputation damaged in the 1850s by scandals linking him to cases of wrongful confinement. Peter Melville Logan has argued that "The Physiognomy of Insanity" was written as a response the scandals and the charges against him. See Peter Melville Logan, "Imitations of Insanity and Victorian Medical Aesthetics," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, no. 49 (February 2008), http://dx.doi.org/10.7202/017855ar.

[16] Contrast this with a Lacanian reading, in which Conolly's intervention might be regarded as exacerbating the psychosis that circulates under the Name-of-the-Father (*nom de père*). In Lacan's conceptualization, the paternal figure is required to impose the law, relegate desire, and intervene in the imaginary relationship between mother and child—to introduce a necessary symbolic distance between them. Psychosis stems, in Lacan's view, from a failure of this paternal functioning. And indeed, the paternal figure failed twice in this woman's case: first, in his evident absence from the situation of the pregnancy that precipitated the psychosis, and second, in the form of the psychiatric institution (of which Conolly is a representative), which, rather than establish a relationship with the patient, simply imposed an interpretative frame from afar.

[17]In a signal paper from 1969, Winnicott defines two different kinds of object relations. Primitive emotional states were often expressed in cruder relationships with objects. "Object-relating" was his term for an aggressive kind of relationality. In this state of mind, the individual fails to recognize the independent existence of the object. Things (and people) are manipulated as projections and extensions of the self—controlled as a means to shore up a fragile sense of omnipotence. In contrast, "object-use" requires a degree of emotional development: recognition that the object has an independent status outside of one's subjective experience. See Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification [1969]," in *Playing and Reality*, 115–27.

[18] Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 669.