

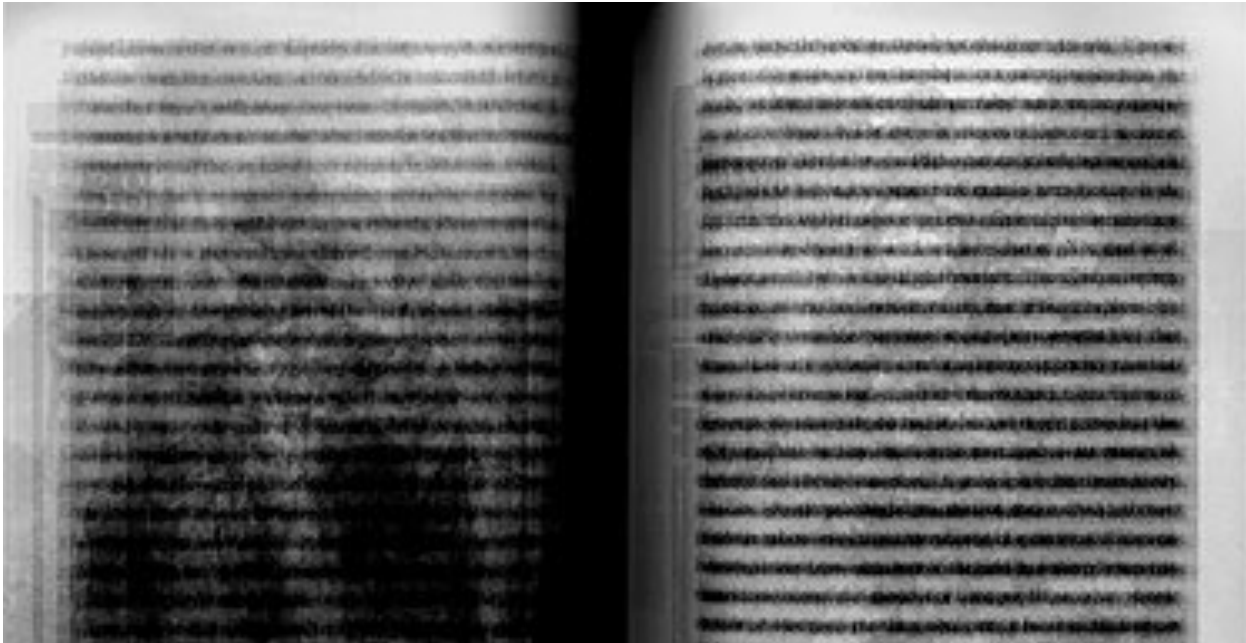
SEANKELLY

Dyer, Geoff. "Between the Lines," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2006.

theguardian

Between the lines

What if you could see each page of a book at the same time, hear every note of a sonata in an instant, or view an artist's works all together? Idris Khan's obsessive photographs attempt to do just that, writes Geoff Dyer



Inclusive vision ... Detail from Idris Khan's Every page ... from Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. Photograph: © Idris Khan, courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery

Criticism sometimes achieves the condition of art; certain works of art are also a form of commentary or criticism. Roland Barthes's meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida*, is a classic example of the former. How to respond creatively to a book that has profoundly shaped the way the medium is regarded? A writer might feel compelled to follow George Steiner's grand advice and "write a book in reply". And if you're not a writer, but a photographer? If you do what Barthes is writing about?

Idris Khan's response was to photograph every page of the book and then digitally combine them in a single, composite image. The result of this homage to - and essay on - *Camera Lucida* (English edition) is a beautiful palimpsest: a series of blurred stripes of type in which the occasional word can be deciphered and one of the images reproduced by Barthes - a portrait of Mondrian by Kertész - glimpsed. Khan did the same thing with *On Photography* by Susan Sontag. The whole of the book can be seen in an instant, but the density of information is such that Sontag's elegant formulations add up to, and are reduced to, a humming, unreadable distillation. Already slight, the gap between texts and Khan's images will shrink further if the books are reissued with his "readings" of them - surrogate author photos? - on the covers.

It's not just books about photography; Khan also photographs photographs. Bernd and Hilla Becher compiled a comprehensive inventory of architectural building types, such as gas towers, all photographed in a stark, neutral style. Khan's composite, *every . . . Bernd & Hilla Becher Prison Type Gasholder*, transforms their rigid geometries into a fuzzy, vibrating mass, more like a smudged charcoal drawing of a shivering iron jelly than a photograph.

These - the Sontag, the Barthes and the Bechers - were the first things by Khan that I came across. It was obvious he was on to something. A better sense of what that something might be can be seen at the

Victoria Miro Gallery, in London, from today. Practically everything in this, Khan's first UK solo show, is a composite of some kind, but the range and depth of the idea have been extended with uncanny success.

Freud, in his famous essay, mentions "the constant recurrence of the same thing" as a symptom of "the Uncanny". In Khan's picture of every page of the recent Penguin edition, the black gutter at the centre throbs like a premonition or memory of an Optical Art void. It makes you wonder if, as well as psychoanalysis, Freud invented the Rorschach blot. In the background, two of the paintings discussed by him, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and *The Virgin and Child with St Anne*, peer through a shifting sleet of type like emanations of the unconscious or something. It's only a book - only a photo of a book - but it pulses like a living thing.

Khan was born in Birmingham in 1978. His mother, who had trained as a pianist, worked as a nurse. She converted to Islam after meeting his father, a doctor. It was his father's idea that Idris - himself a non-practising Muslim - photograph every page of the Qur'an. Since a significant part of the population believes that the complexities of the world can be resolved by this one book, there is a certain logic in taking things a stage further and reducing the book to a single manifestation of itself. The result is incomprehensible. And lovely. The patterns bordering each page are turned into a solid black frame so that the book becomes - as is often said of photography - a window on to the world. Inside this frame - rigid, unalterable, definitive - all is in flux. Fixed meaning dissolves in a blazing grey drizzle. Words, as one of Don DeLillo's narrators says when confronted by a swirl of Arabic script, are "design, not meant to be read, as though part of some unbearable revelation".

Working in a medium wedded to the visible, photographers, perversely and inevitably, have been preoccupied with photographing the invisible. Given his mother's training, music has an allure for Khan. *Struggling to Hear . . . After Ludwig van Beethoven Sonatas* is a picture of all of the composer's scores for piano, the impenetrable mass of black serving as a visual corollary of Beethoven's increasing deafness.

Each art form has its own advantages and limitations. Words and music unfold successively, through time. Photography is about an instant. By analogy it can ask the impossible: in this case, what if you could hear every note of Beethoven's sonatas in an instant? What would that look like? And when we think of a piece of music that we know well, don't we sometimes remember it, not phrase by phrase, but in its amorphous entirety?

It is often said that photographers freeze time, but Khan does the opposite. This can be seen most clearly in his remixes of Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies of the 1880s (a well-documented source of inspiration for Francis Bacon). Muybridge used fast-shutter speeds to break action into moment-by-moment increments, rendering movement stationary. Khan takes these sequences of isolated moments and unfreezes time by combining them in a single image. Muybridge's strictly mechanical record of a man getting out of bed becomes a vision of the unconscious lifting clear of the body, a dream of waking. It's like a photographic equivalent of Henri Fuseli's *Nightmare*, an out-of-body experience made flesh - and vice versa.

To learn more about artists' working methods, some paintings have been X-rayed so that preliminary versions of masterpieces are brought to the surface. Khan's photographs are a kind of reverse X-ray, laying bare by accretion. Marrying up the eyes of all Rembrandt's self-portraits, reducing them to the same size and layering them digitally together, Khan effectively photographs him with an exposure time lasting the length of the artist's life. *Rembrandt by Himself* offers an experience akin to the painter looking at the mirror in the moment of his death, when the evidence of a lifetime of intense self-scrutiny flashes before his grave-dark eyes in a single instant.

There are precedents for these essays in visual condensation: most recently, Fiona Banner's paintings in which a film is verbally transcribed in her own hand so that an entire movie can be seen - but not read - in an instant, on a single canvas. In the 1970s, Hiroshi Sugimoto began photographing empty movie palaces and drive-ins. Using an exposure time equal to the duration of the film, Sugimoto reduced the contents of whatever was on screen - car chases, murders, betrayals, romance - to a single moment of radiant whiteness. The most explicit precursors, however, are also the earliest. They also enable us to view Khan's situation and methods in a broader historical and contemporary context.

In the late 19th century, photography became an important tool in an alliance between some of the "scientific" fads of the day - physiognomy, eugenics, racial taxonomy - and attempts by the police and the state to isolate types likely to commit crimes. Francis Galton believed that there could "hardly be a more appropriate method of discovering the central physiognomic type of any race or group than that of composite portraiture". His composites of convicted criminals duly showed "not the criminal, but the man who is liable to fall into crime". Using similar techniques, Arthur Batut, in France, made "type-portraits" to identify the defining traits of particular races, tribes or families (including his own). In a phrase that might have come from Khan himself, Batut spoke of these composites as "images of the invisible", images that shimmer with the same ghostly air that we see in Khan's.

Khan is himself a composite of artist and photographer. For more than a few current practitioners, the advantages of identifying themselves as artists rather than photographers can be summed up as a six-word hustle: Print bigger, sell less for more. For my money, Khan is as much of an artist as any other photographer currently working. He is a conceptual artist in the straightforward sense that thought is implicit in the act of looking at his work. A lot of contemporary British art flogging itself as conceptual has the intellectual depth of a paddling pool and the gravitas of a helium balloon; Khan's work is dense, multilayered (literally) and profound.

The danger is that this composite thing could just become his shtick. He could do every page of every book, every this of every that. Every . . . Photograph Taken Whilst Travelling Around Europe in the Summer of 2002 seems a rather pointless novelty - there's nothing to see. Its relative failure suggests that Khan's method tends to work better when applied to existing works of art. You can almost hear certain books summoning him to them. It is only a matter of time, surely, before he does every page of Borges's story "The Aleph", in which the narrator discovers a spot where "all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist".

Needless to say, not everything lends itself equally fruitfully to his attention. Garry Winogrand said that he took photographs "to find out what something will look like photographed", and Khan, in his mediated way, is motivated by a similarly random curiosity about what might emerge when he opts to give an image the treatment. I'm guessing that a fair amount of stuff gets processed and then discarded once the preliminary findings are in.

In tandem with the Miro show, inIVA is showcasing Khan's six-minute film of Gabriella Swallow playing bits of six cello suites, with sound and image repeated, overlain and mixed together. It's interesting to see Khan expanding his repetition compulsion into the realm of the moving image but, for me, A Memory After Bach's Cello Suites lacks the eerie concentration of stilled works like the huge Caravaggio: His Last Years. Fifteen late works by the painter who, according to John Berger, depicted a world that "displays itself in hiding", who found a promise "in the darkness itself", are turned into a tangled kaleidoscope of disembodied bodies, a swirling knot of light.

In the course of these negative excavations a form of auto-interrogation is at work, as Khan's "discoveries" question the ways in which accumulation can both reveal and obscure essence. Every . . . William Turner Postcard from Tate Britain transforms these great paintings of light and air into a brooding soup with an amoeba-mushroom curdling in the swampy twilight. And yet something glimmers, faintly, through the murk. What could it be?

Walter Benjamin claimed that mechanical reproduction, the process of which Tate postcards are symptoms and which Khan has pushed to an extreme, stripped artworks of their "aura". Ironically, Khan's obsessive reproduction invests works with an aura buried within them. Consistent with Barthes's notion of what makes a photograph special, this is, simultaneously, something that Khan adds to the originals and which, none the less, is already there.

- Idris Khan's first solo UK show is at the Victoria Miro Gallery, London N1, until September 30. Details: 020-7336 8109.
- A Memory After Bach's Cello Suites is at inIVA, London EC2, from September 13 to October 22. Details: 020-7729 9616.
- Geoff Dyer received this year's Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography in New York for his book The Ongoing Moment (Abacus).