

# On Eclipses

## When Language and Photography Fail

On August 21, the earth, moon, and sun's celestial postures aligned in performance of the perfect spectral mirage: the moon appeared to slip from its orbit, and like an unknown body blotting out the light at the end of a narrow tunnel, briefly obscured the violent, ultraviolet orb of the sun.

In Los Angeles, outside the slender path of totality that threaded across the contiguous United States, the sun remained as a sliver, a toenail, or a fractured oval; the drop in air temperature was only marginally perceptible. A naked glance upwards would be rewarded with a crescent-shaped scar seared into the retina.

Elsewhere, those situated within the path of totality would be seized by a lunar tempest: a disc of shadow would defiantly cloak the sun and assail the terrestrial plane below, moving at an upward speed of nearly 3,000 miles per hour.<sup>1</sup> At the moment of total eclipse, twilight would emerge, the sun's corona would careen into view, and the visible color spectrum would appear to lilt and shift. While this rapturous solar void has been lyrically imparted as "a forsaking"<sup>2</sup> (Anne Carson), a fatal "defeat"<sup>3</sup> (Virginia Woolf), and "a slug of anaesthetic up your arm"<sup>4</sup> (Annie Dillard), by all accounts, the corporeal experience of this phenomenon is truly invulnerable to being shaped by language. Existing in what Sarah Charlesworth describes as a liminal state of "All Light & No Light,"<sup>5</sup> an

eclipse also magnificently defies photographic representation. Capturing an eclipse's image or recounting it through language is akin to fleshing out an imperishable portrait of a fleeting ghost.

While a total solar eclipse predictably occurs somewhere on the planet approximately once every 18 months, the August 21, 2017 eclipse was the first to align above the United States in 38 years, with the last occurring on February 26, 1979.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the uncanny qualities of this celestial affair, both Sarah Charlesworth and Annie Dillard employed the 1979 eclipse as subject matter for two distinct works that mined its respective photographic and poetic properties.

In Dillard's classic essay, "Total Eclipse," the author intimately recounts her personal experience of the eclipse, narrating the ways in which language becomes unmoored from the actual somatic experience of being consumed by the moon's shadow ("Language can give no sense of this sort of speed"<sup>7</sup>). Pondering the limits of language, Dillard frequently turns to the language of photography, excavating the points at which image and prose meet: "The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. The hatch in the brain slammed."<sup>8</sup>

As she continues to navigate an array of complex visual metaphors, she ultimately asserts that, as language crumples in the aftermath of totality, so does its photographic brethren. "You have seen photographs of the sun taken during a total eclipse. The corona fills the print... The lenses of telescopes and cameras can no more cover the breadth and scale of the visual array than language can

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VOL. 129 — NO. 37,034

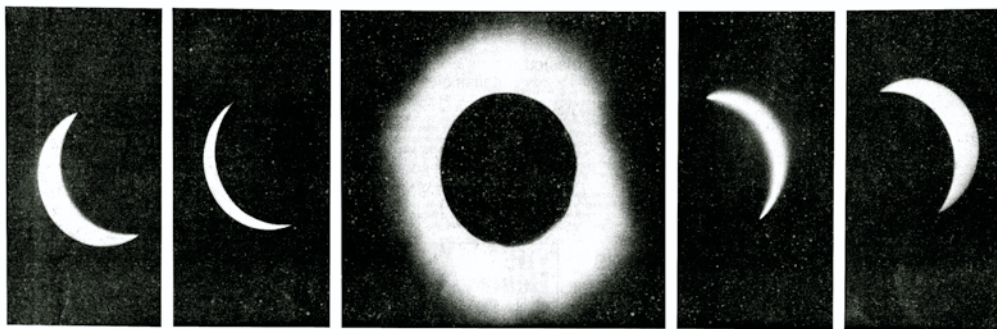
# The Oregonian

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1979

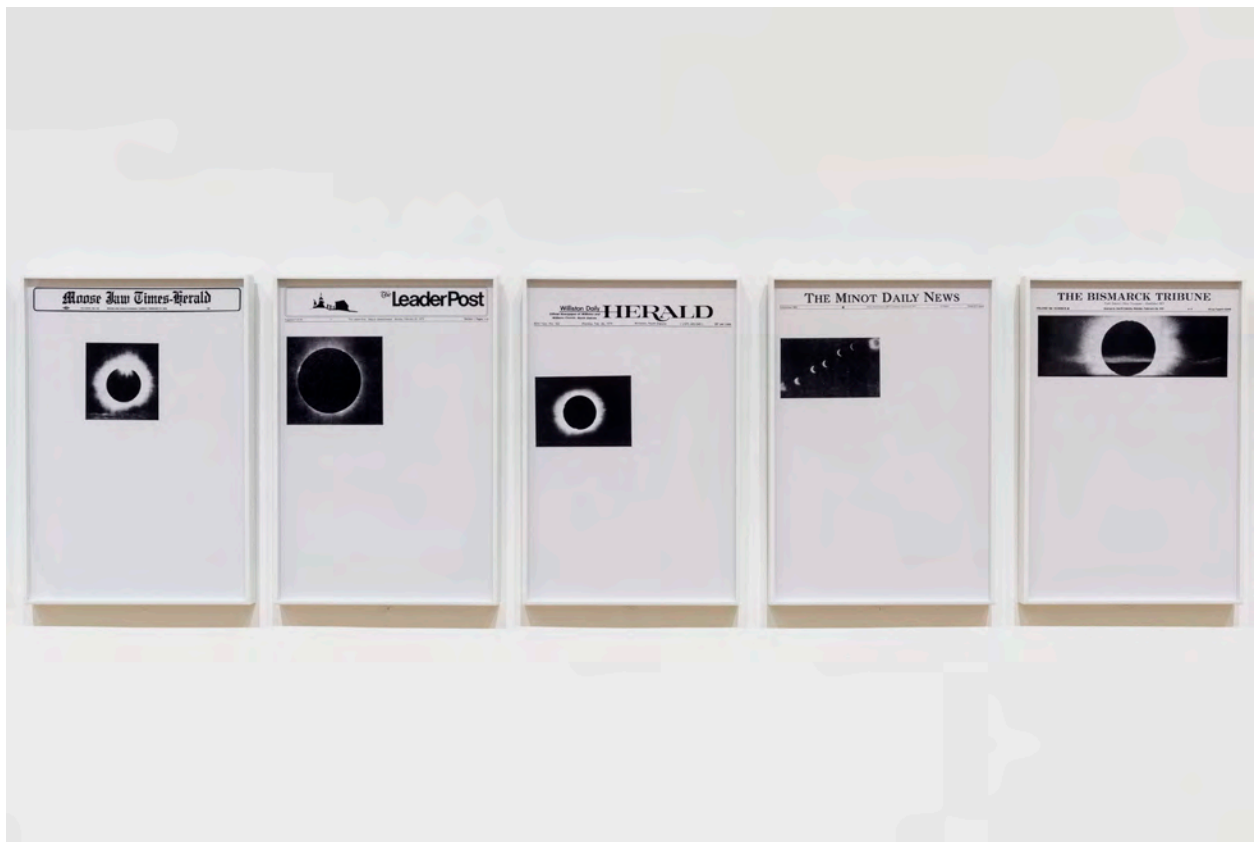
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Feature



2  
 Sarah Charlesworth:  
*Doubleworld* at Los Angeles  
 County Museum of Art, August  
 20, 2017–February 4, 2018  
 (installation view). © Estate of  
 Sarah Charlesworth. Image ©  
 Museum Associates/LACMA.

3  
 Leonardo Katz, *Lunar  
 Typewriter* (1977-1978). Image  
 courtesy of The Getty Museum  
 and of Henrique Faria Fine Art.

cover the breadth and simultaneity of internal experience.”<sup>9</sup>

Here, the problem of memorializing the eclipse emerges. Dillard suggests that both poetry and photography function as mediators of a primal experience, and as such exhibit tragic flaws when tasked to quantify the visual and emotional contours of a total eclipse. While Dillard’s linguistic focus is largely internal, intimate, and personal, Sarah Charlesworth’s *The Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979* (1979, currently on view at LACMA), dissects the problem of photographic representation by focusing on the wider point of public dissemination. Visually tracing the geographic arc of the 1979 eclipse, Charlesworth photographically reproduces the front pages of 29 newspapers headlining the eclipse, all from communities within the path of totality. Stripped of all accompanying text and image aside from the publications’ mastheads and photographs of the eclipse, the work presents the phenomenon as a compositional abstraction that threads through a series of nearly empty frames.

Interestingly, despite hailing from diverse geographic points along the eclipse’s trajectory, many of the newspapers use identical images of the cosmological occurrence,<sup>10</sup> undermining the unspoken insinuation that each offers unique, firsthand reportage of a newsworthy event. As duplicates of reproductions of already mediated images, the photographs in question function as viral facsimiles, visual surrogates incapable of truly “reporting” the moment for which they stand. By erasing the remaining content of the newspapers’ covers, Charlesworth further contextually dilutes a moment that is already more hallucinogenic than it is concrete.

Charlesworth deploys photographic processes to point to the medium’s own blindspot, unearthing a beguiling riddle: despite inherently embodying the physical and optical interplay of light, shadow, and object that the mechanism of photography employs, a total eclipse fundamentally eludes the parameters of photographic representation. An eclipse is an optical lacuna: an oblique, fugitive state marked by the dual presence and absence of light, which renders it metaphorically (and in most cases, physically<sup>11</sup>) unphotographable. Only the most advanced telescopic lenses can capture an eclipse in any detail, and the resulting physical image is a beautifully tidy abstraction—a finite yet disembodied emblem of an already abstract occurrence. Immense, uncapturable, and uncategorizable, an eclipse ultimately untethers the visual world from its verbal reference point.

If the 1979 total solar eclipse confounded modes of conceptual and optical representation, the 2017 eclipse exponentially compounded these representational dilemmas. On the morning of August 21, as the needs of my newborn forbade me from venturing outside, I tacitly watched the crescent-shaped projections of a partially eclipsed sun emerge from the dappled light filtering through my window. While simultaneously scrolling through my friends’ geographically scattered posts and hashtags, I streamed NASA’s live video feed of the moment of totality. Every major news channel boasted dedicated coverage of the eclipse, revealing disquietingly large throngs of people congregating in fields and stadiums, gazing skywards as if anticipating the unfurling of the apocalypse (and by Dillard’s reading, perhaps they were).

1. Elizabeth Zubritsky, “The Moon is Front and Center During a Total Solar Eclipse,” *NASA.gov*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2017/the-moon-is-front-and-center-during-a-total-solar-eclipse>.

2. Anne Carson, “Totality: The Color of Eclipse,” *Cabinet*, Issue 12: The Enemy (Fall/Winter 2013), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/carson.php>.

3. *Ibid.*, as quoted.

In fact, over 200 million people viewed or experienced the eclipse.<sup>12</sup> Exacerbating the dilemma of photography set forth by Dillard and Charlesworth, most of these spectators witnessed the eclipse, as I did, through varying degrees of photographic mediation: through a live feed or on social media, through filtered lenses, or through the irregular shadows cast by found or handmade projectors. If the eclipse itself embodied the mechanics of photography, so did attempts at viewing it—our eyes became lenses protected by filters, our iPhones became surrogates for our eyes, and our bodies bore the apparatus of homemade camera obscuras.<sup>13</sup> And, on the fringes of totality, lest there be millions of newly forged retinal scars, we turned our backs to the light en masse in a postmodern performance of Plato's philosophical parable.

In an inadvertent rendition of Charlesworth's *Arc*, most networks aired live video footage of the moment of totality as it rhythmically unfolded above the various communities along its geographic path. As the sun and moon appeared to collide, a moment of rapt silence was punctuated by a chorus of screams—a spectacle of primal rapture performed for the mediated vantage points of news cameras and social media.<sup>14</sup> This peculiar primitive phenomenon, also recounted by Dillard, marks the precise moment that language begins to disintegrate. "From all the hills came screams." Then suddenly, "[t] here was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world."<sup>15</sup> This void—of light, darkness, language, sound, and reason—represents the experiential dialectic of the eclipse: How can language possibly annotate its own evacuation? How can photography, through the mechanics of light,

possibly illuminate light's own jarring retreat? Both become the modes through which our internal experience of external phenomena are mediated.

Like an object in a viewfinder slipping from focus, like our eclipse-battered senses "receding the way galaxies recede to the rim of space,"<sup>16</sup> the moon methodically recedes from the earth each year at a glacial pace. In 600 million years, as the moon's synchronous orbit finally surrenders its ability to veil the sun, the last total solar eclipse will align above the terrestrial horizon.<sup>17</sup> In a fitting end to this metaphor, like an unfixed image that dissipates in the sun, or a momentary mincing of words, an eclipse is a fleeting, mercurial anomaly—it evades all forms of permanence, just as it evades all modes of representation.

4. Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse," *The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 21.

5. Rochelle Steiner, "Tools and Magic Wands," *Sarah Charlesworth* (New York: Prestel, 2017), 15.

6. See NASA's online database of maps of solar eclipses in North America: <https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEmap/SEmapNA.html>.

7. Dillard, 21.

8. Dillard, 11.

9. Dillard, 14.

10. Mark Godfrey, "Modern History," *Sarah Charlesworth* (New York: Prestel, 2017), 138.

11. See instructions for and the limitations of photographing the eclipse: <http://www.eclipse2017.org/2017/photographing.htm>.

12. Mike Wall, "Great American Solar Eclipse Viewership Dwarfed Superbowl Audience," *Space.com*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.space.com/38296-solar-eclipse-2017-more-watched-than-super-bowl.html>.

13. In reference to the proliferation of DIY instructions for wearable / mask-like eclipse viewers, modeled after the mechanics of the pinhole camera or camera obscura.

14. This was also noted in primetime news broadcasts of the 1979 eclipse. See "A look back at the 1979 total solar eclipse," *ABC News*, August 19, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/back-1979-total-solar-eclipse/story?id=49310831>.

15. Dillard, 11.

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

17. Zubritsky.