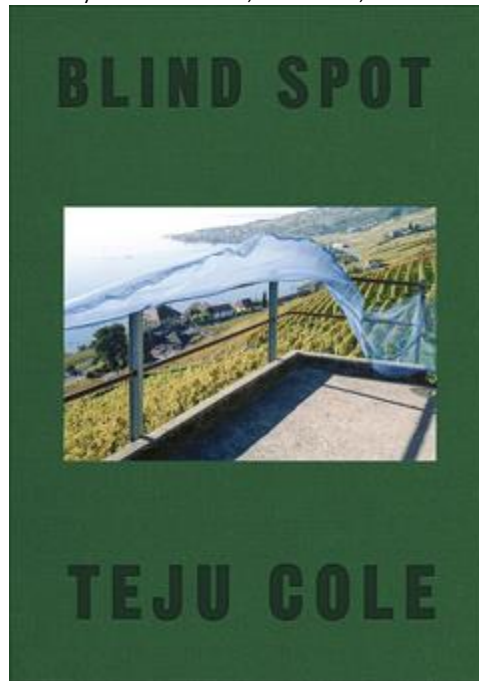


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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

TEJU COLE'S BLIND SPOT

By Leah Gallant, March 5, 2018



Three years ago, shortly after reading Teju Cole's second novel, *Open City*, I began following him on Instagram. He was, at the time, posting multiple images a day, mostly reposting other Instagram users' pictures of tourist sites taken from nearly identical vantage points. First there would be ten shots of the Statue of Liberty, shown from the front and below; then there would be eight at sunset of her face in profile; then several shots from a little further away, water visible in front. Then a bunch of reposts of birds flying overhead.

Cole was onto something interesting about how we use photography, and, as he has put it, "the limits of seeing." The degree of similarity between the shots was unsettling. Despite the infinite possibilities for photographic subjects, compositions, and effects, if you were willing to sift through enough of the image-swamp you could find the exact same photograph made by crowds of individual photographers. But it was also annoying to be subjected to someone's active image-collecting. It was clogging up my newsfeed with an endless scroll of people's backs blocking the Mona Lisa they were jostling to photograph. So, feeling guilty of my own conservatism, I unfollowed him.

If *Blind Spot*, Teju Cole's most recent book, is an extension of his work on Instagram, it is only because he uses social media towards that rare and admirable thing: not as a tool for marketing himself, but as a platform for experimentation. His Instagram account, after the brief reposting phase, has since become a place where his own photographs are accompanied by short texts. This book extends this format, of 1:1 pairings of interlinked photographs and prose that touch on the author's eye surgery, faith, travel, and embodied histories.

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Cole's material is how stuff looks now, the stuff you wouldn't think to look at: images printed on objects (a picture of a cruise ship on the side of a bus, palm trees on a shirt buttoned over a belly); cars, crosses, and veiled things; a man sleeping curled outside a church. As one might expect from a photographer whose interest in the monumental is in finding other people's photos of it, these are shots of anti-attractions, the work of someone suspicious of what he terms "what has been labelled beautiful ahead of time." Specific objects and historical references cycle through the book, cropping up first as an image, only to be mentioned, many pages later, in a text. A passage about loss of sight in one eye is paired with a car whose front side window is draped in white cloth. A painting of an angel's draped robes is juxtaposed with buildings wrapped in Tyvek. If this list sounds appealingly lyrical, it is. It is also deeply attuned to political crisis and the author's place in it as witness, participant, and traveler.

Cole seems to travel exclusively by two opposite modes of transportation: by airplane and on foot. This means that the scope of his subjects is simultaneously very wide, in terms of countries visited, and very small, in terms of the ubiquity but local variance of the urban landscape. These are the photographs of someone who flies across the world to a place just to get lost walking its streets. Each spread is titled with the location of the photograph, which has the effect of leveling their significance: Zürich is just as important as Sasabe.

There aren't many people in these images, and the ones there are only visible as their parts: long pink-blond hair down a back, a figure crouched, face obscured, in the top of the tree. (This is mirrored by the traces of people in the texts where they are only referred to by the first letters of their names.) But everywhere are the traces of people: our structures, our street signs, our trash. What he loves about various far-flung cities, Cole writes, is "the material evidence of human life, which goes on in spite of the world's calamity." The absence of people, monuments, or anything centered in the frame has the effect of democratizing the picture's contents. These images may not have subjects, but they are composed of materials, as though Cole's medium were not photography but collage.

Many of these passages index the photograph as a thing-which-hides, something that can lock up or unreel the past. This dialectical ability of the medium is also linked to specific places and material histories. In one of the passages titled "Berlin," Cole describes a meeting for an arts organization in a building he later learns is on the site of an earlier building, destroyed during the war, whose owner was sent to Auschwitz. "Each brick contains within its form something crushed," he writes. The accompanying photograph shows a hood of a car under a sprinkling of electric green tree pollen. It's covered in reflective black paint, a dark mirror in which the sky above is just visible. The paint is gone from a large patch on the right, revealing an earlier coat of matte black paint.

Despite the apparent intimacy of the project, Cole remains careful with what slivers of his personal life—his work, what he does when he travels, his relationships, his psyche—is revealed. These may be his distinct thoughts and views of the street; these are his anecdotes and bodily experiences of near blindness, but the narrator is never fully within reach. His novels reveal more of a psyche in their fictionalized narrators than the form which most closely approximates the author's own journal. If this is a journal, it is pivoted towards an outside gaze—the fate, perhaps, of any social media journal made public as soon as it is written. The biggest blind spot, the subject that remains most fully veiled, is the writer himself.