

Locating the gap

Traditional photography and the digital divide

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The purpose of this paper is not to offer a definitive answer that lays out a rigid new regime to jack march the digital order into the 21st century crushing all in its wake, or reiterate a desperate defence for traditional photography as the territory of truth, (such folly would suggest there is actually a truth out there) rather it is to create a context where questions can be raised about an inclusive photography (image making with lenses and light but not necessarily both) and the digital domain, questions that might offer an in-



“From today painting is dead” Delacroix declared. “Such a wonderful invention”. Inspired, he made the comments that an artist might “raise himself to heights that we do not yet know”. With the official announcement of the invention of photography in 1839 humanity was confronted with a revelation; it delivered a fundamental philosophic change in the way people implicitly saw images, a change that could only ever be refined or redefined. That initial excitement of disclosure to a disbelieving public could never be replicated, an innocence of image culture was lost forever; while a new order, a different understanding between image and subject emerged, virginity intact. And over the next 120 years an apparently unseverable truth between the image and the subject developed.

Such was the revelation at the announcement of this new invention, that the Leipzig City Advertiser newspaper in Germany responded in disbelief: “*The wish to capture evanescent reflections is not only impossible ... but the mere desire alone, the will to do so, is blasphemy. God created man in His own image, and no man-made machine may fix the image of God. Is it possible that God should have abandoned His eternal principles, and allowed a Frenchman ... to give to the world an invention of the Devil?*”

Research reveals that the invention of photography was not a single revelation, but a series of incremental steps over a long period of time where discoveries were made about both photosensitive materials and optical principles, discoveries which grew to a crescendo as imminent success loomed, but in both areas (photosensitive materials and optical principles) actually date right back to the Greeks Aristotle and Archimedes.

And yes, there was a German involved in this blasphemous activity . In 1725 Johann Schulze photography, for in modern photography it is from exposed silver salts that the photographic image we know is ultimately formed.

However, it was an age where realistic depiction in the visual arts was stimulated and assisted by the climate of scientific inquiry, which had emerged through the Renaissance; so in the scientific fraternities there was little surprise and full acceptance at the announcement of this new invention.

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was free use of the invention and immediate excitement.

Despite the charges of blasphemy, the world was ready to embrace the notion of photography and the opportunities that it offered. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than in America where it was embraced almost as though America was the only nation that had sole rights to the medium. Late in 1838 the American inventor Samuel Morse, who had attempted to fix images from a camera obscura himself, made a visit to Paris and eventually met Daguerre in March 1839.

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Morse promptly sent a letter to his brother, and through publication in the New York Observer, describing the results, alerted the American public to the potential of the process. “*In a view up the street, the distant sign would be perceived... By the assistance of a powerful lens... every letter was clearly and distinctly legible, and so also were the minutest breaks and lines in the walls of the buildings; and the pavements of the street*”.

Although Morse had returned to the United States before Daguerre had published his full instructions, D. W. Seager, who was leaving England just as the first published copies arrived there, brought the formula with him and is credited as the first American photographer. Transfixed to this new nectar, Morse made his first successful daguerreotypes only days after this and the process spread through the land like a ship load of colonists.

Due to the crudeness of the processes, in some cases

the very first photographs struggled to achieve realistic representation and looked more like abstractions of the scene in front of the camera. However, within a few years the process was quickly refined to the point where photographic images gave very accurate detail of the scene in front of the camera in a way that painting or drawing could not.

The perception of truth in this era was securely rooted in religious belief and the unquestionable word of god, but in this blasphemous medium, subject was no longer questioned, there was no potential for it to dwell in the realms of the artist’s imagination, no space for an artistic license, as was the case in media like print making and painting where aspects of the subject could be moved at will to form a more pleasing or relevant composition.

There was a visual accuracy that spelt truth to the subject, a photographic truth. It was a crucial time when the visual culture of the world changed in a dramatic way. Unlike the painted portrait, which carried an elitist weight not everyone could afford, the photograph quickly became available to almost everyone with modest means, rapidly undermined the industry of miniature portrait painters, which had proliferated in Europe up until this time.

This association of subject / image and the real, became particularly evident with photographs of the nude, where the morals of a virtuous, early 19th century audience was easily challenged and affronted. Up until the photograph, paintings of nudes had always related to religious depictions, gods and goddesses from Greek myths or great historical events: ‘Well that’s how the story goes.’ There was unspoken conjecture that somehow these paintings never actually involved real people.

However, with photography these nudes had nothing to do with religious depictions, Greek myths or great historical events other than in some cases to imitate them. In a photograph, they were real people and the fact they were naked in front of the camera was a visual truth which could not be denied.



Anonymous circa 1855

These people were unashamedly naked, photographically frozen as in a Barthesian death, caught out, and on display in a cultural age where the exposure of flesh was shunned. Worse than that, in some cases they may actually be involved in disgusting acts of fornication.

With this association to an assumed truth, photography quickly became recognised as evidential. A means of telling: telling that the subject had been in front of the camera at a certain place at a certain time, that specific objects had specific associations to other objects in the image.

Such was the accuracy of recording visual information that some in the Royal Photographic Society argued that its place was in science and not art, an argument in the minds of the public that dogged photography for years. Perhaps because of the early philosophical battles between photography and painting, photography developed this notion of truth as a key characteristic of the medium.

Long before Steiglitz, Strand and the Weston mob proposed the notion of a modernist photographic truth as art, where they took control of the definition, a control that permeated generations of photographers, a different species of photographic evidence existed.

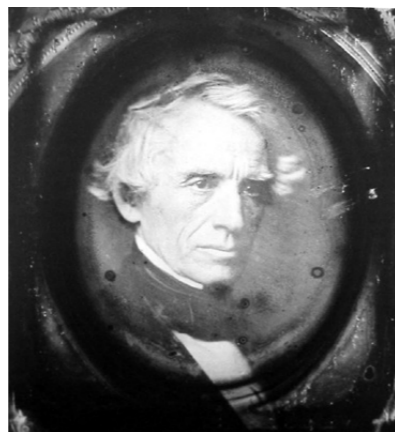
In 1854 an English physician, Maddox, developed dry plate photography, eclipsing Daguerre's wet plate on tin method, which made photography a much more practical process. Among the new applications was the photographing of inmates for prison records, and so began the practice of utilizing photographic truth as evidence. In 1864 Odelbrecht first advocated the use of photography for the identification of criminals and the documentation of evidence and crime scenes, and from here forensic photography was born. The photograph became a corner stone of judicial truth, a powerful truth that could convict, or release.

Perhaps this idea of photographic truth is concisely underlined by the credo of the Photo League, whose documentary work is conceived in part on the following: *"Photography has a tremendous social value. Upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today.... The Photo League (works) in keeping with the traditions set by Steiglitz, Strand, Abbott and Weston. Photography has long suffered..... from the*

stultifying influence of the pictorialists ... The Photo League's task is to put the camera back in the hands of honest photographers, who will use it to photograph America." From the Photo League, and other groups like Magnum, etc. generations of photographers in every country of the world followed a doctrine of *imagined objective photographic truth*.

New Zealand has also had a strong and committed group of like photographers. Stalwarts like Ans Westra who engaged in this genre during the 1960s, inspired the next generation of photographers to utilize the documentary approach, which appeared to reach a peak around the 1980s. There was wide spread enthusiastic activity by a growing group of photographers who had been influenced through exhibitions - Photoforum and the teachings of influential figures like John B Turner and the collecting of Luit Bieringer and Eymard Bradley at the National Art Gallery.

Combined with a world-wide enthusiasm generated by legendary photographers from Magnum Photos, it promoted a climate which implied there was only one approach one should take to photography. But it is ironic that this feverish climax of activity reportage and social documentary slid into a decline just before the most significant social renovations this country had known and some of these significant changes went quite undocumented while more trivial events a mere 5 or 10 years earlier had been shot to death.



Unknown Photographer Portrait of Samuel F. B. Morse c 1845
Daguerreotype

As inventors of the medium Daguerre, Bayard and Fox Talbot, etc are embedded into the history of the medium as archetypal reference points.

Reflecting as a frustrated artist using the Camera obscura and the Camera Lucida as aids to drawing whilst on holiday at Lake Como in Italy, Fox Talbot made the following comment: *"on the immutable beauty of the pictures of nature's painting which the glass lens of the camera throws on the paper in its focus...fairy pictures, creations of a moment and destined as rapidly to fade away. - It was during these thoughts that the idea occurred to me - how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably and remain fixed upon the paper"*.

Talbot's findings were read to a meeting of the Royal Society on 31 January 1839 in his paper: *"An Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing or the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil"*. Talbot's contribution is best summed up in his own modest statement: *"...I do not profess to have perfected an art but to have commenced one, the limits of which it is not possible at present exactly to ascertain. I only claim to have based this art on a secure foundation"*.

Before he became famous as the inventor of the first successful form of photography, Daguerre, was an acknowledged painter. Originally trained as an architect, he later became a pupil of E. M. Degotti at the Paris Opera and a thriving scene painter. Working with Charles Boulton in 1822, Daguerre helped develop the Diorama, an illusionistic exhibition in Paris that contained paintings on large translucent screens, which appeared to come to life with skilful light manipulation.

Daguerre's artistic pursuit was in creating realistic renderings and utilized a camera obscura to aid his efforts. Through this, he became intrigued with the idea of permanently fixing an image chemically, as were many others during the period. Daguerre began his initial experiments alone, but he was soon introduced by his optician to Joseph-Nicephore Niepce, who was working with similar ideas.

Hesitant at first, the pair decided to collaborate, primarily concentrating on silver-plated copper sheets treated with iodine to make them sensitive to light. While the process they used at that time

was not practical for wide scale applications since it took eight hours to expose, a view from Niepce's studio window taken in 1826 is considered the oldest existing photograph, Daguerre and Niepce worked together from 1829 until Niepce's death in 1833.

Although, Daguerre was once again alone in his experiments, he had made excellent use of his time with Niepce and had learned enough to make important advances. Finding the proper developing agent was the key to Daguerre's success, and occurred quite by accident. Daguerre had placed one of his treated copper plates in a cabinet that contained a variety of chemicals and was surprised to later find a clear image had developed on the plate. Through the process of elimination, he found that the substance he was seeking was mercury vapour that had leaked from a broken thermometer. The discovery meant that images could be exposed in about twenty minutes, rather than several hours.

Daguerre further improved the photographic process that he and Niepce had developed by utilizing sodium chloride to permanently fix pictures and, by 1839, was ready to release his knowledge to the public.

Yet, the daguerreotype process had serious limitations. The imprinted images that were obtained through Daguerre's technique were clear, but fragile. Relatively heavy since they were produced on metal, the images were further weighed down by the need for a cover plate or frame to protect their delicate surface layers. Furthermore, each daguerreotype image was unique and could not be copied, a problem that was avoided in the photographic process developed by William Fox Talbot at approximately the same time.

Also, the bulky equipment, bottles of concoctions and the need for a new metal plate for each image, made the process fairly costly and outdoor photography impractical. After several years of widespread popularity, use of the daguerreotype began to dissipate in the face of further photographic advances, most notably the development of the wet collodion process.

Perhaps more than any medium the association between inventor and process became a key aspect within the context of the photographic medium. In mediums like painting, sculpture etc. the history is ancient, the inventions and inventors lost in the mists

of activity that followed.

Questions like who invented oil paint, who discovered bronze casting may be traced back to civilizations but certainly not to individuals. To some degree, printmaking has retained a reference to individual inventors like Guttenberg, but they are not embedded in the history of the medium in quite the same way as the inventors of photography.

The social context that existed when photography was invented presented an environment where importance was placed on recording and retaining information. As routinely as we place information on the web, it was considered standard practice that an individual should document entries in their journal about their experiments, their endless failures and ultimately their discoveries and inventions.

For those who partake, there is an attraction akin to an arcane ritual that is still potent today.

We know a great deal about Fox Talbot, because he wrote constantly about his work. In fact we know a great deal about many photographers and even a hundred years later, the daybooks of Edward Weston offers an revealing window into how he worked and thought. From its invention photography has kept its history intact, and quite often photography is taught from this chronological perspective. Niépce, Daguerre, Talbot and Bayard were not only inventors; they all produced compelling images themselves, reference points to work from.

Over the past 100 years many photographers used the validity of this currency, as with the reference to the polished plate of the Daguerreotype in Joel Peter Witkin's images, they referenced the inventors and the historic processes, in their work.

Or with the Atget Rephotographic Project, 1988 project by students in Paris where the photograph provided succinct reference point to look back at the memory of place in a way that other media had never permitted. The Rephotographic Survey Project in the USA was broader and challenged a number of photographers to relocate various places from historical photographs across different States in America that had been previously documented in the mid 1800s for military and geologic surveys by photographer like Timothy O'Sullivan and then photograph the sites as they appear today. Ironically in an increasingly populated country the results were not always urbanization.

But like other media, the photograph still allows the practice of utilising existing historical images as reference points. Many of the daguerreotypes that remain are still noticeable for their exquisite detail, and allow comparison of minute detail with these locations today. In its own time this caused quite a sensation. Indeed, the Spectator (2 February 1839) called daguerreotypes the *"self operating process of Fine Art"*. The reaction in America was also one of amazement. The Journal *The Knickerbocker* for December that year quoted: *"We have seen the views taken in Paris by the 'Daguerreotype,' and have no hesitation in avowing, that they are the most remarkable objects of curiosity and admiration, in the arts, that we ever beheld. Their exquisite perfection almost transcends the bounds of sober belief"*. The daguerreotype, became aptly called a *"mirror with a memory"*.

Daguerreotypist Carl Dauthendey, a photographer who became the first professional daguerreotype photographer in St. Petersburg, makes an interesting comment on the way Daguerreotypes were viewed: *"People were afraid at first to look for any length of time at the pictures he produced. They were embarrassed by the clarity of these figures and believed that the little, tiny faces of the people in the pictures could see out at them, so amazing did the unaccustomed detail and the unaccustomed truth to nature of the first daguerreotypes appear to everyone"*.



Daguerreotype Anon. Jabez Hogg making a portrait in Richard Beard's Studio 1843

But at the beginning of the 20th century, the science behind the new discoveries and developments in photography had become much more complex than a few simple chemicals and an alchemist's aptitude. Inspired and affluent as an individual might be, the resources needed to achieve these new breakthroughs lay beyond the means of a single entity. The environment shifted, the individual was no longer empowered, only companies like Agfa, Kodak etc. with wealth and authority could provide a situation where discoveries like Dufaycolor, Ansco print, Autochrome, Kodachrome etc were made.

Because of the commercial implications, specific information from the new technology became something to safeguard, not only to hide from one's competitor but also inadvertently to deny the public. Often these new products required elaborate technology, as a means of manufacture or processing, which has left them as vanished processes that may never be resurrected. In retrospect, the artists of the future may never have the pleasure of exploring the special subtle colour of Dufaycolor, or the extenuations of red in Autochrome in the way earlier processes like the Daguerreotype, Cyanotype etc are explored in a contemporary context today.

By the inception of the digital image, these research environments had hardened much further; giant corporate conglomerates, or massive government funded institutions like NASA controlled extraordinary well resourced environments of technological discovery. The large financial resources that supported these new developments were well beyond an

Unlike Talbot, Daguerre etc, the inventors of digital media were not artists looking for new methods to create images, but scientists looking to solve problems for large organizations. Today we might look at images, particularly published images and feel there is little difference between digital and traditional photography. So what is this digital image hype all about? What is the difference between a traditional image and a digital image? Mitchell gives an excellent graphic description: *"The basic technical distinction between analogue (continuous and digital (discrete) representations is crucial here. Rolling down a ramp is continuous motion, but walking down stairs is a sequence of discrete steps - so you can count the number of steps, but not the number of levels on the ramp"*.

inspired individual with an affiliation to the arts.

While the romance of the lone inventor pottering away in a alchemic laboratory endorsed by the Royal Society seemed irrelevant in the dawn of post-modernism, it had also become an impossible scenario. So there is little surprise, that when we look at the invention of digital visual media there is a different unparalleled contextual wealth to draw from than photography.

At the birth of the information age, subheaded, the post-photographic age, intellectual property was regarded as the most precious commodity. Unquestionably not something to be gifted to the people of the republic as the French Government had done with the Daguerreotype. But like photography the precise point at which digital photography was invented is open to interpretation. Was it the drum scanner constructed by Russell A Kirsch and his colleagues at the National Bureau of standards in the 1950s that recorded visual information on a raster grid?

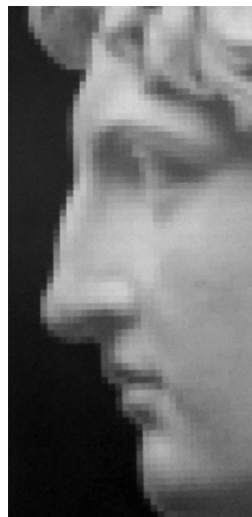
Was it the digital imaging techniques that NASA used to correct imperfections, that ran as trace lines caused by transmission static, from images of the Luna surface sent back by Ranger 7 in 1964?

Was it in the late 1980s when Canon, Nikon and Sony introduced compact, high quality, still-video cameras that recorded images directly on miniature floppy disk and provided an alternative to the silver film processes?

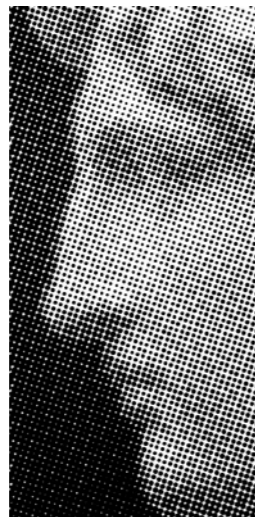


Zooming in, we see the black and white photograph is made up of tiny silver particles embedded in the surface of the paper. As these grains actually overlay each other, the layer of particles has a thickness or depth. The amount of light each particle receives determines how dark it will turn when fully developed and the tone of an area is determined by the tone or density of all the overlapping silver grains.

Arguably the most basic form of digitalization, the use of a half tone screen for reproduction in magazines newspapers etc. through a printing press, was a means of breaking photographs down into a series of dots that either printed a dot of ink or left a gap. The closer the dots the darker the tone, the wider the gaps the lighter. The smaller the dots the finer the reproduction. However, close examination of the digital image reveals that smooth curves and continuous tonal gradients are approximated by discrete pixels (small squares of uniform colour or tone) and where each pixel is of a different tone a gradation exists.



Digital image



Half tone screen image

The fact that the digital image is broken into steps is significant. Initially the steps were few, producing coarse images, broken into large squares of tone or pixelated. Today, we recognize such images as low resolution. As technological advancement refined this new image method into smaller and smaller steps, eventually producing images indistinguishable by the naked eye from traditional photographs, the distinction in the public's mind between the means of making a photograph dissolved. A photograph is a photograph by whatever means.

The effect of this breaking down of the image into a defined grid allowed the information in each pixel to be manipulated in a precise manner, in a way that traditional photographic truth had never been al-

tered, and this factor it is crucial to the digital image.

This precise control relegated the traditional enlargement technique of burning in and dodging, regardless of how elaborate, as a blunt instrument, a stone tool, in an age of laser cutters and smart bombs. In traditional photography, Ansel Adams drew an analogy from his musical training; he talked of the negative as the score and through a range of intricate printing techniques the print as the performance, where the photographer placed emphasis on specific areas in a similar fashion to an orchestral conductor. He saw the photographer's role not only as taking photographs with the camera but as the consummate performer in the darkroom.

These tools of traditional photography were well suited to Strand's, Weston's and Adams' high-modernist intentions - their life quest was for a kind of objective truth that demanded a quasi-scientific procedure leading to a closed, finished perfection. But the tools of digital imaging appear more adapted to the diverse projects of our modern era; a digital image is always open. Lyle Rexer Comments in Photography's Antiquarian Avant-garde: *"The intellectual residue of the poststructuralist wave arouses queasiness with Weston's unabashedly totalising formulations and foments skittishness about hanging a logocentroid quite so closely; a medium that privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and that emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object will be seen by many as no bad thing"*.

Yes a negative could be printed repetitively, but there were always aberrations in the performance; materials changed, negatives could be damaged and that dreaded enemy, dust turned up in different place with each printing.

In a digital form, an image could be altered, transferred as a series of binary codes. And as in Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra; the copy without an original, precisely copied dissolving the distinction of original and copy, reducing the image to raw data. With Photoshop and the click of a mouse, Adams's score could be played up like hell, or reduced to a vague melody interspersed with anything else at one's disposal. There is no doubt that any veracity photography had been severely undermined by digitisation. Although humanity had become conditioned to the photographic image, again it was a time when the image culture of the world changed in a crucial way, and new perceptions were desperately required.

Surprisingly the inevitable took over 150 years. As an obvious response, eventually someone would turn Delacroix's declaration back on photography. Like a latent photographic image, the theatre of death was waiting to be scripted for photography, and the play-acted out. From the flap of William Mitchell's book, *The Reconfigured Eye - Visual truth in the post-photographic era* he states; *"From this moment on, photography is dead - or more precisely, radically and permanently redefined as painting was one hundred and fifty years before. Enhanced? Or faked? Today the very idea of photographic veracity is being radically changed by the emerging technology of digital image manipulation and synthesis: photography can now be altered at will in ways that are virtually undetectable, and photorealistic synthesised images are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from actual photographs"*.

Photography was raped, its imagined virginity of truth was ripped away, stolen without consent by this brash new high tech kid on the block. But photography's truth had always been a false perception; it had been anchored on a quivering lump of clay rather than an immovable foundation of stone. As photographic materials of the time were over sensitive to blue green, there was often a problem retaining information in the sky of a landscape. To counter this, photographers like Gustave Le Gray, printed separate negatives of dramatic skies in to give a tonal balance to the image. While this use of combination printing was not criticized when he exhibited his seascapes, it is unlikely that he hung finished images utilizing the same negative for the sky in each adjacent to one other, so perhaps it went undetected.

Artists like Osca Reijlander, and Henry Peach Robinson were involved in technically more complex subversions that combined parts of numerous negatives to create combination images beyond the reality of what was in front of a single camera lens. Reijlander produced a large composite allegorical work from many negatives titled *The Two Paths of Life*, which depicts a sage guiding two young men towards manhood. One looks with some eagerness towards gambling, wine, prostitution and idling, whilst the other looks (with somewhat less enthusiasm!) towards figures representing religion, industry, families and good works. In the centre appears the veiled, partly clothed figure symbolising repentance and turning towards the good.

Shown in 1857 at an exhibition in Manchester,

the picture provoked considerable controversy. As mentioned earlier the Victorians had issue with nudity in photography. and at one stage when this photograph went to Scotland to be exhibited it was considered so controversial that the left hand side of the picture was concealed, only the right side being shown. However, there were others who saw in this picture a valiant attempt to use photography in a domain which up to that time painters had dominated, and when Queen Victoria purchased a copy for her husband (at ten guineas), this seemed to make his photograph respectable! As if entrusted with the power of God to spike photography for undermining God's truth, this righteous construction was the hilt of a foil to undermine photography's truth.

Henry Peach Robinson, also working during the 19th Century in a similar manner, produced a work titled *Fading Away* referencing a young woman dying of sickness surrounded by a concerned family. Today we might read the title as a comment on the dissolving of photography's imagined truth with a huddle of traditionalists around an ailing medium.

Subversion of a different kind was also at hand when it came to photographic truth in the form of *adjusting* the scene before the camera. There has always been a vague line between the subtle modification of the objective image where the odd thing was arranged to create a stronger image and all-out direction where the image was constructed from scratch. 19th century studio portraiture in the new countries like New Zealand which utilized a set of fairly standardized props to associate the subject with the illusion of a new found prosperity might have told small lies, and the tradition has continued in various forms through to the present.

But the rhetorical re-enactment of significant news events, as in Jole Rosenthal's famous photograph of marines hoisting the Stars and Stripes atop Suribachi Yama Iwo Jima Feb 23 1945, to obtain a more graphic press image drew a different line. Some considered it a reckless use of the medium, a use that undermined the most publicly perceived photographic objectivity.

However, when it comes to more than a cool million dollars, Cindy Sherman reigns supreme. In 1995 the Museum of Modern Art purchased the original prints of the series *Untitled Film Stills* from the artist. With Sherman as the main character, these fictitious images of stereotypical Hollywood and tabloid snapshots, signaled a turnabout for a museum that

had championed the idea of photography as a distinctive art, based on modernist photographic truth. Suddenly the Sherman acquisition enshrined a species of antiphotography an art of cultural documentation in which the fact of the picture-taking, its accumulated social meanings (film stills) and the position of the observer (photographer and viewer) were far more important than the composition of the images, the matrix of their presentation or the visual truth that lay before the camera.



Lyle Rexer Comments: *“The medium that had from its inception played upon the ineffable effects of light was now bathed in a lurid glow. For although this antiphotography was corrosively self-aware and politically astute, it paid no attention to itself, that is, to the mediating circumstances of paper, printing process, composition, texture tone and moment that had for almost a century signified a work of photographic art”.*



ical and optical) have come to seem restrictive and impoverished, whilst the new technologies promise to inaugurate an era of almost unbound freedom and flexibility in the creation of images. There is the sense that photography was constrained by its inherent automatism and realism, that is to say, by its essentially passive nature; that the imagination of photographers was restricted because they could aspire to be no more than the mere recorders of reality”.

In the post-photographic age, is the digital assassination a scripted theatre where a play is simply enacted for the benefit of a few critics and commentators or a real and final death? Photography has certainly taken some body blows in the past decade or so from the digital revolution, but mortally wounding a media like photography is a hard call when photographers are still discovering new tricks with old toys. While it might not have expired yet, it has certainly aged, and like wine this might be somewhat of a blessing that gives it a new mobility.

Up until the invention of a workable photographic process, images of any kind were relatively rare, but photography altered that and over the next 100 or so years they became so prolific that attitudes towards possessing images changed dramatically.

The words digital democracy has a nice ring, but photography has always been about democracy. In the 19th century photography allowed images to be obtained by everyone, in the 20th century it allowed images to be produced by anyone and the 21st century offers publication and subversion of images by anyone. However with freedom comes problems of discrimination. In the 20th Century many could not distinguish between a photograph crafted at a high level a personal snapshot.

While traditional Photography might not have expired just yet, it has certainly aged. Unlike the real shoe; discarded left to fray and disintegrate from the elements, Weston’s image of it remains frozen in black silver. As Van Gogh’s shoes allowed Fredrick Jameson a new reading it has the potential to reflect a different light. Like wine, this ageing might be somewhat of a blessing that allows the medium to gain a new sole/ soul, gain a fresh mobility. But protagonists who need a foundational faith in the recording instrument, photojournalists, the legal system and science, have fought hard to maintain the hegemony of the standard photographic image. It is a practice hard to remove.

Photography based on real events, people and places will always teach us something about the world that once existed and the culture of the time we live in. Snap frozen moments, Mirrors of Memory always have some currency no matter how devalued that currency might become in an age of hypermedia. Often what gives these frozen packages a value added impact is associated inscriptions that locate people, place, time. Where the photographer used insight and method to record specific detail.

Obvious manipulations, like the *Untitled (Canoe flying over Auckland)* 1917 image by George Bourne, might not offer the full open window vista of the straight documentary style, but there is more than a useful keyhole to peer at how a city has changed, what people wore, and the humour of the day.

All photographs have tangibility, an implicit tactility where one can sense handling the image, where one can stop to look again, where one can relate the detail differently with each telling. It is an essence that speaks through the materials and processes from the age the image was made in. A daguerreotype speaks differently than an albumen print, which accents the language differently than a tintype or a silver gelatine print.

But this tactility is not generic to all images stored as digital files. Regarded as a design icon of the 20th century, a CD has its own seductive urbane appeal and tactility, there is a sense of mystery of what images it might contain, but then again, it might contain absolutely nothing.

Others see the emergence of digital imaging as a welcome opportunity to expose the aporias in photography’s construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic pictorial tradition.

Digitalization has made photography easier; easier for people to access, easier to subvert and virtually impossible to detect, and consequently easier to abuse a reader’s trust than ever before.

Andy Grundberg, the photography critic of the new York Times, predicted *“an eventual derealization of the photographed world. In the future, readers of the newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than reportage, since they will be well aware that they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated. Even if news photographers and editors resist the temptations of the electronic manipulation, as they are likely to do, the credibility of all reproduced images will be diminished by a climate of reduced expectations. In short photographs will not seem as real as they once did”.*

For over a hundred years photojournalists have subscribed to codes designed to protect the integrity of editorial content, such as the NPPA’s 1990 statement of principle: *“..it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way that deceives the public... altering the editorial content of a photograph, in any degree, is a breach of the ethical standards recognized by the NPPA”.*

Although this is unconfirmed, I believe in an attempt to retain integrity, photographers from the devout Magnum Photos Agency have vowed never to use digital means; yet photographs by the agency photographers are available on the web.

Death

Kevin Robins twisted the theatrical knife deeper in his book *Into the Image Culture and politics in the field of Vision* with the statement, *“the death of photography has been reported”.* He mentions the convergence of photographic technologies with video and computer technologies, and this convergence seems set to bring about a new context in which still images will constitute just one small element in the encompassing domain of what has been termed hypermedia. Robin continues, *“Old technologies (chem-*

Resuscitation

However, Delacroix’s declaration that painting was dead, never quite came about, in fact the invention of photography gave painting an impetus to move on from the preoccupation with realist perspective devised during the Renaissance through the popularity of the camera obscura, to an exotic new jungle of infinite potential.

Rather than strangulation underwater, the supposed killer, photography, actually dragged painting from a watery grave and gave it a breath of new life, not a deathblow. It offered painting a fresh subset of visual material to explore different directions, it catalysed brush and pigment into arguably the richest exploitative period of the medium, while at the same time inadvertently positioned itself in fine art as a poor cousin to the medium it was supposedly displacing.

From the Iraqi conflict in 2003, LA times photographer Brian Walski was fired for breaking the rules and combining two images, (even though they were taken moments apart) one of a soldier and the other of a crowd to produce a *more dramatic image*. The Times policy forbids altering a news photograph. Like a drug cheat, this action has also brought into question some of his earlier award winning work. While today photographic truth is linked to the integrity of the photographer, it raises interesting issues about a press photograph that has been subverted and published undiscovered, but is then taken and subverted by another artist, believing it to be real.

While it took photography 140 years to become fully established in our high school and tertiary curricular, it has taken little more than a tenth of this time for digital technology to permeate the image culture of our current generation. Digital cameras proliferate; they attach like clingons to any convenient vehicle and have even found a way into the bastion of traditional photography. The cost of the digital item is tumbling downwards at an extraordinary rate. Regarded as a professional camera, a Nikon E3 was a large and heavy beast, in 1998 it cost around \$35,000 and at its highest image quality produced a 2.45 Mb file, today you might be lucky to off load a second hand one for a few thousand. A camera of similar capability today might cost \$4-5000 and offer an image size of 10Mb. Amateur cameras that a year ago cost \$1200 now cost \$700 and do twice as much.

This accessibility of means to make images and subsequence abundance has cultured a different attitude in those who take photographs. Question: What's an editor's nightmare? Answer: A kid with a Digital Video Camera.

Veteran cinema photographer Bob Brown from the Fox Natural History Unit based in Dunedin, makes a distinction between digital and film. *"When I began with film in the 1970s it was expensive and more bulky to carry, you shot in a way that mattered, you had to understand what a good shot looked like and make it count, film was precious stuff. This style, etched in my brain, carried over when I used digital; my cut rate even with digital is still 10 to 1. New people in the Unit that have only ever known digital approach it with gay abandon, they shoot everything that moves scatter gun; its cheap and there is plenty of it. Their cut rates run as high as 70 to 1, it makes editing a much greater task than it needs to be"*.

But with both analogue and digital, the equipment can become a signifier of status within a consumer society, or represent the ideals a would be photographer who dreams of what it might be used for rather than a means to an end. From the 1960s through to 1990s there was a fetish among the boys mob to purchase Nikon or Leica cameras, they became the most popular piece of male jewellery for people wanting to make a statement.

These cameras were never likely to have the paint worn down to the brass with use. Or in the case of, Luis Dilia of Delahye - News Week - and Luc Delahaye, a freelance photographer with the Magnum photo agency, used as a shield where both photographers had lucky escapes when a bullet hit their cameras rather than them. Likewise in the digital domain, rather than its application, obtaining the latest digital camera, hard ware and software can become an obsession that becomes the occupation and over rides the purpose.

Again, in both analogue and digital, it is easy to become seduced by the technicalities of the medium. Through the teaching of Ansel Adams and the Zone System, a method of relating subject, negative and print tones, obsessional dependence on the right technique often divorced ideas and content. Approaches to working in the digital domain can snare an artist in the same way. Energy can be over directed to ever refining the image on a technical level at the expense of content.

Security - A half-dozen years ago, wearable computing was the stuff of super-geek dreams. Today, the ultimate mobile computing system is the stuff of the battlefield, and the groundwork for outfitting these 21st century combatants is being laid at the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center's Natick Labs in Natick, Mass.



One hot research focus: the integration of computers and electronics including cameras with textiles. It's a logical extension of true wearable mobility: By weaving networking capabilities, including antennas, into clothing, military personnel is freed from the "weight and bulk" of currently used communication devices.

We are being watched, our mundane activities are fixed in an undetectable memory at the supermarket, service station, bank, car-park, mall, swimming pool, airport, roadways, intersection. Cameras are mounted everywhere, on race cars, America's Cup yachts, cricket wickets, tanks going into battle. There are even dummy cameras that record nothing.

As a reaction, groups like *Surveillance Camera Players* have evolved that use this medium as a means to perform and protest. 15 mins of fame in front of which camera and what audience?

But when we look to the most serious species of pho-

tographic truth in the postphotographic era, Norah Rudin of Forensic DNA in the USA offers the following: *"The issues surrounding digital photography for use in forensic science pretty much parallel those in editorial photography, or any other use where the "consumer" expects that the image documents what the photographer saw. Everyone panicked at first and assumed that every digital photo was "manipulated". Now, slowly, as with editorial photography, guidelines are being established as to what kind of enhancement is permissible and which changes need to be documented. The problem, of course, is that the people who are the most concerned understand even less about digital photography than they did about chemical photography. Remember also that documentation of evidence in a lab, for instance, for the simple purpose of identifying it is probably less of an issue than, for instance, crime scene photography, where the photo IS the evidence. That is the short soapbox"*.



James McArdle - image from a 4" x 5" camera with multiple points of

Strange also, that the most photographed and perhaps believed event in history, September 11 2001 occurred in the postphotographic era when photography had lost its reliability. It was an event bombarded by every type of camera, and recording medium available, from film, video to digital; everyone who had the means and vantage point made images that day. From the plethora of images what did become clear was that this was not a cinematic illusion, it was a photographic truth which was a multifaceted beast and lay more in the hands of editors than photographers. Also, the most fundamental elements of the photographic, time and place, emerged as the most powerful tool at the disposal of those creating these images.

Regardless of the equipment, analogue, digital, still, animated, high or low quality, camera view point, and specific time related directly to the success of the images being created.



Current presentation confuses simulation with the real and even prompts the media to comment on itself. The visual image is such a powerful propaganda tool that it forms the basis of many campaigns. In Iraq, the USA encouraged embedded reporters and camera operators to become part of an attacking army unit and present a predetermined picture that mirrored the video game in which the player, (the audience) observes, acts and ultimately wins.

The rescue of Jessica Lynch by US Marines was described by a commentator a precision military operation perfectly choreographed. Questions could also be asked about why the rescue of a young woman was filmed rather than a man and also how the timing coincided with prime USA TV viewing.

An implosion, dust storms and a rain of A4 sheets of paper exemplified how the visuality of the event exceeded the most imaginative movie illusions of the period.

As an integral part of the digital hypermedia, the current trend to present major news items, like the Gulf War, Sept 11, Invasion of Iraq, with extended live coverage, accompanying graphics and theme music that switches seamlessly at the click of a button to Sky movies or a simulated Playstation or Xbox game, asks question of how future generations, today's under 10 year olds, interpret the images they are confronted with.

Recently to identify with a younger audience, the New Zealand Army has resorted to using a graphically simulated advertisement that models the play station games as a means to enlist new recruits.



But this strategy raises questions, as with these images of a so called friendly fire incident in Iraq, about what are the consequences when the mission is botched and there is a dramatic unplanned deviation in the choreography that supersedes the intended production. A change so dramatic the camera operator wipes the blood off the lens and continues filming. And among this horrific sequence of images, isolated frames of subliminal beauty, as gold fish swim in the green waters of a pond.

With satellite cell phone connections, small handy cams etc., the electronic hypermedia allows uninterrupted coverage in a way that traditional photography could never approach during past conflicts.



The presumed assimilation into the hypermedia has allowed photography to look back in much the same way Picasso was influenced by African art. For Picasso, it was a creative revelation and liberating force, which can be seen in the painting *Demaiselles d'Avignon* 1907. Where the two right hand figures were painted after he had seen African art, the others before.

But from the distance of the impending rubble of photographic evidence from the Twin Towers disaster emerged what was for me one of the subtlest yet powerful images of the event that spoke in a curious language. On a roof top several miles away New York photographer, Jerry Spagnoli, having overcome his initial hesitations of the safety of the process years before, was creating daguerreotype photographs a method of making photos on copper plated with silver.

Obsolete since the 1860s, it transformed his approach to documentary photography, giving him a means to explore in a single image the collision of lived time and historical time. His series *The Last great Daguerrean Survey of the 20th Century* is an archive of contemporary events and places that deliberately plays on the expectations. Jerry was not alone; a growing number of artists working with photography were turning their attention to antiquarian processes. It offered a collision of opportunity, the fading rhetoric of the photograph with the vagaries of historical processes.

Around the time MoMA announced the Sherman Untitled Stills purchase Jayne Hinds Bidaut, had been searching for a way to photograph her beetle, moth and butterfly collection when she discovered she could no longer obtain many of the darkroom supplies she needed. She was advised to go digital. This prospect of photography going the way of the natural



environment pushed her towards an act of resurrection. She began to make tintypes of her specimen, positive images on iron or aluminium plates discovered in 1853 and defunct in the USA for decades.

Commercial chemical-based photography is becoming relegated to a restricted craft becoming relegated to a restricted craft. In the reductive environment of globalization, manufacturers are cutting back, materials are becoming more limited, harder to access. But for many contemporary photographers, the random chemical marks of antiquarian processes that were glossed over in search of an ever urbane method, now offer a set of peculiarities and vagaries as a reaction to the proliferation of digital photography in the past few years.

And while digital is acquiring the commercial endeavour that traditional photography once had, it opens a new passage for artistic pursuit through the forests of earlier photographic processes that were once cut down and discarded but have since regenerated, and also offered some new avenues never before explored.

We can never go back to the golden glory era of traditional photography, but for many, chemical-optical processes, in whatever form, offer a sanity that opposes the digital divide, there is a relevance that supersedes the pixel in the same way the surfing/snowboarding experience surpasses exercising in a gym.

As a maker, engaging in photography for the exploration of a personal project opens up a line of dialogue with one's self that can generate an extended perception and understanding of their relationship with the world. Rather than influencing generations of photographers the way Steglitz, Weston or Sherman did, the work might offer little but entertainment value for the contemporary audience, but in reference to the quote "Change the world, make a difference, think global act local", changing an individual is an ever so slight change to the culture of the world.

In a world of genetic engineering it would be naive to think photography won't mutate in a way we can't yet conceive, evolve past this initial phase of digital

hybridation of the hypermedia into a beast foreign to our era. Michael Serres talks of the Parasite or static in communication; -static being caused by some form of electrical spike.

Despite the static, photography in all its manifestations still offers a special electrical pulse. In all its forms and those yet to come photography offers a rich vocabulary of visual means for artists. However what appears at issues is the context and approach is placed in. -The gentle or violent interplay between processes, genres and context.

Photography in whatever form it manifests, will always remain as Fox Talbot put it,.....

References.

Unfortunately, the original text with references for this paper has been lost?

The text has come from a fully illustrated digital slide show that was presented at the conference. Due to copyright a limited number of images have been embedded in the document.

"A little bit of magic realized".



Francis Baker - Van Dyle Brown Prints