

# The Material Image: Surface and Substance in Photography

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Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art  
State University of New York at New Paltz

By Beth E. Wilson

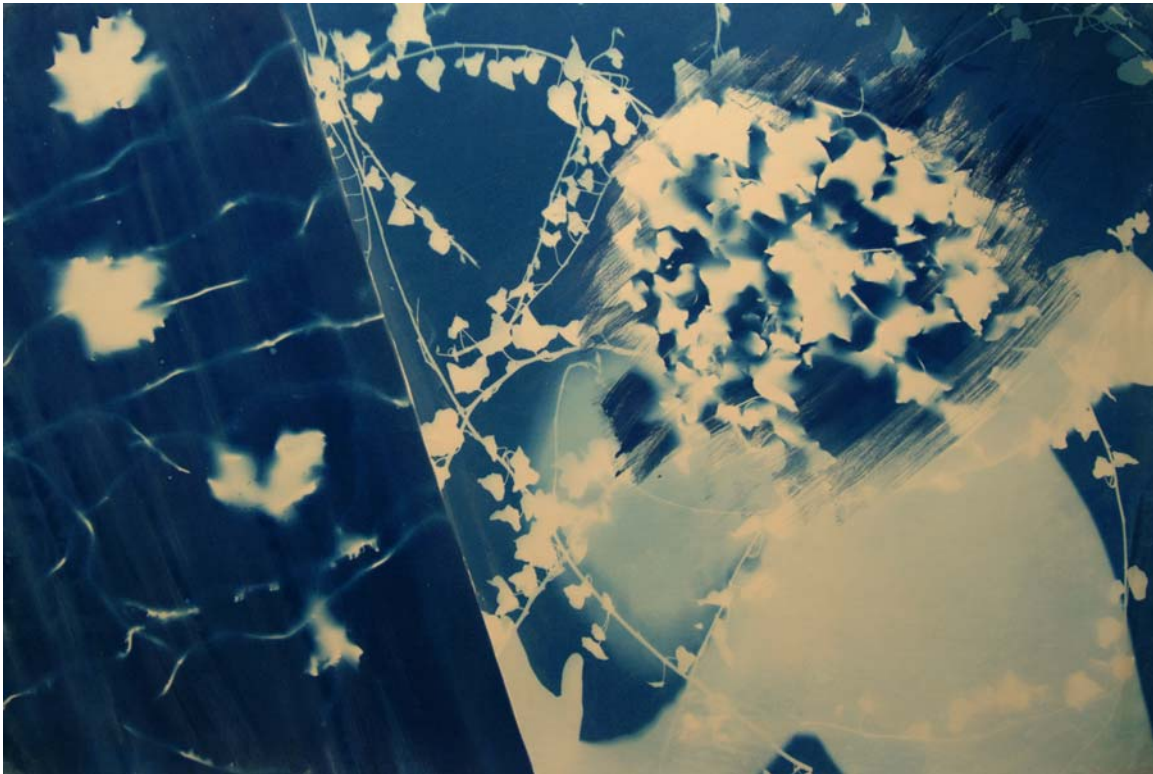


Laura Pickett Calfee  
In Juliet's Room, 1999  
C-print, 12 3/4 in. x 19 in.  
Extended loan, Center for  
Photography at Woodstock  
CPW2000.056

## I. Introduction

This exhibition concerns itself not so much with constructing yet another history of photography as it does with understanding the medium's historicity – the palpable sense of time and place indelibly registered in the substances and surfaces of a plethora of individual photochemical (and now digital) processes, and how we have come to understand it as a cultural practice. What we call 'photography' is, in fact, an abstract, collective noun used to encapsulate the 'reality effect' embedded in these images, an attempt to grasp what is at any given time a culturally and historically conditioned response to what is commonly understood as 'the real,' just as the photograph itself seems to grab hold of a particular moment, arresting the trace of light itself through the relentless unspooling of time. Whether glinting, mirror-like, from the impossibly detailed surface of a daguerreotype, or veiled in the painterly, textured surface of a Pictorialist gum bichromate print, the photographic reality of presence, a sort of odd investment of the particular aura of the person or place represented, makes itself apparent in each of the works in this exhibition. This magical conjuring of a historical presence out of absence—the displacement effected by the very act of representation—is utterly dependent here on the material substance that opens and preserves the photographic encounter.

Circling back toward the origins of photography, the exhibition commences with Judith Mohn's *Modern Mythologies: Conceit*, a large work executed in one of the earliest successful photographic processes, the cyanotype, which was first made public by Sir John F.W. Herschel in 1842. This is a camera-less process, in which objects (here the sprawling vegetation) are laid out on top of the sensitized paper, which is then exposed to light. The passages of the paper struck by the light convert photo-chemically to create the blue, while areas blocked by the objects on top of the paper (here, including the ghostly presence of someone who may be the artist herself) remain white. The simple, binary code of presence/absence (white/blue) rendered by this process is a straightforward example of the status of the photograph as an index; that is, a species of sign that depends upon the physical trace or presence of the thing being represented, as in the case of footprints in the snow, or the red, itchy bumps that indicate a chicken pox infection.



Judith Mohns  
*Modern Mythologies: Conceit*, 1986  
cyanotype, 30 in. x 44 in.  
Extended loan, Center for Photography at Woodstock  
CPW1999.45

The on/off dynamic of the cyanotype's representational code coincides interestingly with the binary logic of the computer in the digital age, a contemporary concern that has helped instigate this exhibition's curatorial theme. While the progressive advances in reproduction technologies (from the photogravure to the flickering screen images on televisions and computers) seem determined ultimately to dematerialize the image, this

process has an unintended consequence: in an age when all (or most) images are electronically transmitted and consumed, encountered as a field of excited electrons hovering on a screen, we will progressively become more and more attuned to (and astonished by) the physical presence of historical, emulsion-based processes. It is precisely this effect of the historical progression of photographic processes (and more specifically the advent of digital technologies) that provided the inspiration for this exhibition, as it seems the time is ripe to re-think our approach to photography as a medium, and to re-conceptualize and clarify the relationships between the physical, material aspect of photographs and the representational system(s) in which they play a key role.

The unfolding technological component of the medium (at least until it largely stalls out with the black-and-white gelatin-silver process in the early 20th Century) provided a key touchstone for John Szarkowski's 1989 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Photography Until Now*, designed as a celebration of the medium's sesquicentennial. Emphasizing a strongly chronological order of the medium's development, Szarkowski in his catalogue introduction invokes a certain technological determinism, asserting that "the two issues—ends and means—were reciprocating, like an internal combustion engine or a mathematical equation. If one side of the equation changed, the other must also."<sup>1</sup> In interleaving the technological and aesthetic development of the medium throughout the show and catalogue that follow, his argument leans heavily on a diachronic logic (and a strongly formalist aesthetic ideology) in which artistic expression inevitably seeks to realize the 'true' essence or unique qualities enabled by various photographic processes as they first become available, are understood, and eventually are displaced by the Next Great Thing. The notion that someone would, for aesthetic or other reasons, revert to an earlier historical process (as does Mohs in her cyanotype) does not to find much traction in Szarkowski's account.

But we have not remained frozen in time, nor has the aesthetic view of photography remained fixed to the pole star of Form. The last quarter of the 20th century birthed a generation deeply suspicious of the supposedly universal truths and beauties of classic modernism, thrusting us headlong into what Lyotard memorably dubbed "The Postmodern Condition". The rational, one-way, progressive flow of time and period style canonized by Art History seemed no longer to apply, and photographic practice expanded far beyond its traditional boundaries, to become an essential component of performance and conceptual art, among other things. Aesthetic choices were no longer being made according to a tightly constricted sense of perceived logical necessity, but rather through a panoply of new, often disruptive strategies such as deconstruction. We are now definitively in an age when perhaps not quite everything is possible, but everything that is possible is, at least theoretically, available. For this reason, the lingering technological determinism of Szarkowski's valedictory MoMA exhibition falls flat when it comes to accounting for the contemporary practice and comprehension of photography, making it clear that new theoretical frameworks are needed.

The fundamentally photographic nature of Joan Barker's *Underwater #6*, 2004/5 at first seems quite secure. A blurred, painterly image, it nonetheless records the real if otherworldly experience of being sandwiched between the top and bottom of a shallow stretch of the turquoise-azure Caribbean off Bonaire. The aesthetic of the image is

heightened both by its size and by its support – here, a piece of silky-textured white ‘Japanese’ paper. While the negative for this image was made on color film stock, though, it was subsequently scanned at high resolution, and the print itself is the product of pigment inkjetted directly onto the paper. The indexical content originally recorded on the negative has (not so) simply been converted into complexly layered binary digital information, which in turn was used to send the appropriate directions to the printer to fabricate the piece. Should we worry whether the scanned image file was Photoshopped before printing to heighten or change the color, to add blurriness, or otherwise alter the relationship between the indexical negative and the finished print? Would/should that fact alter our perception of the fundamental reality of the scene presented in the image?

These concerns seem largely misplaced, given the realities of printing even within the bounds of traditional analogue processes. Burning in and dodging portions of the negative, cropping the negative or printing to its edges, selecting a soft or contrasty grade of paper, deciding whether or not to tone the print to achieve a warmer or cooler result – all of these are potential aesthetic decisions in everyday darkroom practice that interrupt the theoretically linear relationship from well-exposed negative to finished print. Barker’s decision to print her image digitally, on a large scale, and on paper stock chosen for its aesthetic qualities is not so terribly different in practice, then, after all, from Edward Weston’s proclivity for contact printing large his tightly focused negatives on soft-toned platinum paper.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the notion of the photograph’s putatively direct mode of address is raised here by Markus Wetzel’s large print, *8.01 Murky Ocean*, 2005. Here the island and the expanse of ocean before it at first seem almost believable, but somehow oddly uncanny. On closer examination, it becomes clear that the image is not photographic – Wetzel has constructed the entire image digitally, without benefit of even an initial photographic model. This is the brave new world of the digital future, an image entirely synthesized to accommodate the projection of our desire for the mythic deserted island. But there is still a photographic element at work, even here. The print has been fabricated using the Lambda Digital Photographic Printing System, an advanced imaging system that prints digital files directly to photo-sensitive materials using a system of red, green, and blue lasers. So even though the source file is purely imaginary, the print itself is photographic, its emulsion having recorded the trace of the lasers fired at it.<sup>2</sup> That the final product has here been double-laminated and hung directly on the wall, its unframed edges curling slightly out from the wall, adds a specifically physical (and somewhat perversely) material dimension to this imaginary projection. The presence of this work in the exhibition is intended to focus the debate on the physical nature of ‘photography’, or rather the manifold, ad hoc grab bag of technologies and techniques gathered together under this rubric, and to foreground the very real historical process that is now unfolding all around us in the form of our ‘digital revolution’.



Markus Wetzel  
*8.01 Murky Island*, 2005  
Lambda print, double laminated  
Courtesy Stefan Stux Gallery, New York

The specific ontological status of these various deployments of photography (and/or the photographic) are not properly accounted for by the entrenched formalist approach presented in Szarkowski's *Photography Until Now*, which notably fell short in its closing section on contemporary works, due to "his lack of sympathy for, or even interest in, the significant developments in the art of the past two decades [which is] a matter of record."<sup>3</sup> This formalist approach, especially as it has played a role in the institutional history of the medium, has been critiqued from a range of perspectives over the past thirty years.<sup>4</sup> A key target in many of these critiques has been the location of formalism's blind spots, pointing out that by maintaining an ostensibly neutral, universal aesthetic it has overlooked the specificities—and the politics—of history, of subject matter, of cultural context in its many nuances. Formalists are almost obsessively concerned with looking at photographs, rather than looking through them to see their subject matters (which is the natural tendency of most viewers). While superficially it may appear that *The Material Image* proposes to do the same thing—privileging surface over subject matter—the focus is qualitatively quite different, and, I hope, will lead to a radically different result.

Despite its shortcomings, however, it is not my intention to entirely abandon formalism, or to jettison all formalist devices for reading these images. At this juncture in history, for better or worse, the photographic canon promulgated by historians and critics such as Beaumont Newhall, Helmut Gernsheim, and their successors is the most familiar roadmap we have to the history of the medium. Anyone familiar with this history will

recognize its signposts along the way throughout this exhibition, along with works that sharply contrast with or serve to re-interpret that narrative. The chief error, I believe, lies in absolutely privileging any one particular reading—especially of photography!—given the complexity of the world and our relationship to/in it. Insistence on a ‘correct’, univocal narrative contradicts the important theoretical principle of irreduction, which states that “no theoretical assumption – empirical premise, ontological framework, analytic device, investigative equipment, laboratory tool, mathematical technique, or other methodological paraphernalia—be given a priori pride of place.”<sup>5</sup> Irreduction is a pivotal principle in the work of Brian Cantwell Smith, a philosopher whose revisionist metaphysics have been shaped in large part by his parallel activity as a computer scientist—making his work an especially apt theoretical model, given the initial curatorial inspiration for this exhibition, and given the closely entwined relationship between art and science that has marked photography from its inception.

Driven to develop a new “successor metaphysics” by the unfulfillable demands placed upon traditional approaches to defining things like objects, programs, and data structures by new fields such as artificial intelligence, Smith sees the ‘the computer’ as a pivotal social/metaphysical figure, not simply a machine. By conjoining hardware (matter) with software (form), computers serve as a node at which the Cartesian subject/object division is theoretically—and more importantly, in practice—imploded. Smith questions the artificial separation of the “external world” as “independent of the experiencing subject,”<sup>6</sup> advancing instead a realist position that interpolates the physical (matter) and the semantic (thought) realms as but two co-existing modes, or ways of framing the exceedingly complex, irreducible reality of the world.

A key notion in Smith’s account is “registration,” or the processes by which we come to stabilize and use information from our world, forming objects in a co-creative act of mind and matter. The “objects” thus formed have more to do with the particular nature and focus of our attention in response to the material conditions surrounding us, rather than some finite, objective reality that imposes itself upon us. The significance of all this for comprehending what goes on in the photographic process is profound.

One could, for example, conceptualize the photograph as a particular screen in/on which we capture some part of the much larger, always overdetermined world. ‘Screen’ is perhaps a particularly apt term, given its dual connotations as both a grid used to sift gravel, flour, or other physical materials to a particular size or consistency, and as the locus for the projection of images (and, in the Freudian mode, desire itself). An analogue photograph is a physical object that has itself been impressed with the photo-chemical trace of evanescent light, preserving in its emulsion a point of contact with the ineluctably concrete facts of the material world. Once produced, this image-object circulates in various contexts (lovingly encased in a locket or family album; on file in the police station; published in a magazine; framed and hung in a museum) that project their own meaning(s) onto the mute (and semantically mutable) image.

Photographs (like computers) are thus a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, a social construction that embodies on a microcosmic scale the structure and dynamics of the everyday encounter enacted by our consciousness as it is embedded in the material world at large. Indeed, we should remember that modern science itself is the product of specific social practices arising from our encounter with the physical world, so declarations of ‘pure

objectivity’ or ‘pure subjectivity’ should be equally suspect. Along similar lines, Geoffrey Batchen has specifically called attention to a tantalizing early relationship between photography and computing, which started at the very dawn of both technologies, a relationship that has become particularly productive with contemporary digital technology.<sup>7</sup>

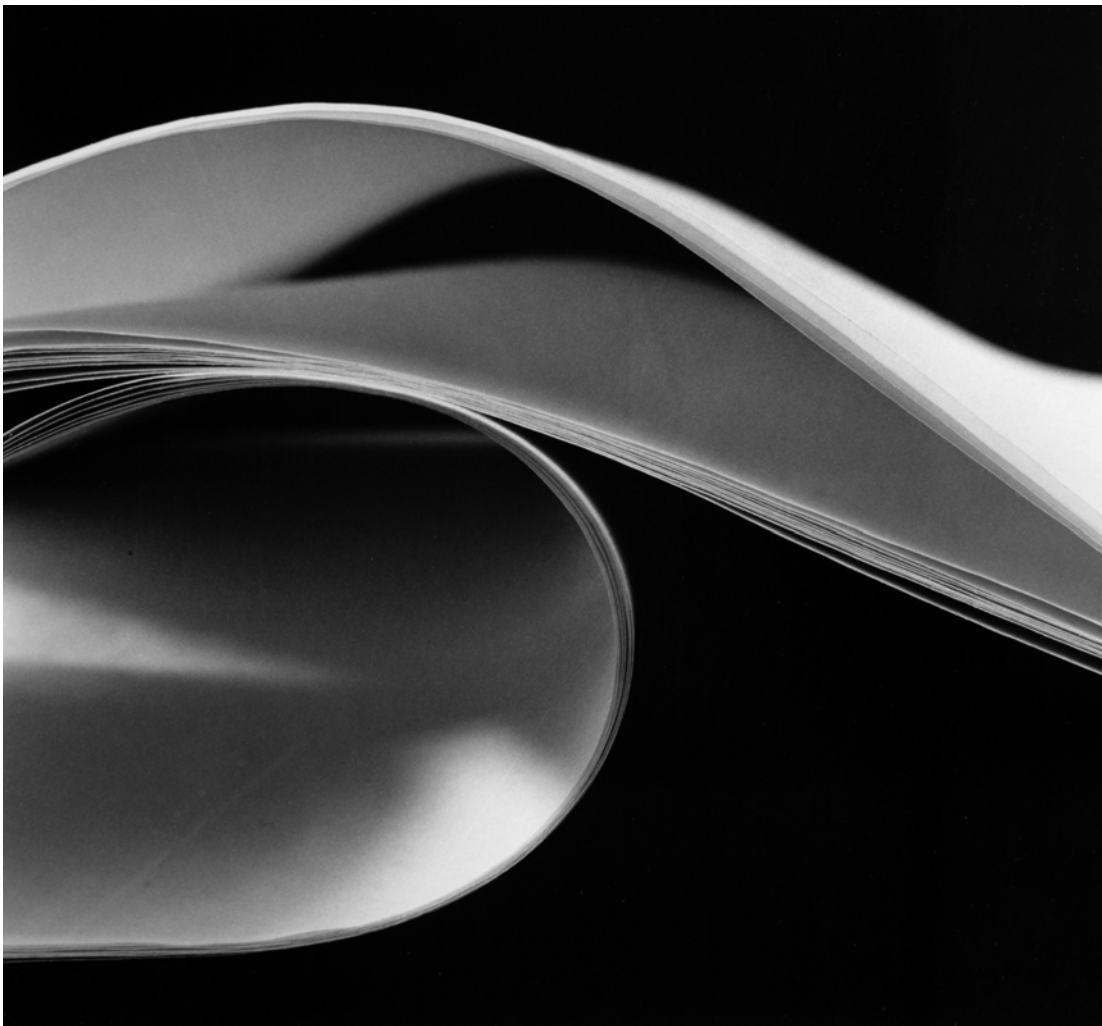
*The Material Image* seeks to draw attention to the surface—and, simultaneously, the theoretical and cultural substance—of a wide range of photographs. Whether vernacular images by anonymous makers, or acknowledged masterpieces, or something unexpected in between, the physical nature and meaning of the medium serves as a base (in the dual senses of both ‘foundational’ and ‘vulgar’), a point of contact between the formal, semiotic construction of the image and the concrete, physical phenomena that it represents. While ideal form, in the Platonic sense, is something perfect, pure, and incorruptible, when it is merged into dross, resistant matter it inevitably becomes de-based. The most beautiful, pristine formal image is locked into an emulsion of one sort or another, bonded to a piece of paper (or other such material support), and is thus itself rendered susceptible to the physical ravages of history, accident, and decay that the photographic image itself, ironically, works to suspend. The composition of any given photograph is thus materially subject to (and, in a museum context, continuously staving off) its own literal decomposition.

In a connected development, largely due to the advent of various digital imaging technologies, there have been a number of exhibitions, critical essays, and books over the past 15 years or so that seek to negotiate what is perceived as the ‘death of photography’ in the wake of the digital revolution<sup>8</sup>. Grounds for these funeral orations range from a nostalgic sense of loss for the once-upon-a-time innocent believability of images (Fred Ritchin) to the enthusiastic embrace of the full-scale aesthetic/epistemic shift mediated by the advent of the new technologies (W.J.T. Mitchell). Much of this burgeoning new body of literature focuses on ‘what next?’ questions, offering various attempts to sort through the new ontological and semantic possibilities now open to (or the challenges confronting) contemporary artistic and journalistic photographic praxis in the Digital Age.

In this exhibition, I take a different tack, asking the question, what will become of the older, analogue photographic processes as digital media become more and more ubiquitous? How will we look at these images, how will we read them differently when digital is the ‘industry standard’? Seen here, these photographs that have been tossed by the vicissitudes of history from their various contexts of origin are re-ordered and re-contextualized in order to draw out of the viewer a new, conscious appreciation for these images as material objects and the various ways in which one might elect to read this materiality (as historicity, as painterliness, or as a new, unexpectedly physical depth of the two-dimensional image). In contrast to the aesthetic transcendence of the photographic image (which explicitly brackets the physical object in question<sup>9</sup>) offered by the modernist/formalist approach, the photographs here are arranged to provoke a very different—one indeed might almost say base—reaction from the viewer, as they register as but another part of the physical reality that they simultaneously document.

Fifty years from now, the gelatin silver print may well have gone the way of the Victorian tintype, and extant examples of this now-ubiquitous technology will seem like nostalgic remnants from a time long past, just as old, rusting tintypes speak of their origin

in a world that seems barely recognizable today. The chief point of this exhibition is to explore photography's shifting meanings, connotations, and modes of comprehension as they cut across particular historical, social, economic, and aesthetic contexts, always already grounded in the overdetermined materiality of the photograph itself, a plenitude that should be readily apparent in the range of images and approaches presented in this exhibition.



Margaret Casella  
*Paper Ribbon*, 1988  
gelatin silver print, 13 in. x 14 in.  
Extended loan, Center for  
Photography at Woodstock  
CPW1995.033





Unknown  
*Untitled (baby)*, ca. 1860  
daguerreotype,  
3 1/2 in. x 2 1/2 in.  
Gift of Dr. Hugo Munsterberg

## II. Historical Remains

With the Photograph, we enter into flat Death. . . .Not only does it commonly have the fate of paper (perishable), but even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal. . . .Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes; there is nothing left but to throw it away. Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of “what has been,” modern society has renounced the Monument.

-- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

This section of the exhibition opens with two very different images, each documenting (ostensibly) the same physical object: the Arch of Constantine in Rome, originally built in 312-15 A.D. The earlier (and smaller) image, a view of one complete side of the monument, is an albumen print produced from a glass collodion negative sometime around 1885. It presents the ancient monument from the point of view of the tourist (or the art historian, which in this instance amounts to almost the same thing). But of course what is revealed by this photograph is not the same monument that first pleased the Emperor’s gaze in the 4th century—by the time this photograph was made, the Roman Empire had long collapsed, leaving in its wake the bleached bones of its enormous architectural programs, like an elephant’s graveyard, marking the empire’s once magnificent place in the world. The intervening centuries of time, weather, and vandalism have left their indelible marks on this triumphal arch: the modern miracle of the photograph is its ability to arrest that decay, extending the temporal dimension of this moment, this presence in a (theoretically) infinite moment of suspension. But as Barthes is quick to point out, this marvelous gift of the photograph is itself subject to decay—as residues of incompletely washed chemicals in the print stain and eat away at the paper;

the desiccated albumen that forms its emulsion chip or flake away, as it might be consumed in a fire, and so on. In the long run, the Arch itself will likely outlast the photographic traces made of it, confirming Barthes' melancholic observations.

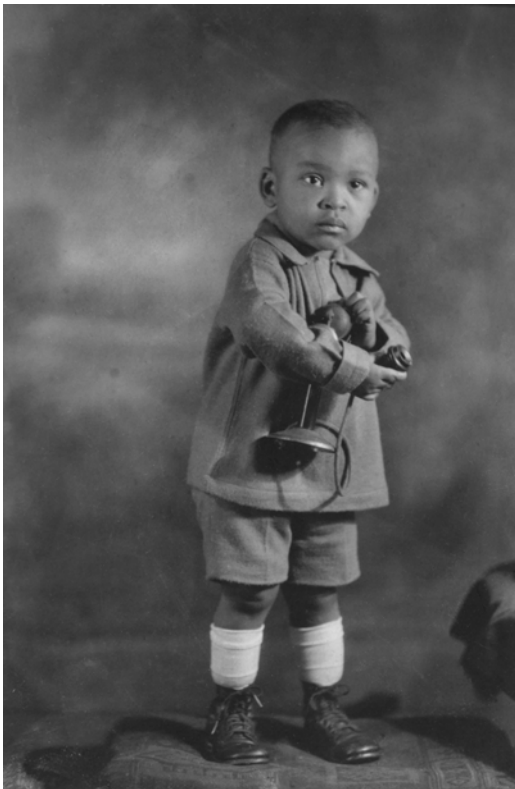
The second photograph of the Arch of Constantine, made in 1967 by Aaron Siskind, makes manifest the theme called forth in this section of the exhibition: Historical Remains. As Barthes' ruminations in *Camera Lucida* make clear, the photograph's future anterior sense (the knowledge that the photograph registers the current moment, and then projects it endlessly into the future, in anticipation of all subsequent encounters with the image) is the feature that makes photographs particularly poignant enactments of the eventual death that we all face. Siskind's large image focuses on one small section of the Roman monument, a stony bulge that has been almost completely weathered away by time and acid rain. This nearly shapeless lump retains some almost imperceptible forms that might once have depicted the sphere of a head, and perhaps the elongated oval of a blocky body, but even this flicker of recognition refuses to settle into a solid gestalt. The formless graininess of the worn surface of the stone, on the other hand, seems to offer a direct reference to the photographic process itself—an image that is dependent upon the grains of silver salts impregnated in the film's emulsion, grains which themselves are magnified when the print is blown up to this size. Siskind here has not documented the Arch of Constantine for armchair travelers, but has instead revealed the ineluctable logic of Death (entropy) that embraces both Constantine's monument and Siskind's own chosen medium. Even the 19th-century print reflects this truth, in the blurred shadows of the visitors who walked under the monument during the collodion plate's somewhat lengthy exposure time. Passing through at the moment the photograph was made, we can see the ghostly trail of their presence. Looking back from our current temporal distance, we realize that they must all be dead as well.



Unknown  
*Arco di Costantino Roma*, ca. 1885  
albumen print on board, 8 1/16 in. x  
10 1/4 in.  
Gift of Neaderland Trust  
2000.024.002

The primary aim of this section of the exhibition is to grasp one of the most human, most understandable uses of photography, namely preservation—of the people, places, and things of significance to us. How often does one hear of a house fire in which the one possession salvaged, in the panic of the moment, was the family photo album? This attempt to preserve, literally to keep our loved ones near us (especially after they have died), has been one of the primary jobs for photography since the moment it was invented. Bound up in the logic of the future anterior, however, this enterprise opens us to the irony of the photograph's mortal nature, as vividly described by Barthes.

In addition to images by a number of well-known photographers (Eugène Atget, Eva Watson-Schütze, Larry Fink, Stephen Shore), there are a number of vernacular images, ranging from daguerreotypes to stereographic cards to police record cards, all of which represent both specific developments in photographic technology and a number of the ways in which this technology has been used to concretely ground various power relations. The social regulation mediated by the police images should be fairly obvious; the stereographic cards, which were produced in volume for the leisure enjoyment of the middle classes from the mid-19th century through the early 20th, employ themes ranging from simple visual play on the perspectival delights of the 3-D experience, to ethnographic images of Eskimo and Arab 'Others,' to providential views of the American landscape, a subject that carries its own considerable ideological charge. On a more personal level, the small boy in James Van Der Zee's studio portrait is quite aware of the power represented by the photographer and his impressive apparatus, even if he is not yet quite sure what it all means.

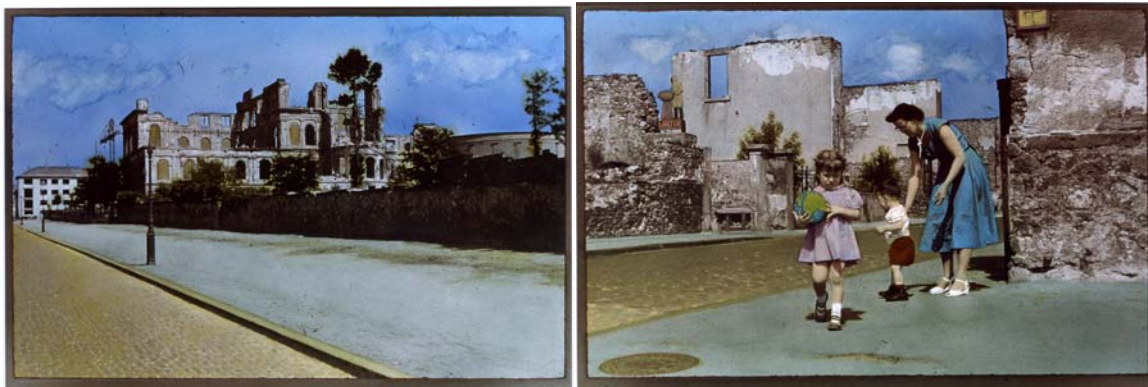


James Van Der Zee  
*Portrait of Boy Holding Telephone*, 1925  
gelatin silver print, 6 in. x 4 in.  
Gift of Howard Greenberg  
2002.076.030

Again, the material nature of the medium is here foregrounded through the range of processes on view, especially by the more corporeal images and objects assembled in the display cases. As Geoffrey Batchen has taken pains to point out, the original experience of the daguerreotype was as much tangible as visual—it was carried about in a heavy protective case, and one had to physically open it up and tilt the plate back and forth in the light to find the proper angle in order to view the image.<sup>10</sup> Just as importantly, the material supports, the photographic emulsions, papers, and related concrete dimensions of the medium inevitably circle us back to Barthes' comment at the beginning of this section—the realization that photography is at once quintessentially modern and inescapably mortal.

### III. The Original Copy

The mechanical nature of photography has frequently been foregrounded, from William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*<sup>11</sup> to Walter Benjamin's influential 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"<sup>12</sup> Where Talbot had invented the first negative-positive photographic process due to his own inability to draw (thereby devising a way of allowing Nature to do the work herself), Benjamin directed the crux of his argument toward the growing political danger presented by the fascist's mobilization of mass sentiment through the eminently reproducible media of photography and film, and thus made the mechanical, cookie-cutter nature of these processes their most salient feature.



Katherine Kreisher

*Darmstadt in 1953: From My Father's Photographs*, 1988

hand-tinted gelatin silver print, 2 images, each 11 3/4 in. x 17 1/2 in.

Extended loan, Center for Photography at Woodstock

CPW1995.550

Even in the 19th century aesthetic debates over the medium, photography's technical, mechanical nature drew much attention, as it seemed to distance the photograph from the humanist address of Art by largely removing the mediation of the maker's eye and

hand—or, even more important for the critic Charles Baudelaire, by failing to engage the “domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends upon the addition of something of a man’s soul.”<sup>13</sup> Imagination, ‘the queen of the faculties’ as he called it, was the key to artistic and aesthetic value for Baudelaire, and photography’s gross dedication to purely objective reality was for him an abomination of all that true art ought to strive for (even as he himself repeatedly sat for his portrait in the photographic studios of Nadar and Etienne Carjat). Photography’s proper role was as a “servant of the sciences and arts. . .like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature.”<sup>14</sup>

Countering both Baudelaire and Benjamin’s analyses, this section of the exhibition focuses on work that draws attention, either implicitly or explicitly, to the manifest uniqueness of any particular photograph, even as it relies upon a mechanical/reproductive dynamic to generate the print’s distinctive, existential character. In the 19th century, the earliest attempts to create self-consciously artistic photography were cast in the mold of the art form that seemed most closely related, as two-dimensional representation of the three-dimensional world—namely, painting. O.G. Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson’s ‘combination prints’ of the 1850’s and 60’s, which pieced together a number of separately exposed, glass plate collodion negatives to create complex figure compositions, sought to emulate the compositions and rhetorical significance of established academic history painting. While their painstakingly printed tableaux should perhaps be recognized as the true precursor to today’s digitally manipulated photography, the key feature to recognize here is their overt reintroduction of the artist’s guiding, intentional practice—the mind shapes the meaning of these works in advance, using the photographic process as a mere tool for realizing the aesthetic concept, rather than as a guiding principle in its own right.

The second great wave of art photography came with the rise of Pictorialism in the 1890’s. Guided initially by Peter Henry Emerson’s theories of ‘naturalistic photography,’ which emphasized the soft focus of the human field of vision, these photographers ultimately extended this blurred, atmospheric effect to create a highly aestheticized, painterly brand of photography. The large gum bichromate print by George Seeley here exemplifies this approach, which quite literally reasserts the hand of the artist in the medium: this process, “based on the property of gum arabic when mixed with potassium bichromate to change its solubility in water upon exposure to light,”<sup>15</sup> allows the photographer to alter values and tones in the finished print through judicious attack on the emulsion with warm water and a brush. The resulting images are often strikingly reminiscent of traditionally produced painting and drawing, allowing little doubt as to their original aesthetic intention.



George Seeley  
*Untitled*, 1916  
vintage gum bichromate print,  
18 7/8 in. x 14 1/2 in.  
Courtesy Howard Greenberg  
Gallery, New York

In this section of the exhibition, the tactility of the photographic print remains prominent, even when the hand of the artist is not as prominently inscribed. Thomas Joshua Cooper's four large prints utilize neither overt manipulation of the negative (as in Vincent Serbin's *Negative Collage #1*) nor a direct, expressive intervention in the print (as in Doug and Mike Starn's *Horses*), yet through their scale, and the delicate, gold-toned processing of their surfaces, they pull away from the photographic anchor of the 'real' toward an increasingly subjective, semantically charged affect. "My particular approach to this 'symbolic field' is to recognise and emphasise final gesture and tone as the emotional release for the information contained here, thus simultaneously creating both a subjective and objective field of view,"<sup>16</sup> as Cooper has asserted about this work. He thus binds these subjective, non-specific Romantic expanses of landscape to their source imagery, located in the ineluctably objective grasp of reality offered by the camera. Framed in terms of both "gesture" and "emotional release," the fulcrum of this contact between the physical and the semantic is, notably, the sense of touch. The photograph becomes a mode of synesthesia, a bridge between the eye, the hand, and the world that

both seek to describe. As my eyes ‘stroke’ the delicately textured surface of these aesthetically evocative prints, I encounter a view of the landscape that renders it in intimately tactile terms, as though it had been translated into a fantastic version of Braille.



Thomas Joshua Cooper  
*From the World's Edge--a Premonitional Work*  
*Tonality—At The Celtic Sea*  
*At the very edge of Land's End*  
*Through the entire time of Tonality of the Total Eclipse of the Sun*  
*Cornwall, England, August 11, 1999*  
*(The Southwesternmost Point of Great Britain)*  
1999  
gelatin silver print, selenium and gold chloride toned, 16 1/4 in. x 22 3/4 in.  
Collection of David A. and Helaine Dorsky

With “The Original Copy,” we discover the unique space opened by the photograph, the room it provides for projection of the purely imaginative faculty of the photographer (pace Baudelaire), even as it leverages the power of the photograph’s proximity to objective reality (no matter how distant), through a point of contact provided by reaching outward through the sense of touch, literally and metaphorically understood. The next stage of our journey will entail understanding the medium as it remains fundamentally grounded in its relationship not to the mind, nor to external reality, but to our own base, physical reality—as we are enmeshed in the body itself.

#### IV. Skins



Konrad Cramer  
*Female Nude With Cloth*, ca. 1938  
solarized gelatin silver print, mounted  
on board, 9 7/8 in. x 7 3/8 in.  
Gift of Manuel Bromberg  
1986.002.001

In a well-known essay by Oliver Wendell Holmes, inventor of one of the early stereoscopic viewing systems (and father of the famous jurist), an attempt is made to reconcile the collapse of the three-dimensional ‘real’ world with its flattened, photographic doppelgänger. Holmes appeals to an account by the ancient philosopher Democritus, postulating that bodies constantly shed “forms, effigies, membranes, or films,” which are then seen “in one of their aspects in any clear, calm, sheet of water [or] in a mirror.”<sup>17</sup> The photograph, in Holmes’ opinion, is thus a “mirror with a memory,” a way of capturing one of the countless ‘skins’ shed daily by the objects of the world.

There is only one Colosseum [sic] or Pantheon; but how many millions of potential negatives have they shed—representatives of billions of pictures—since they were erected! Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.<sup>18</sup>



Setting aside the troubling colonialist implications of this extraordinary outburst, the key concept highlighted by Holmes is the revolutionary divorce of form from matter represented by the photograph. Peel away and preserve the visual form, or ‘skin’ of the object, and there is no longer need for the original. (“Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing...and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please,” he asserts elsewhere in the essay.) This focus on the abstracted, formal nature of the image presents a point of view that finds its fullest expression in the purist, 20th-century modernist approach of the photographer Edward Weston, and ably articulated as an overarching approach to the medium’s history in Beaumont Newhall’s *History of Photography*.

But even within Holmes’ early formulation of this position, there lies a critical ambiguity—centered on his preferred metaphor, skins. Given that his essay primarily treats the new technology of the stereoscope, a 3-D viewer that mimics depth perception by providing two slightly different images of the same scene, thereby tricking the brain into reading them as a single, continuous image, Holmes indulges in a bit of perceptual psychology. According to his reading of the contemporary scientific research, “There is good reason to believe that the appreciation of solidity by the eye is purely a matter of education.” Citing reports from “Cheselden and ... Müller’s Physiology,” he concludes that “everything is seen only as a superficial extension, until the other senses have taught the eye to recognize depth, which gives solidity....Cheselden’s patient thought ‘all objects whatever touched his eyes, as what he felt did his skin.’”<sup>19</sup>



William Wegman  
*Suitcase*, 1996  
gelatin silver print, 10 in. x 10 in.  
Extended loan, Center for Photography  
at Woodstock

In this passage, quite a different usage of the term ‘skin’ is invoked, here as the direct, physical, sensory contact with the world through the sense of touch—which is ultimately responsible for training the eye to recognize the three-dimensionality of solid objects. It is ironic that Holmes—early champion of the purely formal nature of photography—should in the end depend upon vision’s radically embodied nature, a notion most fully explored by 20th-century phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty.



Kenro Izu  
*Blue #1002B*, 2004  
platinum and palladium with cyanotype,  
mounted on aluminum sheet, 20 in. x 13 7/8 in.  
Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New  
York

Beginning with Kenro Izu’s stunning blue-black nude (a platinum/palladium print with cyanotype, ‘float-mounted’ on an aluminum sheet), the works in this section of the exhibition have been selected to engage the viewer in an overtly sensual, tactile encounter with the medium. The lush, textured surfaces of these images tend to pull close to their subjects, or else utilize framing devices that flatten them out to correspond to the two-dimensional picture plane. A number of the images (such as the Izu) explicitly address the human form, thus conflating Holmes’ two contending readings of the term skin: the surface of the body, source of our most intimate, tactile knowledge of the world (and indeed, of one another) finds an analogue in the objective skin of the photograph’s emulsion, where the density of the print’s surface in turn opens itself to even greater sensuous appreciation. This almost decadent, baroque passage of the exhibition is designed to stage a visceral, pre-verbal encounter with the base, corporeal experience of the image, openly embracing the libidinal, fetishizing desire that characterized the drive to invent this bizarre, hybrid mode of representation in the first place.<sup>20</sup> Sliding from one photographic skin to the next, from brilliant color to stark black-and-white to the painterly gray tonalities of platinum and photogravure, vision regains its primordial contact with touch, with its complex somatic and perceptual context as an ‘embodied eye’,

to use Merleau-Ponty's expression. Rather than the bloodless, elevated, often intellectually abstract notion of 'form' that dominated much 20th-century photographic criticism (and practice), we are confronted here with the low, inescapably physical nature of the medium—which, I contend, is an essential (if often unacknowledged) factor that continues to generate the undeniable, ongoing cultural power of the medium. When we know that vision is inextricably linked to the circuits of desire, how is it that the body itself is so easily forgotten, repressed—only to revenge its absence through our charged response to the abject (our revulsion for 'dirty' bodily functions and the like)?

The abjection implicit in this passage of the exhibition brings us back to the base, fundamental nature of 'photography,' in its most material dimension. Through the physical impress of reality, the indexical trace of the world embedded in the photographic emulsion, we are reminded again of the material reality of the medium, and of its role in the "flex and slop"<sup>21</sup> of the real world, the space that allows the varied play between the semantic and the physical, the looseness that enables us to see (or rather, register) different aspects or meanings in the same image, whether at different times or by different viewers.



Frank Gohlke  
*Ice forming, The Sudbury River - Hopkinton, Massachusetts, March, 1990*  
C-print mounted on aluminum, 42 in. x 54 in.  
Museum Purchase  
1999.029

## V. Classics



Dorothy Norman  
*Front of Alfred Steiglitz "Equivalent" at An American Place, New York, ca. 1940/printed later gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 in. x 2 1/2 in.*  
Gift of Howard Greenberg  
2003.053.040

Formalism has become a favorite bogeyman for many critics in the past few decades—an evil spirit to be exorcised by some, a straw man to be vanquished by others. This section of the exhibition assembles work that fits comfortably within what might be called canonical 20th-century formalism, as that critical practice is presented (and continues to be transmitted) through general texts such as Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography*, and in more traditionally oriented photography programs. A series of black-and-white prints, uniformly matted and framed, and generously spaced to maximize the viewer's uninterrupted attention, this gallery exemplifies the formalist's reverential attitude for and elevated aesthetic expectation of beautiful photographs, immaculately printed. The purely visual, individual encounter with the image is emphasized, and indeed heightened, by this exhibition strategy. The flat white of the gallery wall dematerializes from the viewer's consciousness, becoming the *tabula rasa* upon which the compositional balance and the formal elegance of the individual photograph (and the aesthetic inventiveness of the photographer) is given privileged register.

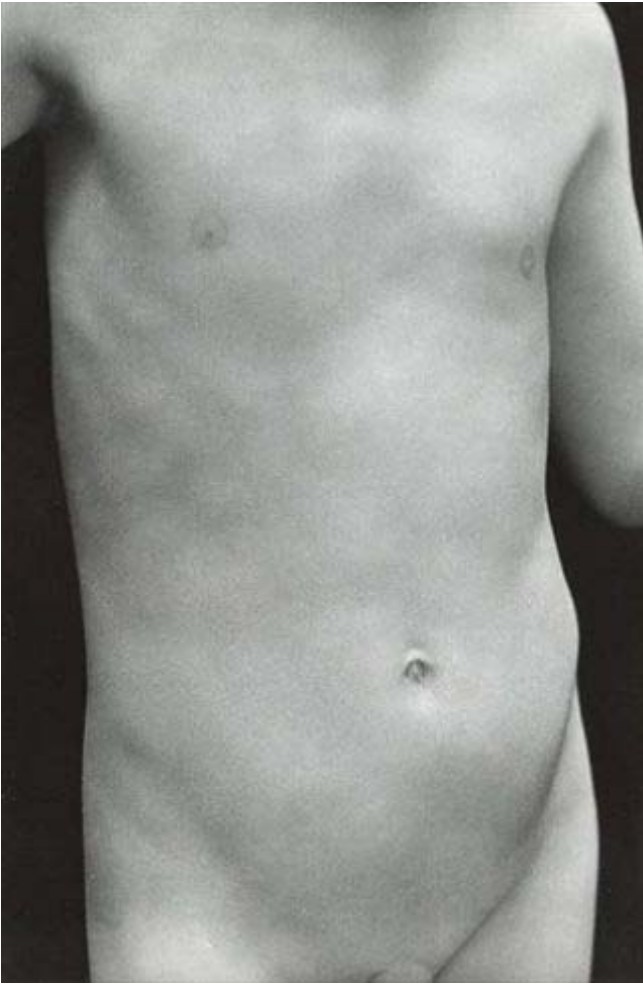
And this returns us to Smith's concept of registration, in which particular constellations of meaning emerge, in the engaged presence of both subject and object, compounded (as I am trying to present it here) by its position within the ideological matrix of this particular cultural practice—formalist art photography. It's not that the historical formation of 20th-century formalism in photography is (or was) wrong, so much as its adoption comes at a price: by embracing this position, and telling the story of

photography from this vantage point, it becomes difficult to focus attention on the power relations played out through the act of photographing something, or the political/ideological functions of (for instance) documentary practice, or to embrace the abject in either subject matter or through subversive deployments of the formless.<sup>22</sup>



Harry Callahan  
*Untitled*, 1952  
gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 in. x 8 in.  
Extended loan, Center for Photography  
at Woodstock  
CPW1995.276

The effectiveness of the formalist position can literally be seen here in the amazingly precise, untitled gelatin silver print by Harry Callahan. Using an almost hallucinogenically deep focus, the compositional relationships between the distant figure and the near crevice through which we are permitted access to it are effectively collapsed into a pure, rarified form that is more abstract than physical. The subject's moorings in the concrete, social/physical environment are silently cut, as the photographer pursues a beauty stripped of all external reference, dependent on the traditional Kantian notion of beauty as an internal judgment made by the viewer, an aesthetic experience radically isolated from contamination by other, more worldly concerns. Raising questions about the repressed eroticism of Edward Weston's carefully cropped *Torso of Neil* seems impertinent, somehow, and would have been actively discouraged by the photographer himself, no doubt. Aren't these just beautiful photographs, after all?



Edward Weston  
*Nude of Neil*, 1925/printed later  
palladium print, 4 in. x 3 in.  
Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery,  
New York

Well, yes and no. By implicitly adopting key ontological concepts such as subject, object, and aesthetic expression in a discussion of these works, we fail to call into account—to register—the price of this commitment to the guiding principle of pure form. Representation, as it is described in this Kantian system, becomes a constitutive act of consciousness, radically divorced from the forever unknowable, concrete reality of the thing-in-itself (Ding-an-sich). As a result, we are placed in a position where it becomes impossible to adequately address the ontological challenge presented by photography, as it generates representations that are physically dependent upon the concrete, material presence and substance of the photograph itself.

Following Smith's principle of irreduction, and his arguments regarding the phenomenon of registration, then, we can begin to construct an alternative account of the photograph, allowing for the emergence (and eventual eclipse) of particular historical positions such as formalism, bringing representation once again into alignment with its etymological root, presentation, "open[ing] up a considerable amount of room in our ability to describe intentional systems" such as photography.<sup>23</sup> Smith's 'successor metaphysics' opens the door to a broad range of interpretive possibilities, but does not

necessarily devolve into pure relativism—the reality of the situation is that intentional processes (such as discourse, thinking, computation, and image-making) are not inherently stable practices, but are “constantly lived and multiply textured: a dynamic, day-by-day, in-the-rough, wrestling and struggling with the fit of one’s concepts and actions and thoughts into the world surrounding them.”<sup>24</sup>

Software programs such as Photoshop present the user with a nearly infinite array of choices for the manipulation of images, but eventually the person operating the program needs to make specific choices, ultimately arriving at a desired (or at least desirable) result. It is in the individual and social negotiation of these kinds of choices—the open-ended, ad hoc process by which certain results or approaches become culturally viable, as others are cast by the wayside—that the future of photography lies. As this exhibition has attempted to sketch out, this story is ultimately to be had in the telling. By effectively reframing the contextual/physical/aesthetic of the medium, in the structured passage from one section of the exhibition into the next, I have attempted to open up a number of points of entry into the knotted thicket of processes and practices that we lump together under the term ‘photography’. I look forward to the contentious, spirited debates that no doubt will carry on, as we come to terms with the ramifications of these ontologically charged ‘material images,’ in their complex interpolation of surface and substance, as the digital revolution continues apace.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 8.

<sup>2</sup> If this seems a stretch, remember that Beaumont Newhall’s venerable *History of Photography* dutifully includes the cliché-verre—an artistic print medium used with some frequency by Corot, in which the artist scratches through the emulsion as though it were an etching plate, and then printed out on photosensitive paper—in his chapter on “Art Photography.”

<sup>3</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Mandarin Modernism: ‘Photography Until Now’,” *Art in America*, December 1990, 148.

<sup>4</sup> Leading this pack would be Christopher Phillips’ magisterial history of the formalist formulation of photography’s significance at the Museum of Modern art in his “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” October 22 (Fall 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Cantwell Smith, *On the Origin of Objects* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Obedient Numbers, Soft Delight,” *Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 164-174. Batchen draws attention to the close personal and professional links between William Henry Fox Talbot, who was working on what became the first successful negative/positive photographic process in the 1830’s, and Charles Babbage, the English philosopher and mathematician who pioneered the first mechanical computer in 1833.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the more significant contributions on this theme include: Hubertus v. Amelunxen, ed., *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, (London: G+B Arts International, 1996); Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001); Mark Haworth-Booth, ed., *Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age*, (New York: Aperture, 1994); W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992); Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography*, (New York: Aperture, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Edward Weston claimed that his approach “provides the photographer with a means of looking deeply into the nature of things....to reveal the essence of what lies before his lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object.” “Seeing Photographically,” in Alan Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography*, (New Haven, Conn.: Leete’s Island Press, 1980), 174.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” *Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 56-80.

<sup>11</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1844-46).

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace), 217-253.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Salon of 1859,” *Art in Paris, 1845-1862*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1965), 154.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *History of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 147.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Joshua Cooper interview with David Bellingham, *Source 14* (February 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography* (Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Press, 1980), 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> See Geoffrey Batchen’s *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Brian Cantwell Smith, *On the Origin of Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 198-212.

<sup>22</sup> Weston even managed to aestheticize his toilet in one pristinely composed photograph from 1925, to offer one notorious example. The formalist’s implicit refusal to undo the central category of form itself is felt in the rejection of most Surrealist photography from the classic canon.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 351. Registration takes place at the level of presentation; while representation takes place at an indirect remove, which “is even reflected in the grammar: we say ‘represent x as y,’ but ‘register x,’ directly.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



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