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Presidential Debate 2000, the photo as an

Oxford History of Art

The Photograph

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1997



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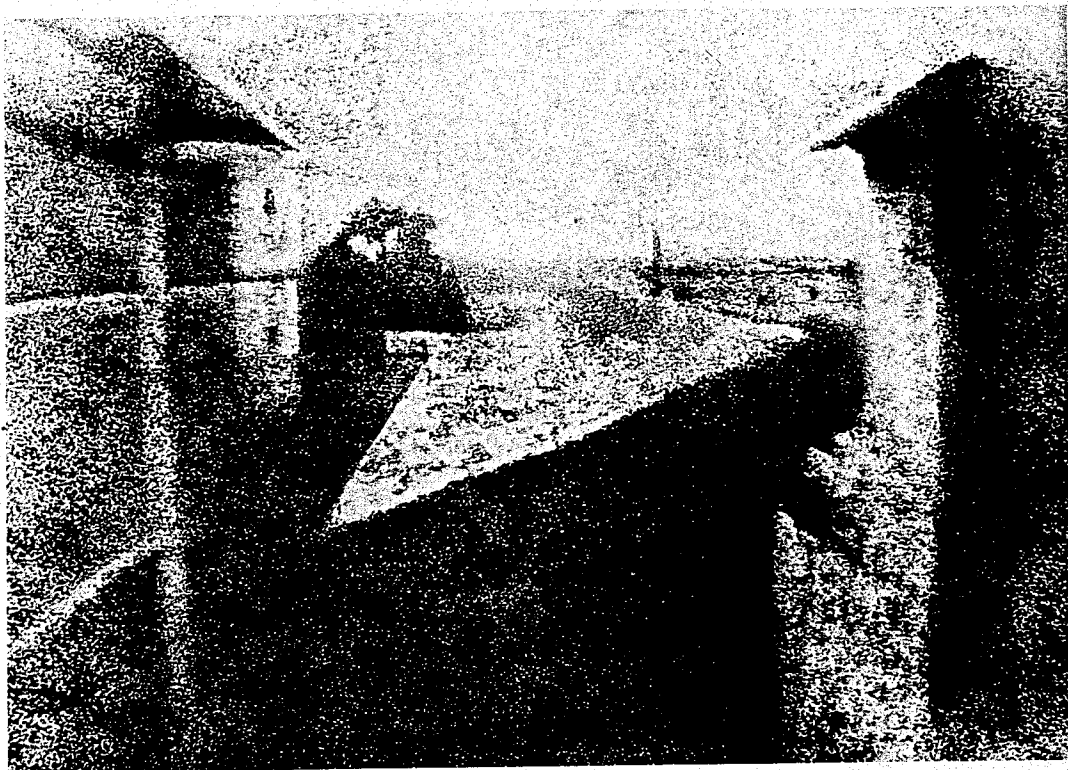
What is a Photograph?

In a world dominated by visual images the photograph has become almost invisible. We take photographs, look at them endlessly, and carry them around with us so that their *currency* (to use John Tagg's term)¹ is pervasive. They are one of the most common of objects that change hands on a daily basis. And yet such a common status belies their underlying complexity and difficulty; for we are always left with the primary and shifting question: what precisely *is* a photograph? We have inherited an entire structure of codes and conventions which not only invests the photograph with status (as a means of representation), but does so in relation to its availability and access. It is, in that sense, a doorway on to a world waiting to be recorded; but, like the world through which we move, it seems almost neutral in its structures of meaning.

Strange then, that in 1760 a French writer, François Tiphaigne de la Roche, in his novel *Giphante*, predicted with a sense of wonder the possibility of fixing an image when his narrator, looking at a scene, is amazed that 'a picture should have caused such an illusion'. 'Illusion' is appropriate, for it recalls to us the extent to which the attempt to record and fix a permanent image was seen as almost magical in its effect and suggestiveness: an alchemical process of transformation akin to revelation. Although, as Beaumont Newhall declared, 'what we know as photography is the combined application of optical and chemical phenomena long known to man'², this does not take away the essential element of surprise and fascination that any photograph engenders in a viewer who, for the first time, finds himself able to record, rather than paint, trace, or draw, an image of what he sees before him. No wonder, then, that the daguerreotype was called a 'mirror image'.

In one sense, of course, this emphasizes its dependence on light. Indeed, the word 'photograph' means 'light-writing'. But it also speaks to an underlying concern to control light and time. The photograph not only signals a different relationship to and over nature, it speaks very much to a sense of power in the way we seek to order and construct the world around us. Like so much of its meaning, this dual aspect (the scientific and the cultural) is basic to its mode of representation. The

Detail of 5



1 Joseph Nicéphore Niépce
View from a Window at Gras,
1826

A heliograph which, taken in 1826, remains the oldest photograph in existence. It was the result of an eight-hour exposure. Its lack of clarity suggests an appropriate mysteriousness underlying the very act of photography and the process of 'seeing'.

act of taking a photograph fixes time, but it also steals time, establishes a hold on the past in which history is sealed, so to speak, in a continuous present.

Exact images of the real world had been available for some time before the photograph proper. The camera obscura, and later the camera lucida, had been in use since the Renaissance. Indeed, Leonardo da Vinci outlined a theory of the photograph, although the first published account is taken to be *Natural Magic* by Giovanni Battista della Porta in 1558. The camera obscura, however, was an aid to artists. It offered them an inverted image which could then be traced; an accurate rendition of the reflection of light.

Minor developments were achieved by such figures as Thomas Wedgwood and Sir Humphry Davy in Britain who, in 1802, used 'white paper . . . moistened with solution of nitrate of silver' to 'capture' small objects, but once again, such images were not permanent. It was the Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) who first fixed a photographic image [1], a view taken from his attic window at Gras, near Chalon-sur-Saône in 1826, achieved after some eight hours exposure. Named a 'heliograph', it is accepted as the first 'photograph' and Niépce's image retains the presence, even ambiguity, appropriate to its status: its crude format and poor quality declare it not so much an image as an archaeological fragment.

But it was precisely such poor quality which led Niépce to team up

**2 Louis-Jacques-Mandé
Daguerre**

Intérieur d'un Cabinet
Curiosité, 1837

Daguerre's early image, in contrast to Niépce's, has about it a clarity and detail redolent of the daguerreotype as a form of representation. There is, however, a deadness about the subject characteristic of the daguerreotype itself. The lengthy exposure time meant that the subject had to be stilled before any image could be taken.

with another Frenchman, the Parisian dioramist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851). Indeed, Daguerre's interest in the diorama (and panorama) is a significant but often overlooked fact, and emphasizes his concern with producing views and prospects of cities and landscapes. Although Niépce died in 1833, it was not until 1839 that Daguerre published his new photographic process—the *daguerreotype*. Niépce had defined heliography as 'the automatic reproduction, by the action of light, with their gradations of tones from black to white, of the images obtained in the camera obscura', a definition echoed by Daguerre for his own process. A daguerreotype was 'the spontaneous reproduction of the images of nature received in the camera obscura', a 'chemical and physical process' which allowed nature 'to reproduce herself'. The sense of wonder implied in the notion of a 'spontaneous' method of reproduction was echoed in the sensational response to it at the time. *La Gazette de France*, in 1839, declared the 'invention' to be so significant that it 'upsets all scientific theories on light and optics, and it will revolutionise the art of drawing'. Nothing less was being made possible than 'a way to fix images'. Daguerre had made available a 'fixed and everlasting impress which . . . can be taken away from the presence of the objects'. No wonder that the painter Paul Delaroche lamented that 'from this day, painting is dead'.³

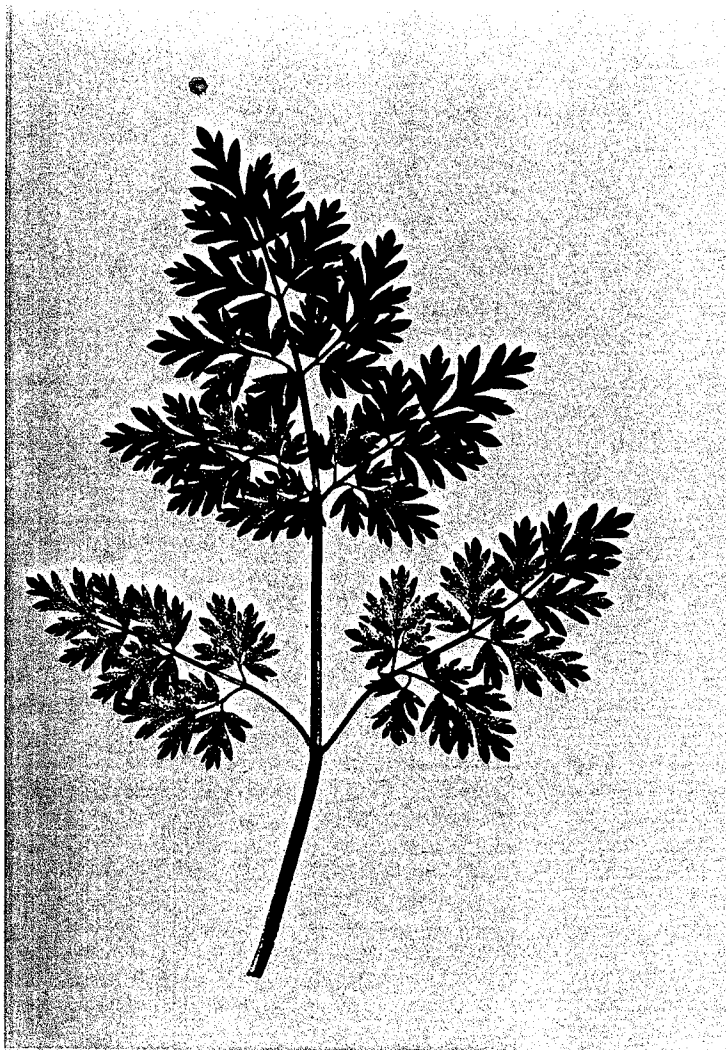
One of the outstanding attributes of the daguerreotype was its capacity to record detail. *The Photographer's Studio* (or *Intérieur d'un Cabinet Curiosité*) [2], taken in 1837, has a clarity and detail wholly missing from the Niépce; what *La Gazette* called an 'extraordinary minuteness'. This was an 'exact transcript' which, whether of objects, or architecture or, increasingly of people, made what it saw a palpable presence in time and space. Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple, Paris*

**2 Louis-Jacques-Mandé
Daguerre**

*Intérieur d'un Cabinet
Curiosité, 1837*

Daguerre's early image, in contrast to Niépce's, has about it a clarity and detail redolent of the daguerreotype as a form of representation. There is, however, a deadness about the subject characteristic of the daguerreotype itself. The lengthy exposure time meant that the subject had to be stilled before any image could be taken.





3 William Henry Fox Talbot

Photogenic Drawing

One of Talbot's earliest images which, like his other photogenic drawings, was little more than the trace of a simple pattern or object. These are objects on paper and lack any sense of a three-dimensional world basic to the spatial illusion of the photograph proper. They remain important, not least for their later use by such radical figures as Man Ray.

(c.1838) is an early urban scene characterized by a range of tone and a capacity for detail which does, indeed suggest the photograph as a 'cabinet of infinite curiosities'. One can understand why the American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, declared this invention as 'the most important, and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science', and the literalness of Daguerre's images was commented upon again and again in the United States, most famously by Oliver Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne.⁴ But the daguerreotype suffered from a series of basic disadvantages which, despite its popularity in France and the United States, led to its rapid decline as a means of photographic representation.

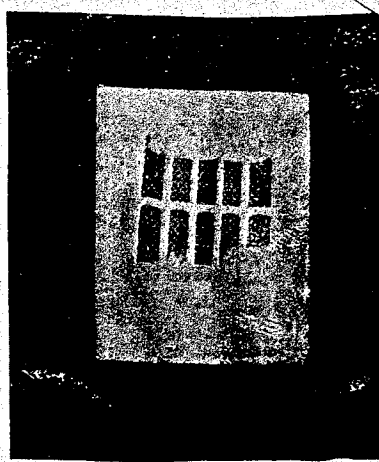
To begin with, the daguerreotype required long exposure times. Although within a relatively short period after its invention this was reduced to minutes rather than hours, it still placed limitations on the choice of subject. The slightest movement resulted in a blurred image; an obvious limitation for the recording of urban images, people, and documentary scenes. The world had to render itself static in front of the camera. In portrait photography (and the daguerreotype became a major form for a new kind of domestic portraiture) the subject had to be 'held' still, sometimes with special rests to aid posture. The result was often a stylized series of positions and attitudes in which the *act* of being photographed superseded the experience of being photographed. Portraits reflected the method not the medium. The daguerreotype, in its concern with static objects, suggests an underlying aspect of all photography: a fascination with the accurate recording of things as part of a larger act of classification and possession. Above all, however, each daguerreotype was a unique image. There was no negative/positive process. Although a 'mirror image' of the original, it could not be reproduced and its delicate surface, easily scratched, had to be carefully protected, often by a leather case covered in velvet. It became as much an object of attention as it was an image of information, thus declaring, from the beginning, the photograph's dual status as simultaneously both object and image.

The basis of the modern photograph, however, was developed by the English scientist and artist William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-77), who produced the first negative/positive photographic process, thus allowing multiple copies to be made from a single negative—clearly of fundamental significance to the future cultural status of the photograph. As Walter Benjamin suggested, the photograph is a prime example of 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'—an image based on both a chemical and industrial process of production.⁵

Talbot started experimenting with photographs in 1833 whilst in Italy, after using a camera lucida to help him draw more accurately (see Chapter 3). By 1834 he was working with what he termed a 'photogenic

Latticed Window
(with the Camera Obscura)
August 1835

*When first made, the squares
of glass about 200 in number
could be counted, with help
of a lens.*



4 William Henry Fox Talbot

Latticed Window, 1835

Taken from inside Talbot's country house, Lacock Abbey, the minuscule size of the negative belies its importance. This is, as it were, the first negative and allowed, for the first time, a potentially infinite number of positive prints to be reproduced from it. The photograph, in terms of this single artefact, had come of age.

drawing', involving nitrates of silver on paper—one of the most basic forms of photograph possible. Using ferns, lace, or flowers, Talbot reproduced images of the object by simply placing it on to the sensitized paper and exposing the paper to light—equivalent to wearing a wrist-watch when sunbathing. Once again the terms in which he spoke of his discovery were typical of the period. The images, he said, had 'the utmost truth and fidelity' and were part of a 'natural magic' and 'natural chemistry' which could do 'in the space of a few seconds' what it would otherwise take 'days or weeks of labour to trace or to copy'. Although possessing an attraction of their own [3], photogenic drawings were of more significance in what they suggested about the possibilities of the photograph. As a process, it was clearly limited in its capacity to record more than a narrow range of objects.

Talbot kept his researches a secret, but in 1839, in response to Daguerre's public announcement in France, he too (believing Daguerre to have developed a similar process) announced his 'invention', and by 1840 had produced the *calotype* (significantly, based on the Greek for 'beautiful picture'; in 1839 Sir John Herschel had already used the word 'photograph' at a Royal Academy lecture). The *calotype*, however, was the first true negative/positive photographic process and remains the basis of all photographic methods today. Although it lacked the detail of the daguerreotype, its great asset was that, for the first time, an infinite number of positive prints could be taken from a single negative image. The photograph proper had arrived. It is appropriate, then, that Talbot's first negative, like Niépce's first image, should be equally ambiguous. The *Latticed Window* [4], a small and fragile ghost of the original, portrays a window at Talbot's country home, Lacock Abbey. Its minuscule size (one inch square) belies its historical significance. Symbolically it speaks to the act of photographing and to the photograph itself, for we look at (and through) a window which suggests an almost mysterious play of

*The
Key of
Dreams?*

presence and absence. It remains an *ur*-image for both the history and the understanding of the photograph. Talbot printed his first calotypes in 1840, and it was this process that laid the foundation for the illustrations in *The Pencil of Nature* which Talbot started to publish in 1844.

Despite such revolutionary breakthroughs on the part of these early figures, the history of the photograph in the nineteenth century shows a series of fundamental contradictions, which remain endemic to the photograph as an image and as a means of representation. An aspect underlined by the way the technology of the photograph rapidly changes and develops. Daguerre and Talbot had put into place the means to record. But the rapid development in the technology of recording which followed in the nineteenth century not only reflected the industrialization of photography, in the cultural and ideological context, but also, integral to the very nature of the photographic image, a belief that there could be a perfect means of reproducing the perfect image; a hyper-reality, as it were. The camera was no longer concerned with a literal record but with something beyond the objective. Technology, in this way, has always been wedded to the 'magic' of what the photographic image promises.

This sense of 'perpetual' technological change is endemic from the beginning. By 1851, for example, Frederick Scott Archer (1813-57), an English sculptor, had produced what was known as the *collodion* process: a system based on wet glass plates which superseded Talbot's calotype. Its major drawback, however, was that developing had to take place immediately after the image had been captured; a basic but crucial factor in the way the technology limited the photographer as to how and where he or she could photograph. By 1870 the wet plate, in turn, was made obsolete, and by 1871 Richard Leach Maddox (1816-1902), an English physician, had developed the first plates to use gelatin which, by 1877 had become the *gelatin dry plate*.

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, we can plot this continuing (if uneven) process of change which produced a veritable mosaic of photographic forms and processes; all part of the establishment of the structures and institutions of the photograph on which this most common of objects is based. And the camera, too, changed rapidly. The hand-crafted wooden and brass cameras used by Talbot were simple affairs: essentially *objets d'art* rather than technical tools. Their major drawback was in the fixed lens although as early as 1840 Voigtländer had constructed the Petzval lens, which reduced exposure time by some 90 per cent. Indeed camera design underlines one of the most obvious and yet problematic aspects of the development and reception of photography as a cultural practice. On the one hand the beautifully made but highly expensive cameras of Talbot, on the other the availability, as early as 1884 (and significantly in the United States) of the first flexible negative film, produced by

George Eastman, and, by 1888, the first Kodak camera, a name he chose because it 'could be pronounced anywhere in the world'. This was a small camera with a single speed of 1/25 second and a fixed focus. Its significance was twofold. It was relatively cheap (it sold for five guineas) and easy to use. Thus the Kodak slogan: 'You press the button, we do the rest.' By 1895 the pocket Kodak had been reduced in price to one guinea and, with the arrival of the Brownie in 1900, the camera was offered for sale at five shillings (or one dollar). As the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn commented, 'Now every *nipper* has a *Brownie*', and 'a photograph is as common as a box of matches'. Photography was, potentially, open to everyone; it had become the most mobile and the most available of visual forms. Photographs and cameras could, literally, be carried around in the pocket.

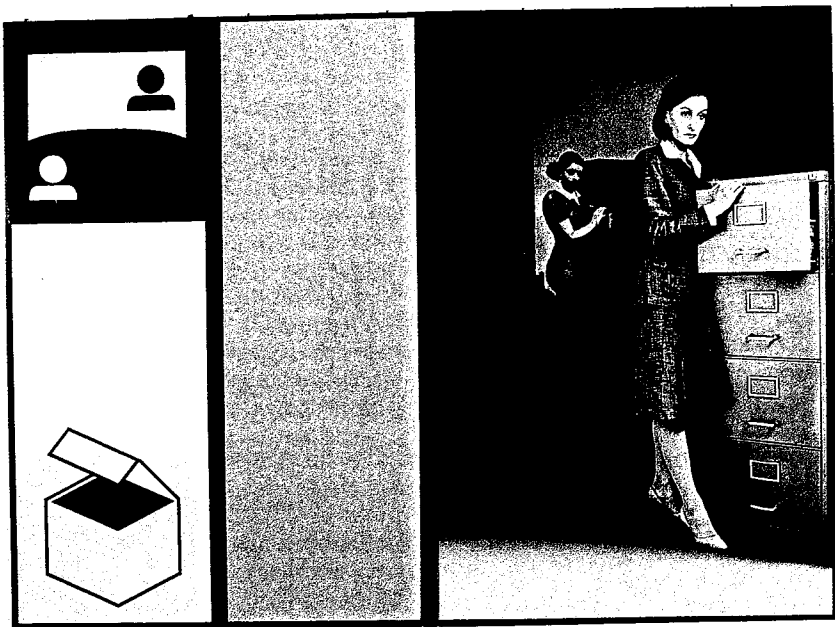
In less than sixty years, then, the photograph had changed from being the privileged domain of its early progenitors to being one of the most accessible and accepted means of visual representation. It was the ultimate democratic art form, at once sanctioning everything and everyone with potential significance—for everything and everyone could now be photographed and given status—and allowing everyone to produce photographs and construct an individual view of their world and particular histories.

And yet underlying this universalizing tendency is the complex (and shifting) distinction between the amateur and professional photographer—between photography as an 'art' (with the stress on individual creativity and expertise), and the photograph as a mass-produced object. Each domain retains its own mythology (see Chapter 9) and each involves, once again, a complex series of relationships. Talbot, for example, established a 'workshop' (at Reading) for the mass production of calotypes, while on the other hand, by 1853 in New York City there were some eighty-three portrait galleries producing daguerreotypes. Even so the distinction between the amateur and the professional reflects the extremes of photographic practice and production and is reflected in the mass of institutions, assumptions, and secondary aspects of photography's cultural status. The professional photographer still remains central and, inevitably, has dominated both the history of photography and the meaning of the photograph. Indeed, one of the many paradoxes at the centre of the medium is the extent to which an infinite number of photographs and of photographers has been dominated by a limited canon of images and practitioners; as few as 200 photographers have determined the terms of reference and the frame of meaning for the history of the photograph. Their work, and the assumptions it reflects, are basic to what we mean by a photograph. Despite its acutely populist base the photograph, for all its capacity to reproduce the literal, retains the values and hierarchies so much associated with what might be viewed as its opposite: academic painting.

What, then, *is* a photograph? It is, at its most basic level, 'a picture, likeness, or facsimile obtained by photography'. But, as we have seen, even in the nineteenth century this definition had to cover the daguerreotype, the heliotype, calotype, albumen print, gelatin-silver print, photogravure, and photogenic drawing, while in the twentieth century we could add the polaroid, electronic scanner, digital processes, and so on. The differences recall to us the inherent complexity and shifting nature of what constitutes a photograph. Any photograph is dependent on a series of historical, cultural, social, and technical contexts which establish its meanings as an image and an object. The meaning of a photograph, its efficacy as an image, and its value as an object, are always dependent on the contexts within which we 'read' it. We need to view the photograph in relation to what Roland Barthes called it: a 'transparent envelope', a potent phrase which suggests its underlying ambiguity as an artefact and a means of representation.

On a functional level, then, the photograph is dependent on its context. The 'fixed' image it offers is subject to a continuous state of transformation and metamorphosis. We forget, for example, how crucial are such obvious factors as the differences between black-and-white photographs and colour, or between small and large images, or square, rectangular, or even circular images. We might see a photograph in a newspaper, magazine (on glossy or matt, thick or thin paper), album, frame, on a wall, taken from a wallet, on a document or in a gallery, in a box or locket, or as a negative or a contact print. Each change of context changes it as an object and alters its terms of reference and value, influencing our understanding of its 'meaning' and 'status'. A passport photograph in a passport has a fixed function as an official mark of identity (itself reflecting a complex underlying series of relationships), but the same image in a gallery might attract an entirely different kudos relative to its declared status as a singular example of individual photographic practice.

And this alerts us to a further problem in the way we understand a photograph; the shifting distinction between its function as an image and its assumed value. In many ways those photographs deemed to have the most value are the least functional, and vice versa. Photographs are placed in categories (or genres) which further codify their terms of reference and status. An 'art' photograph involves an entirely different set of assumptions from a 'documentary' photograph; all part of the complex web of interrelationships within which any photograph is suspended. The extent to which so much photographic practice has been haunted in its development by what has been termed 'the ghost of painting' is crucial, for photography established, from the outset, genres and hierarchies of significance related to painting. It institutionalized the artistic and professional aspects of its meaning in

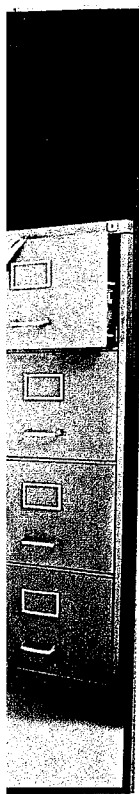


terms of an academic tradition. For example, the Photographic Society (later the *Royal* Photographic Society) was founded as early as 1853 in London, dedicated to promoting the idea of photography as a fine art.

But against this sense of the actual and the literal has always existed a powerful vocabulary, most associated with 'art photography', which insists on the medium's capacity to express something beyond the surface appearance of things. The photograph mirrors back not a literal but a super- or spiritual reality. In this mythology of creative sight the photograph allows us to see what we would otherwise not see. The camera becomes an artificial eye which, through the creative 'lens' of the photographer, probes the world in an act of revelation. A

literary record is transformed into a mere transcendence. The history of photography and the language of photographers have no reference. Paul Strand, for example, a poet (who was called a 'seer'), spoke of the nature of things while Edward Weston talked of its capture. Perhaps Siegfried, comprehensively when he declared that in its ability 'to open up new, hitherto unimagined reality'. Thus, 'photographs do not just copy reality' . . . —the use of the word 'metamorphosis'. The photograph, in this sense, is the very opposite of what Baudelaire's disparagingly called 'the capacity for reflecting no more than the surface'. This Wordsworthian (even Ruskinian) notion of insight over sight. A language of the surface. The photographer, like the poet,

First, we need to be aware that the photograph is very much dependent upon the original. It has the potential to be enlarged as far as the image is only relative, in its immediate representation. Size is thus part of a character and status, but it is also an aspect of larger aesthetics of representation, especially the first decade after the 'invention' of portrait miniatures virtually disappeared with the new technology. At the other extreme is Victor Burgin's (1941-) *Office at Night*, 183 x 244 cm. It is an enormous photograph, which establishes parallels with the grand tradition of portraiture, suggesting the grandiose and the epic. It may be more banal than an office at night, but it establishes parallels (especially with Edward Hopper's work) which we should read it, as a visual essay on modern urban life. In a similar way, the 'surreal' photographs of the 1930s and 1940s, which are often seen as a continuation of the tradition of the 'surreal' painting, are also a visual essay on the modern urban life. The 'surreal' photographs of the 1930s and 1940s, which are often seen as a continuation of the tradition of the 'surreal' painting, are also a visual essay on the modern urban life.



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literal record is transformed into a metaphysical moment of fixed transcendence. The history of photography is full of such attempts, and the language of photographers littered with such terms of reference. Paul Strand, for example, a supporter of Alfred Stieglitz (who was called a 'seer'), spoke of the camera's 'intensity of vision', while Edward Weston talked of its capacity for 'looking deeply into the nature of things'. Perhaps Siegfried Kracauer defined this comprehensively when he declared that 'the power of the medium' lay in its ability 'to open up new, hitherto unsuspected dimensions of reality'. Thus, 'photographs do not just copy nature but metamorphose it . . .'—the use of the word 'metamorphose' is fundamental, for the photograph, in this sense, is the very opposite of a literal record. Rather than endorse Baudelaire's disparaging remarks about its limited capacity for reflecting no more than the superficial aspect of things, this Wordsworthian (even Ruskinian) perspective mythicizes the notion of insight over sight. A language of depth replaces that of surface. The photographer, like the poet, 'sees into the life of things'.

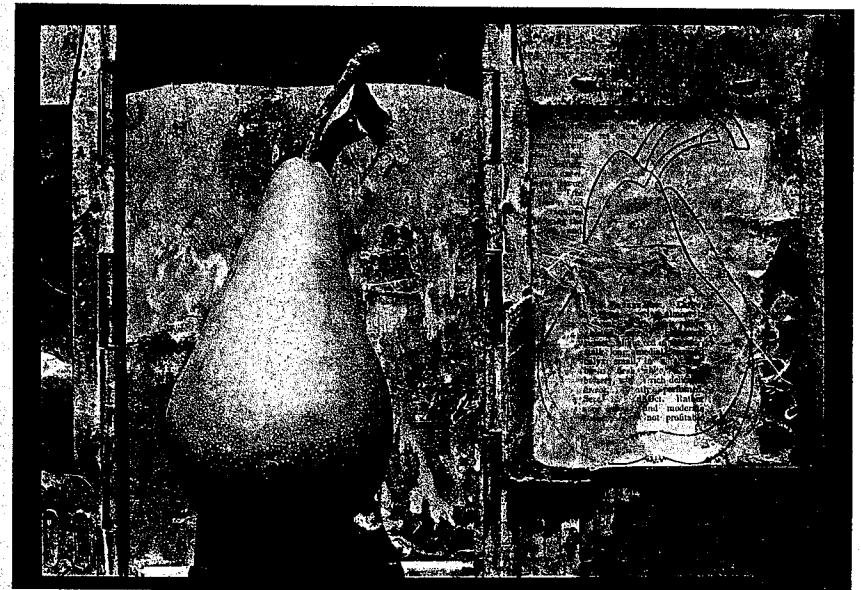
These two extremes—of surface and depth—add to the way in which the photograph exists amidst paradox, and qualifies, once again, its status as image and object as well as the way its meaning is sanctioned within complicating aesthetic, cultural, and ideological contexts. The photograph has a multiple existence which informs its multiple meanings. Its seeming simplicity of form and function belies an implicit problematic of sight and representation. I want to look briefly at six aspects related to this problematic which, although basic, remain part of what we might call the hidden structure of photographic definition and discourse.

First, we need to be aware that both the efficacy and effect of a photograph is very much dependent upon its size. Any negative image has the potential to be enlarged as far as technology will allow, so that the image is only relative, in its immediate form, to its other spatial representation. Size is thus part of a changing and ambiguous function and status, but it is also an aspect of the medium's history within a larger aesthetics of representation, especially in relation to painting. In the first decade after the 'invention' of the photograph the painting of portrait miniatures virtually disappeared as an art form, displaced by the new technology. At the other extreme we have something like Victor Burgin's (1941–) *Office at Night, No. 1* (1986) [5], which measures 183 × 244 cm. It is an enormous photograph and clearly uses its size to establish parallels with the grand tradition of European painting, suggesting the grandiose and the epic. And yet, as a subject, what could be more banal than an office at night? Its iconography and painterly parallels (especially with Edward Hopper), however, alert us to the way we should read it, as a visual essay on the meaning of contemporary urban life. In a similar way, the 'snapshot' has a standard mass-

produced size, redolent, perhaps, of its assumed 'everyday' significance. When we go on to select particular photographs to be enlarged, we thus underscore their difference and value.

The size of a photograph, moreover, alerts us to the way in which the photograph, in itself, frames space. We might frame a photograph, but equally we use the photograph to control and order what is before the eye. And much of this, once again, relates to the language of painting. The two dominant terms for the frame of photographs, for example, are 'portrait' (vertical) and 'landscape' (horizontal): the space of a photograph has been divided between two painterly genres; both emblematic of the way we situate ourselves *in* space and organize that space according to aesthetic and cultural principles. However, the polaroid camera produces a square format, with a very different effect—the American photographer Diane Arbus was to use such a frame as central to her portraits of New York individuals. The square format of her images suggested a voyeurism and immediacy often associated with the polaroid format, as well as making the entire space of the photograph of equal significance. Of course professional photographers will crop and enlarge at will, but we need to remember how standardized the act of framing is and how it represents a cultural (and ideological) way of shaping the world. Even when, in the nineteenth century, a variety of shapes of prints were used (the stereoscope, for example, or the circular Kodak print), photography did not deviate from the principles of Renaissance perspective and centring embedded in the history of painting.

The size and shape of the photograph, then, reflects a larger structure of aesthetics and sight, and of the way we order our world. The very act of focusing implies an element of choice, a hierarchy of significance itself reflecting other assumptions and other values: the conventions of the dominant ideology. And yet, if the photograph gives credence to one frame of reference, so it makes invisible, indeed discards, everything which surrounds the chosen subject at the moment of taking the image. We can, as it were, never go outside the frame of the photograph. In that, at least, it has absolute control. And just as the photograph cuts into the space of the subject, so it alters the scale of that which it records. Invariably it reflects the world it observes according to the principles of one-point perspective, but it does so in terms of the world in *miniature*. The photograph is always reductive. If Burgin's image is virtually life-size, it self-consciously draws attention to the very question of size, and the problematics of representation. Any sense of a photograph's 'realism' has to be qualified in terms of the size of the image at which we look. Entire cities are reduced to an image of 6 × 4 inches: part of the medium's alchemy of power and possession. We can go no further than what the photograph allows us to 'see'. It thus reflects a continuous process of selection, editing, and



6 Olivia Parker

Bosc, 1977

Bosc, a relatively small image, is a wonderful example of the way a photograph can establish a play of possible meanings in terms of both the eye and the intellect. The image is full of visual puns, conundrums, and ambiguity. It saturates itself with questions concerning the real, the abstract, and the conceptual. Its surface complexity is akin to the cubist still-lives of Braque and Picasso.

control; the replication, not so much of an objective reality, as of a subject framed by a set of ideological assumptions and values.

The surface of a photograph might be matt or glossy, but it is always *flat*. The obvious nature of the point belies the implications for the photograph as a form of representation. The three-dimensional illusion it offers is based on the uninterrupted expansion of a flat surface which, unlike a painting, does not draw attention to itself. Indeed, the photograph 'buries' its surface appearance, in favour of the illusion of depth and the promise of the actual. We assume that we can look into a photographic space, but we only look over and across it. We can never enter a photograph's 'depth'. Roland Barthes rightly complained about the frustration involved in the misplaced assumption that the closer we look at a photograph, the more we see.

The traditional *canon* of photography largely eschews colour, so that we are faced with the paradox of photography's 'realism' being communicated in black and white. It drains the world of colour, representing another way in which the 'realism' of photography is part of a structure of illusion to which we accede. The most obvious aspect of this remains the traditional 'documentary' image, where the presence of colour actually lessens the sense of the photograph's veracity as an image and witness. We equate black-and-white photographs with 'realism' and the authentic. Colour remains suspect. There were colour (and tinting) processes available as early as the

nineteenth century, but colour failed to establish itself as a viable alternative to black and white until the introduction of Kodacolor film in 1942. Colour photographs remain problematic. They are central to the snapshot, but are still invariably rejected by the professional and art photographer who will use colour only in a deliberate and self-conscious way: either to draw attention to the medium, or to imply a statement about the subject. Thus, rather than adding to a photograph's 'realism', colour invariably detracts from it and reflects the act of interpretation rather than of recording. Since the 1970s, certainly, the use of colour has formed part of a critical, not a representational vocabulary.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, a photograph fixes a moment in *time*. Although, as we have seen, the exposure of the image has varied historically from hours down to fractions of a second, so the assumed speed of a camera has added to the mythology of the photograph's 'truthfulness': the record of what happened *at that moment*. But the language of capturing (most obviously reflected in Eadweard Muybridge's visual experiments for the recording of motion) must equally be placed in a cultural context. Although, as Hubert Damisch states, the photograph offers 'the trace of an object or a scene from the real world', it does so only in so far as 'it isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum'.⁷ Thus another paradox, for we look at a photograph as recording time, as a historical record, whereas invariably it stops time and, in turn, takes its subject *out* of history. Every photograph, in that sense, has no before or after: it represents only the moment of its own making.

I want to look briefly at one image by a contemporary American photographer, Olivia Parker (1941–) for it suggests how the aspects I have isolated conspire, as it were, to resist definition. Originally a painter, Parker approaches her work very much in the context of painterly representation. Thus, she is as much concerned with the act of seeing as with what is seen. 'Knowing', in this sense, is basic. And *Bosc* (1977) is an exemplary image in this context [6]. A pear has been photographed against a series of what one assumes to be small wooden structures. There is a 'pear' on the left, while on the right there is part of a written text and, over this, the outline of what we take to be a 'pear' (or 'pair of pears'). The overall surface effect is of different areas of light and texture, of depth and contrast, so that there is a wonderfully rich surface texture which promises other meanings and possibilities. Again, each area of the image is of equal significance. The eye has no point of rest, even though, ironically, we might describe this as a 'still life'. The dense resonance (a thickness of meaning rather than of surface) means that any reading of the image is relative to where the eye comes to rest within the photographic space.

But this is also an image about photographic meaning, an essay on

the capacity of the photograph to both reveal and conceal its meanings. It asks, in one sense, not only what we look at and how we look, but how a photograph encodes the 'real'. In other words, it asks what a photograph *is*. Thus, the pear is reconstituted, and referred to other contexts and meanings. The obvious subject-matter is rendered problematic, and the question of definition becomes basic. In essence, what Parker's image suggests is that the photograph, far from being a literal or mirror image of the world, is an endlessly deceptive form of representation. As an object it announces its presence, but resists definition. It is, in the end, a sealed world to which we *bring* meaning; a complex play of presence and absence. But it is also part of a dead world. Again, as Barthes insisted, whenever we look at a photograph we look at something which no longer exists.⁸ The moment has passed. It replicates what we have lost, and in one sense suggests a deep psychological need to record, retain, and to classify the world of our actions. If the photograph is 'light-writing', it is also our signature on that world. It is not so much photography 'that evades us' as the world we would capture on film. Hence photography's power and fascination, and hence too its complexity. For if the photograph depends on light, it also depends on dark, and what falls between, as T. S. Eliot reminded us is, of course, the shadow. The photograph is a distinctive cultural product which reflects a culture's way with the world. As a means of possession it may be no accident that its rise and popularity was related to particular cultures. As a means of representation, it says as much about the world it 'mirrors' as it does about the world which produced the images in the first place.

