The Object Lost and Found

I. PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography was, from the beginning, an interdisciplinary undertaking. Early practitioners brought together aesthetics, optics, and chemistry. French inventor Nicéphore Niépce took the first photograph. But only after inventing the *pyréolophore*, the world's first internal combustion engine. This new way of making images was first called "photography" by John Frederick William Herschel, a British mathematician, chemist, and astronomer. He named seven moons of Saturn and four moons of Uranus. And he named the snapshot. Although Hershel also first used the term "negative" in connection to photography, it was William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor and researcher of optics and light, who created a reproducible photographic process using the negative/positive method. Nearly all early pioneers of photography have biographies that sound, for example, like that of the British soldier, geologist, and inventor Levett Landon Boscawen Ibbetson. This catholic activity applied not only to photography's innovators, but also to some of its earliest fans: Queen Victoria was an amateur photographer and prominent intellectuals like Victor Hugo and Oliver Wendell Holmes advocated publicly for the medium.[1]

Photography has always borrowed liberally from other disciplines. Cameras have been used by artists since the sixteenth century and became standard equipment by the eighteenth century. The camera does not separate photography from other media. Only with the development of the physical object, the print, and its condition of reproducibility does photography begin to be conceived as a medium in and of itself and not simply an optical tool.[2] But as the early history of photography suggests, this sense of cohesion is illusory. There has never been a singular act or process, just *one* type of photography. Even early descriptions of photography are fraught with duality and an uneasy elusiveness. Talbot named it "the art of fixing a shadow."[3] Holmes called it "the mirror with a memory."[4]

Photography's field is defined by separate but interrelated artistic, commercial, and vernacular uses. These are immensely varied and, because of photography's direct relationship with technology, they are constantly shifting with innovation. The ubiquity of images and imaging devices has become overly familiar as a concept, but how that pervasiveness shapes practical reality, both physically and ideologically, is only beginning to be understood. The ranges of imaging technologies that we use to see the world "includes everything from 'art' photography to iPhone snapshots, from MRI scans to the infrared eyes of CIA Predator drones, and from surveillance cameras attached to facial-recognition software to minoritarian documentary practices from Rodney King to Abu Ghraib."[5]

Because photography is thoroughly and visibly connected to technological apparatus, and because that technology is constantly changing—and presently in the midst of a period of epochal change—ontological discussions of the medium have proliferated. Recent institutionally and independently organized projects have interestingly engaged the question of what photography is. Surveying them broadly, however, there is a noticeable frustration on the part of artists, curators, and critics with these essentializing discussions. The instability of all media, and particularly of photography, leads to a reactionary discursive framing around ideas of ontology and crisis. But we understand media as being distinct based on the collision of technology and application.[6] Media are defined simultaneously by their tools and what is done with those tools. The conventions that develop around this interaction are what make a medium legible as such.

It is useful here to think of the term "medium" itself, as it implies an intervening, in-between stage: a translational space. Institutions like the academy and the museum are invested in delimiting this space, and a

continuous shifting—between adherence to convention on the one hand and new relations between technology and use on the other—creates a perceived crisis. In the interest of self-justification and self-preservation, "photography becomes, in this instance, a way to name this institutional anxiety, and any perceived crisis is really that of the disciplinary structures applied to it."[7] These disciplinary structures are formed by the categorization and taxonomy that defines art history, which molds institutions from their outlook to their departmental structure to their framing of critical discussions. The crisis, then, is abstract, cartographic, revolving around the demarcation of territory. This is photography. That is not photography.[8] As photographic practice had been historically excluded from fine-art discourses—that is to say, even well after photography had staked a claim for its place within the institution, it was often treated as a separate discussion, both by institutions and photographers—its sense as a medium became strengthened by a discursive isolation.

In taking stock of photographic activity within the field of contemporary art, it seems that any framing of the present should depend on the practices of the artists themselves. And if attempts to define photography ontologically are not only futile, but also wholly insufficient for understanding actual artistic practice, then we need a more elastic way of approaching and articulating photography. Instead of delineating photography philosophically, it seems more productive to, as Charlotte Cotton puts it, "unpack and engagingly narrate photography's pluralism in ways that feel absolutely relevant to contemporary eyes."[9] We must engage its multiplicity and its greater social reality, and a discussion around crisis is ill-equipped for this. But if it bleeds, it leads, and historically criticism has rehearsed death narratives for just about everything. Roland Barthes, André Bazin, Walter Benjamin, Christian Metz, and Susan Sontag all saw photography as an abstraction of death.

Anxiety is a through-line in this cycle of endgame narratives, and these examples suggest that anxiety has always been part of the relationship between criticism and photography.[10] But instead of searching for some kind of atavistic truth within photography as a medium, artists are instead breaking down this compartmentalized, taxonomic, institutionally informed way of thinking about photography. During a recent panel discussion, Walead Beshty joked about the distinctions drawn between certain photographic practices, drawing an analogy between making these divisions and saying, "I don't like art painting, but I like painting."[11] There is not necessarily a choice to be made between being an artist or being a photographer, as those distinctions are largely historical and discursive. In most cases, Beshty argued, asserting the position "photographer" tends to close off a set of conversations more than it opens them up. As he wondered aloud, "Is Martin Puryear a carpenter?"[12]

II. ANXIETY

Photography has always had strong ties, both in terms of implementation and technological innovation, to spheres that produce anxiety or reflect it back to us. To begin with, its language is violent. Shooting frames, capturing images, bombarding the world with pictures. Dodge and burn. Crop. Some of the earliest photographic taxonomies were produced to catalogue the facial features of criminals, with the intent of creating a reliable method of visual detection. Today, people fret over full-body scanners employed by airport security. The histories of war and cinema are fatally intertwined.[13] From spirit photographers to UFO enthusiasts, photography has long been a physical link to the paranormal. In Voodoo, the belief that any similar-looking object can create a powerful link to its mirror creates a special place for photographic images in spells or curses.

Photography both seduces and unsettles by surpassing the limits of human perception. Early stroboscopic experiments at MIT attempted to reveal and arrest phenomena that are seen, felt, and experienced, but remain invisible without the aid of photography.[14] Here an ostensibly rational scientific application of photography results in a "strange sense of suspension, of being caught between things."[15] It is worth noting that stroboscopic technology enabled the first photograph of a nuclear explosion, and later the technology was altered to help trigger atomic bombs themselves.[16] Photographic vision surrounds us like a fog, seeping into all of the physical spaces of our existence and showing us things we are not supposed to see, both in between and inside. Three-dimensional X-ray technology allows doctors to see broken bones in the round and make new versions of them. Belgian artist Kris Martin used this technology to create a perfect bronze

replica of his skull, an impossible reminder of his own mortality made tangible and visible, as the work's title notes, while he is *Still Alive* (2005).[17]

Popular culture also registers an overflowing of anxiety with photography. A quick list of notable films from the past four decades includes Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*(1966), where a fashion photographer begins to realize that he accidently photographed a murder—the dark side of Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. In Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976), a photographer begins to notice unexplained marks on photographs he takes of people that foreshadow their subsequent deaths. The protagonist in Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985) first notices the impending reversal of his own existence when he sees himself fading out of a family snapshot. The frenetic uneasiness in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) stems from photographs used as a literal and deeply flawed replacement for memory as an anterograde amnesiac depends on them in the search for his wife's killer. Scientists have called the (mis)use of photographs as memory surrogates in Memento "the most accurate portrayal of the different memory systems in the popular media"[18] and "close to a perfect exploration of the neurobiology of memory."[19]

Crazy Horse, the Native American war leader of the Oglala Lakota, strictly forbade his picture being taken, fearing that the capture of his image would mean certain death. For entirely different reasons the artist Stanley Brouwn refuses to let himself or his work be photographed or reproduced. Ian Wilson similarly refuses that his speech-based works be photographed or recorded. More recently, much has been made about the prohibitions artist Tino Sehgal places on the documentation of his work in any manner. The mechanisms of desire are crucially implicated in this gesture. As critic Ben Davis notes, the prohibition

is about denying spectators a mode of relating to their own experience, and, presumably, maintaining the author's monopoly on how it is experienced. The urge and ability to photograph is so all-pervasive that Sehgal's prohibition on pictures really can only be another arbitrary restraint to intensify his visitors' desire for his work: a pair of velvet handcuffs; a chastity belt.[20]

Any discussion of anxiety within and around photography must contend with desire. Not desire depicted in photographs, nor the desirous gazes they reveal, though an understanding of those mechanisms can and should inform our interpretation of photographs. Instead of defining desire by parsing out the various types operating within photographic images, desire should be thought of as a more general question: What do you want from me? As Jean-Louis Gault explains:

To my question about your desire: "What do you want from me?", you can answer pointing at something and say: "I want that." But do you really want "that" or do you want something else beyond what you answer to me? So, here is a new question, to which you could give a more precise answer, and so on after the second answer and a new question. That impossibility to give an ultimate answer to the question about desire maintains desire as a question. That question without answer is the cause of anxiety.[21]

Photography's anxiety stems from the fact that photography becomes this question without answer. A photograph needs to be completed. It is designed to be taken in.22 It is motivated. That question without answer can be reframed as "what does the picture require in order for you to understand it, to fulfill it . . . in order for it to do the work it was designed to do?"[23] While this condition can be ascribed broadly to representational media—Plato relates that Socrates, in his dialogue with Phaedrus, described the unfortunate quality of writing and painting to "preserve a solemn silence"—it is particularly acute within photography.[24] In his so-called "aporetic" dialogues, Plato introduces Meno's paradox (often called the learner's paradox), a logically valid string of deductions that "proves" that it is impossible to learn anything. But for Plato, rather than inducing paralysis, the learner's paradox induces aporia, a paradox of meaning, which in this case has a cleansing effect for the questioner. The uneasiness of the paradox replaces the comfort of thinking one knows something with a desire to investigate further, creating a productive condition. Anne Ellegood, in her text for this catalogue, cites paradox as perhaps the defining aspect of photography throughout its history and fertile ground for many artists working today.

So even when we think we know the answer to the question posed by the photograph, it is always only partial. One reason for this is photography's polysemy. Photographs have an innate ability to have their

contexts radically shifted and still retain their legibility. This, as Kate Bush puts it, is "the promiscuity and elasticity of photography."[25] Because images can exist in multiple places, they do not sit comfortably within any of them. This uncertainty only exacerbates the problem of approaching a photograph, of answering the question "What do you want from me?", because we are not sure who "you" is.

Photography's relationship to time also makes answering this question quite difficult. In the first place, this relationship is overwhelmingly imagined in relationship to death. André Bazin compared it to embalming the dead.[26] After the death of his mother, Roland Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida*. In it, he describes viewing a photograph as "enter[ing] into *flat Death*,"[27] as photographs show us both what once was and what no longer is at the same time. He concludes that "every photograph is a catastrophe."[28] Shortly after it was published, he died in a car accident. For Susan Sontag, photographs "state the innocence, the vulnerability, of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people."[29] And Christian Metz describes the encounter with photography in more violent terms, saying "the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time."[30]

It is about time. We are always pushed by its current, and if a photograph freezes time, our relationship to every image changes accordingly. The constant tension between fixity and fluidity that is always embodied in photography produces a fundamental anxiety. It seems fitting that in 1882, with the intention of an ever-fine arresting of time, Étienne-Jules Marey invented a chronophotographic gun, with a rotating glass plate, capable of shooting twelve frames per second. This violent metaphor rings out in a device that collides the two factors that continually shift photography's rug from beneath our feet: technology and time.

It is in this act of capturing time that Stephen Shore locates the photograph's ability to enunciate, noting that "as this flow is interrupted by the photograph, a new meaning, a photographic meaning, is delineated."[31] But instead of thinking of fixed and fluid as an on-off switch, it might be more useful to think of those states as having a more dynamic relationship. The speculative fiction writer Stephen R. Donaldson conceives of order as organized or frozen chaos and likewise chaos as a fluid state of order.[32] This metaphor is apt here for two reasons. First, because this dance between chaos and order is inherently anxiety producing and feeling unsettled along this continuum is the root of a number of mental illnesses, like obsessive-compulsive disorder. And second, because this model hints at a stored energy, a potential, that exists at every point. Within this framework, photography's capacity to create meaning exists as it balances these two poles, finding a middle point between their tensions that is rich and dynamic. In Donaldson's view, "chaos is a more subtle and perhaps more essential form of order."[33]

A closer examination of photography's complex struggle between arrest and motion can be framed by looking at a film composed of still images, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). By stripping cinema of a seemingly essential quality, movement, but retaining the time-based structure of narrative montage, Marker overlays our experience of narrative time, this-is or this-will-be,[34] with an even sharper sense of what Roland Barthes describes as the peculiar way a photograph registers the past: as a simultaneous indication of this-has-been and this-is-no-more.[35] The film makes us sharply aware of this uneasy coexistence of time senses, producing an anxiety through the very "'photographicity' [of the] image—a triangulation of reality, past, and death."[36] The images, no longer relying on movement to convey a sense of time, begin to *produce* time through their interrelation.

Marker's *photo-roman*, as it is called in the work's opening credits, is a science fiction film about time travel. Set in postapocalyptic Paris, the story centers around a man, the narrator mentions, who is haunted by an image from his past: an obsessive memory of a death he witnessed as a child, on a boarding platform at the airport, and a woman he saw just before it took place. He is doubly a prisoner, beholden to this image and incarcerated underground, fittingly, in the galleries of the Palais de Chaillot. Scientists at the prison impress the man into time-travel research, attempting "to send emissaries into Time, to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present."[37] When he completes his mission, he learns that he is scheduled to be executed. He flees to the past to find the woman, meeting her at the airport. But he is followed, and he is killed. In his final moments, "he understood there was no way to escape Time, and that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death."[38]

The collapse of time in the work—of photography and cinema, of past and future—are set at further remove when the work reveals its own making. In some shots, reflected light is clearly visible on the photograph's surface, tipping the construction-in-studio. Crucial to our understanding of this gesture is Marker's stubborn refusal to identify as an artist, on which he elaborates, "I'm a cobbler . . . I think I'll stick to cobbling, with all that's inherently honorable in artisanal undertakings."[39] He insists on the mark of the handmade, of the fabrication before the camera, of the mediating presence of lights and the camera itself. His answer to the question "Have you never considered yourself a filmmaker": Ne-ver.[40] Perhaps Marker, too, has a photophobia. When asked for pictures of himself, he sends images of his cat, Guillaume, instead.[41]

III. PULL IT DOWN OR BURN IT UP

As artist Victor Burgin writes in *Looking at Photographs*, "The daily instrumentality of photographs is clear enough: to sell, inform, record, delight. Clear, but only to the point at which photographic representations lose themselves in the world they create."[42] In thinking about everyday encounters with images in the real world they help shape, unpacking the actual experience of photography helps to understand how those conditions shape our understanding of images. Photography reaches us in a fundamentally different way than we reach its two closest artistic analogues: painting and cinema. The viewing of a painting or a film is an intentional act, where photographs "have no special space and time allotted to them . . . photographs are received rather as an environment."[43]

Photography has never been more available than it is today. Some 307,006,550 people live in the United States.[44] According to a recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 82% of adult Americans own a mobile phone, and of those 76% use their phones, on average more than once a day, to take a photograph.[45] Mashing those numbers together provides a rough but conservative estimate of the number of mobile-phone photos taken each day in America: 191,326,482.

Approximately 54% of adults have used their mobile device to send someone a photo, which means that 135,942,500 Americans have gone as far as distributing a photo they have taken. And 15% have posted a photo online, so at least 37,761,805 have published in some form.[46] As one would expect, these trends are even more pronounced among younger adults, as 93% of 18–29 year olds use their phone to take pictures, and 81% send photos to others. Among 30–49 year olds, 83% use their phone to take pictures, a 12-point increase from 2009.[47]

Though these numbers are only measuring the habits of mobile-phone users and fail to take into account the large amount of digital images created on a daily basis in other contexts, they reveal a tremendous upswell not only in the sheer amount of participation in the act of taking photographs, but more direct participation in image culture through thoroughly available dissemination and publication. We gain a tremendous facility with photography that is conditioned by environment and participation, passive and active experience.

This facility is often internalized, preconscious, and applied automatically as we sift through sensory data. Victor Burgin uses the analogy of piecing together a puzzle photograph, and the shift that occurs at the moment of recognition:

Once we have discovered what the depicted object is however, the photograph is instantly transformed for us—no longer a confusing conglomerate of light and dark tones, of uncertain edges and ambivalent volumes, it now shows a "thing" which we invest with a full identity, a being. With most photographs we see, this decoding and investiture takes place instantaneously, unselfconsciously, "naturally"; but it does take place.[48]

We project a coherence into the photograph. A semifiction and half-truth. A mental image graft on to a visual one. An act of naming. And we get very good at it, because we do it over and over. Photographic images, in many of their iterations, are not meant to be looked at for very long. So our speed in recognition, in naming, comes from the necessity of processing images quickly and the practice of repetition. We reflexively begin to internalize photographic relationships. But, as Burgin points out, "this structure of representation—point-of-view and frame—is intimately implicated in the reproduction of ideology (the 'frame of mind' of our 'points-of-

view').”[49] What ideologies do we soak up when exposed to technologies that not only greatly expand photography's plasticity and make reproduction and distribution instantaneous, but also enable deep surveillance and remote war?

The means with which we produce, distribute, and experience photographic images are undergoing the first truly radical transformation since Talbot's invention of the negative/positive process. Still written with light, the digital photograph no longer requires the intermediaries of negative and print to view the image in a material form.[50] By distancing us from a physically rich photographic object, the digital image refocuses our attention on its content. Screen space is more or less standard in size and format and narrow in tonal range, equalizing photographic images. In essence, our physical experience with images has been shifted to screen spaces that trade variation and material intrigue for flexibility and portability. When our primary experience of images is digital, we lose a sense of context in favor of a flattened, attenuated focus on content.

As manifestations of images transition to digital, and our vernacular experience shifts from analog photography and print to digital camera and screen, it seems natural that artists invested in photography are widely exploring its changing materiality. Often materiality is formally embedded within the work—in assemblages and constructions made to be photographed and placed in front of the camera. Sometimes it is reflected in the manner in which the work is printed or displayed. In recent exhibitions and critical writing (assessing ostensibly more formally oriented work, especially abstract photography), these interests are all too commonly situated as nostalgic yearnings for earlier moments in photography's history during chemical photography's supposed sunset. Nostalgia is certainly present, but along with romanticism it has been recovered throughout contemporary art in recent years after being repressed in much of the work of the 1980s and 1990s. So its operation must be placed within a broader context, as must our approach to photography's materiality. That we are in the midst of seismic change is clear, but if we are going to speak of loss, it takes time and reflection to understand just what we might lack. We are still figuring out what this transition might mean, still developing a language for how to talk about what digital technologies really change.

Digital photography still operates, by and large, as a simulation of older technology. Just as we must understand the invention of photography within the larger framework of industrialization, we should be sensitive to digital photography's place within a broader process of digitization, one that began in the late 1970s and persists today. Proclamations about digital technology ending photography as we know it, or obliterating its material presence, are beginning to feel a bit like Charles Baudelaire's fears about photography destroying artistic genius—he refers to Daguerre as the messiah of a vengeful God[51]—or Oliver Wendell Holmes's worry that the mere availability of pictures of far away places would end travel. Holmes's worry about profusion and distribution feels incredibly relevant at present, as does his retrospectively preposterous assertion. Addressing photography's relationship to the material world, Holmes writes, “Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please.”[52]

IV. MATERIALITY

Welling up across contemporary art of the last decade has been a renewed interest in objects and materiality. This notion has been explored in some depth with sculptural practices, and it is worth looking at how they situate two specific ways of relating to objects: making and collage. Some exhibitions have examined the ways in which artists have reintegrated the handmade into their practice, often through labor-intensive means. *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* identified how this careful positioning of craft alongside mass production creates a “quality of open-endedness wherein questions are posed and single meanings are denied . . . [a] sense of uncertainty.”[53] Helen Molesworth used this condition of being partly manufactured and partly man-made as a way of reimagining Duchamp's legacy on postwar sculpture in her exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture*. Another recent exhibition, Knight's Move, was partially framed around the questions “How can strategies of estrangement, appropriation, and abstraction exist alongside direct engagements with materiality, figuration, and storytelling? Can the makeshift, readymade, and precarious exist in dialog with the meticulous, obsessive, and finely crafted?”[54] These exhibitions grapple with an approach to making

objects that is polyvalent and multiple. Rarely, it seems, are things merely fabricated, or conversely, merely made in studio.

The notion of collage, as well, has been taken up, responding to a pieced-together quality of much recent sculpture and installation. Identifying contemporary sculpture that juxtaposes disparate objects for suggestive effect, the exhibition *Unmonumental* positioned collage within sculpture as a response to an "age of crumbling symbols and broken icons."[55,] The exhibition situates collage as a historical response to trauma and social upheaval and focuses on a certain set of more gestural collage practices: "fragmented forms, torn pictures and clashing sounds."[56] But these approaches can be placed within a more recent expanded notion of collage, pervasive within contemporary art, which involves the resituating of elements, not simply in new contexts, but in new relationships, in nuanced interactions that investigate materials, memory, and forms. In many ways, this describes the work of an artist like Carol Bove or Jason Dodge as readily as that of Mark Bradford or Gedi Sibony. Artists like Kris Martin, Trisha Donnelly, and Mark Manders, whose practices are deeply conceptual, use a refined, clean assemblage that is heavily invested in objects and their associative potential. Another element that unites the practices of these artists and differentiates their work from conceptually inflected readymades produced by, for example, Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, or the detached, ironizing installations of Cady Noland or Pruitt and Early, is a reinvestment of personal content.

In addition to a renewed interest in materiality, this expanded collage aesthetic and influx of the individual are reflected in recent photographic practice. All of these aspects of contemporary practice are connected in some way to the idea of appropriation. To unpack the term "appropriation" and what relevance it has for photographic practice, we should look at changing relationships with the subject and with authorship.

The realist photographers of the 1930s and 40s, most notably Walker Evans in the United States and August Sander in Germany, always played with their distance from subject matter, creating images that exhibit a clear tension between a frank, documentarian approach and a keen, earnest connection to the depicted object. This "oscillation between engagement and estrangement"[57] crops up in a variety of ways in the work of artists employing photography in the 1960s, including Bernd and Hilla Becher, Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, and Stephen Shore. In addition to artists beginning to incorporate photography into their practices, the profusion of photographic education that happened during the 1960s and continued on into the 1970s encouraged photographers to think outside of the medium and become "increasingly alert to the ideas, effects, and techniques that might be borrowed from one medium and persuaded to serve another."[58] Work became increasingly hybridized, and a number of photographers displayed "evidence that [they] had hands as well as eyes."[59] Engagement and estrangement become mapped onto the photographic object itself.

This obvious mixing of practices, and the hand of the photographer they implied, was accelerating just as a growing number of artists were interested in upsetting conventional notions of photographic authorship. Even in the work of the Bechers, for example, authorship was repressed, piled under the rules of typological investigation.[60] During this time, a second seismic shift in photographic education occurred. MFA programs began to incorporate photographic practice, and a generation of photographers participated in dialogues and, perhaps more importantly, pedagogical systems from which they were historically kept out.[61] And it is at this moment that French post-structuralist theory, especially Michel Foucault's critique of power and Roland Barthes writings on authorship, began to seriously penetrate the art academy.

For a number of photo-based artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman, it seems that "the only conceivable radical act was to acknowledge the impossibility of photographic originality, and to merely select and incorporate images that were already in circulation in wider culture."[62] If conceptual art used photography in part to question the necessity of the object, the pictures generation employed photography to question its own necessity, to investigate it as a system of representation. Photographic practices of the 1980s involved a redirection from one category, like advertising or cinema, into the realm of another, fine art. Transposition was favored over transformation. This fits into larger strategies of appropriation that treated found objects singularly as whole, realized entities. The slickness of the work reveals a detached, analytical relationship with the object and its referent.

Photography is an inherently analytic discipline.[63] But artists working with photography today seem less interested in making photographs *about* than photographs *that*, less interested in what a photograph *is* than in what it can be, what it *does*. As artist Carter Mull has suggested, "the dynamic between a sense of materiality on the one hand, and an awareness of how images relate to other images (historical, commercial, or contemporary) on another, is what characterizes a strong facet of contemporary photographic practice."[64]

In more recent photographic practice, the source of images, both found and "original," is downplayed within the work. The German philosopher Gottlob Frege's distinction between a sign's sense and its reference is helpful in understanding the qualities or attitudes of a reference, the way a sign regards its object. The reference is the definite and agreeable thing toward which a sign points. The sense is *how* it points. To say that a photograph is a depiction of a clown is to name its reference. To say that a photograph is an ironic depiction of a clown is to invoke that sign's sense. Within this framework, the pictures generation seems, in retrospect, to have been heavily invested in the reference, while artists today are widely exploring the sense.

Appropriation has ceased to have a critical function or reading in and of itself. It is a given, a condition many young artists were born into (or after). The term appropriation itself connotes an aggressiveness or hijacking of imagery that simply does not conform to the complex, intermixed, sometimes conflicted ways that artists are using existing imagery today. Borrowed images coexist with photographs taken by the artist; images produced in a commercial context are reused within the artist's studio. According to Kate Bush, these practices are "post-appropriative" in the sense that they recognize "the impossibility of absolute originality while still investing in photographic authorship."[65] The term post-appropriative gives pause because of the way it privileges appropriation as a historical trajectory. But it is useful in acknowledging "photography as something that is fluid" and for thinking about the way that not just images, but entire image-making contexts can be appropriated.[66] And it seems absolutely connected to the ways in which the reuse of existing materials have fundamentally changed in both artistic practices and larger cultural practices in recent years.

If advances in digital technology have inspired anything, they have contributed to a more self-reliant and direct relationship to production—a "maker" culture—which expands beyond repurposing digital media to cobbling together open-source software and hardware, hacking consumer electronics, and creating other functional devices like clothing and home décor all from information shared freely online. Drawing from the DIY ethos of subcultures as disparate as punks, hippies, and computer programmers, maker culture reflects people's growing inclination to understand how the objects in their world work, and how they can be altered. Although enabled by digital technology and the free and open sharing that makes this kind of collective development possible, maker culture encourages a much more direct and active physical relationship with our objects and devices.

Photography was born at the intersection of the laboratory and the studio, and it has returned there again. Even while attempting to capture nature, to penetrate the outside world, photography's innovators were tied inside. The desire to accurately depict clouds in the sky, for example, made difficult by the overlong exposure times, and other attempts at a more faithful reproduction of nature spurred the development of image manipulations like negative retouching, painting on the print, and combination printing.[67] In addition to being a chemist, Louis Daguerre was a painter, specializing in producing sets for the opera and for popular theater.[68] The earliest known daguerreotype, made in 1837, depicts the inside of Daguerre's studio, a detailed view of an arrangement of ornamental sculpture in the corner. The resurgence of sculptural materiality and the return of personal content within contemporary art reflect a commitment to studio practice. It is a return to the studio as a site of making, not simply a site of production. This immediacy and sense of the artist's investment in the object's making feels far from the arch production values that dominated much art of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and in photography specifically, the very large, very detached photographs of artists like Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer. The studio draws the artist into sustained relationships with material, be they fraught or meditative.

A touchstone for many artists working with photography today—a model not only for polymorphous production but also for focused studio work—is James Welling. One of the most striking aspects of Welling's output is the incredible diversity of his printing methods: photograms, traditional gelatin silver prints, Polaroids, and digitally processed prints.[69]That Welling's preoccupation with the photographic surface exists

in all of his work, and not simply his more well-known photograms or images of tinfoil, reveals a long-term and multilayered engagement with the photograph-as-object that has been taken up by a number of younger artists. Crucial to understanding Welling's influence is his intense focus on objects, a "double stress on simplicity and aestheticism"[70] that reveals materials not "merely or primarily as they are in themselves, but as they are revealed photographically, as they exist *within* photography or are made manifest *by* photography."[71] He cites *Lock*(1976), an elegant and deceptively simple photograph of a two-by-four leaning against the wall of his studio, as a foundational early work. His important early abstractions, like his photographs of diary pages, aluminum foil, or black velvet drapes strewn with shards of phyllo dough, are resolutely studio based. As Michael Fried notes, however, this diversity of output and attention has led some to view his art "as conducting a critique of photography rather than as mobilizing its resources."[72]

Artists working with photography are opening up and reassessing the very process and structure of making pictures. Their return to the (art) studio is accompanied by a profusion of still lives and portraits, genres most closely linked to the (photographic) studio. By running down the catalogue of photographic genres, techniques, and styles, artists "move through photography's own internal 'typologies' in a way that acknowledges the putative redundancy of the medium while simultaneously reclaiming a space for artistic maneuver."[73] Where transposition was a key artistic strategy of the 1980s, it was focused on the object. In the past decade it has been reinvigorated on the level of practice and process, an aspect of current artistic engagements with photography that is explored in Jenelle Porter's essay for this publication. Photography's fluidity can produce fundamental anxieties, but artists are intent on exploring the very possibilities for and limits of its plasticity.

Photography is full of closures. The iris, the shutter, the arrest of time, the myth of ontology. Whether conceiving of photography as a medium, a tool, an object, a practice, or some combination thereof, artists are opening it back up, playing with the photograph's three essential qualities: being flat, static, and bounded.[74] Artists are investigating just what a photographic object—and a photographic practice—can be, taking its aporia as a point of departure rather than a mark of crisis. They use the puzzlement the photograph so easily traffics to induce a more careful state of looking, a more open dive into pictures. They are fully mobilizing photography's resources.

NOTES

1 Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), 65.
2 Ibid., 11.
3 William Henry Fox Talbot, "The art of fixing a shadow," in *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing: Or, the Process by which Natural Objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil*, (London: R. and J. E. Taylor, 1839), unpaged.
4 Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 22.
5 Trevor Paglen, "Is Photography Over?" (participant statement, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 22, 2010), accessed February 7, 2011, http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over/.
6 For a thorough examination of the relationship of media, crisis, and institutional structure see Walead Beshty, "Is Photography Over?" (participant statement, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 22, 2010), accessed February 7, 2011, http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over/.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Charlotte Cotton, "Is Photography Over?" (participant statement, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 22, 2010), accessed February 7, 2011, http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over/.
10 If it seems that this has been particularly endemic in discussions about photography, there is perhaps an interesting counter-narrative suggested by George Baker, a history of photographic thought that engaged real-world crisis as a context for possibility. As he writes: "I think, for example, of Walter Benjamin predicting the rebirth of photography in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, of his hopes for a return to the forgotten potentials of the medium before its industrialization. I think, too, of Walker Evans announcing the 'reappearance' of photography around the same historical events. I think of Roland Barthes prioritizing similarly atavistic potentials of the medium at the moment of a later economic recession, that of the 1970s, which is also the moment immediately preceding the technological shift from the analog to the digital that we

have subsequently witnessed." George Baker, "Is Photography Over?" (participant statement, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 22, 2010), accessed February 7, 2011, http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over/.

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13 See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).

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15 Peter Eleey, "Thursday," in *The Quick and the Dead* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2009), 45.

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24 Plato, "Phaedrus," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Scribner, Amstrong, and Co., 1874), 581.

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27 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 92.

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29 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 70.

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