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At Arm's Length: The Critical Distance of Digital Photography

Abstract

Digital technology has presented a number of philosophical and ideological problems in relation to the contemporary experience of the photographic image. Many of these problems relate to the attempt to correlate reality with the visual image. Solutions to these problems however are continually blocked by the desire to look for answers within the image itself. Given the subtle, however important, relationship of the body to the production and experience of photography, it may prove more fruitful to focus on photography's physical nature rather than the exhausted visual aspect.

If we historically contextualise this seemingly incidental part of the photographic process, there appears to be a reduction in the physicality of the photographic process over time. At one end the camera obscura, an early drawing tool predating the conventional camera, which once required the user to be actually inside the device to use it, and at the other, a small digital device held at a distance from our face. The photographic act put at arm's length.

The physicality of our relationship with photography and with photographs is possibly the most important, but most overlooked element of the photographic process. For it is this aspect that allows us to relate to our physical past through photography. And digital imaging technology rather than add to this problem actually contributes to its solution.

Biography

Ashley Whamond is a current Master of Fine Art candidate at the University of Newcastle and also tutors in Art History/Theory there. He published the University's first online art magazine, *New Dentist* from 2000 – 2002 and is now working on a new version of the site.

Ashley is also Co-Director of Rocketart Gallery, an artist run initiative in Newcastle. In this position he is responsible for general management and curating of exhibitions. Rocketart Gallery has a focus of new and experimental artwork and is interested in facilitating the formation of artist networks, and intercity collaborations, with the hope of enriching the local experience for artists and the greater art community, and providing opportunities for artists from outside to show their work in Newcastle.

Ashley's Masters research is concerned with the changing role of photography in contemporary society and how this is processed in terms of personal experience and the body

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A theoretical discussion of photography has never been a straightforward task. In the face of the cynicism and suspicion of our age photography manages to maintain a persona of certainty. A certainty that is more a product of photography's monopoly on representation rather than any inherent truth. But today the former is as good as the latter; they are interchangeable. The degree to which advancements in photographic technology have been welcomed and absorbed by the happy-snapping public, is of worthy note in the task of identifying the kind of truth we require and what we expect from photography at this point in its history. The popularity photography has enjoyed as a result of its relationship to truth (real or imagined), is not driven by a manifestation of the obsessions of an ocular society, rather it is a physical requirement of the contemporary human experience. Truth in photography is not an issue of pure visuality but rather, operates in a complex relationship between technology, physicality (the body) and materiality (objects). The existing technological opposition aligns traditional photography with visual truth and digital photography with image manipulation and therefore falsehood. However, far from adding to this complexity, digital imaging technology effectively elucidates it.

Imaging technology can operate as a rich index of the level of sophistication technology as a whole has achieved to date, but also of the level to which it has infiltrated our daily lives. In order to understand this

more completely it may be useful to briefly retrace the major historical milestones in photographic technology. However rather than evaluate the resultant changes in visual culture, it is an analysis of the changes in physical, or bodily involvement in photography that proves most productive.

The origin of photography is popularly posited in the 17th century with the drawing apparatus called the camera obscura. This was essentially a darkened chamber with a small aperture in one wall that projected an inverted image on the opposite wall. The artist was then able to copy the image seemingly directly 'from nature'. With the weight and clarity of scientific research behind it, the camera obscura was instrumental in formulating the belief that knowledge is related directly to seeing, that objective truth is accessible not only through vision, but through visual representations. The images created through the use of the camera obscura were scientific, and therefore objective and true - a belief that has characterised and motivated all subsequent developments in photographic technology¹. In the late 20th century however, it is this belief that has spawned an array of philosophical, political and ideological problems that linger even in this century. One need only think back as recently as August 2001 and the 'children overboard' debacle, where the dogma of photography's veracity was instrumental in the Australian government's fabrication of the event. This common thread, that dates back four centuries, rests on the notion that the image is some kind of end point, the last word in a conversation, or that the finished image represents a finished reality. A crucial, though largely overlooked element in this process is the role of the body. Not however, the well scrutinised and critiqued *represented* body, but rather the physical body inhabiting and interacting with the physical world of objects, space and time. That is, an assumed body outside the image, a body that may or may not have experienced the photographed time first-hand.

The significance of the body in relation to the camera obscura is that the artist is required to be intimately connected to the apparatus, once, even to be inside the camera itself, in order for the image to be recorded. Such a private situation reveals itself as the ultimate in subjectivity, a subjectivity however that becomes elided by its technical status. This is the fulcrum of photography's historical problematic; by giving primacy to technology, its product, in this case the image, cannot help but assert its authority, if for no other reason than to validate the technology itself. Attention to the literal subjectivity of the camera obscura presents a corporeal lineage that accounts for not only the relatively recently acknowledged subjectivity inherent in photography, but also for the magic it possesses, for the spell it continues to hold over its users and viewers alike. A dialogue is initiated in the darkened cell of the camera obscura, where the artist witnesses the behaviour of light and records it through drawing. The subsequent product is a translation of light into image, of image into concrete picture, if we understand the 'image', as Bachelard explains it, to be purely a product of the imagination.² If the viewer then seeks to find in this image some truth of what it depicts the dialogue becomes blocked, but if they look at the image as a visual trace of the artist's experience of that light, in that time, the image suddenly transcends itself. It speaks of, and to, bodies outside its frame and outside its time. The time of the actual production of the image communicates with the time after it; it is a communication of temporality and corporeality, rather than one of visuality.

In an essay on drawing, it may be the marks made by the artist that are the main point of interest regarding the use of the camera obscura, but in the context of photography the role of mark-making is important only in its technical capacity as the method of recording the much more significant element of light. It is, after all, the play of light that creates the original image, and it is the determination of humanity to capture this image that has inspired the development of photographic technology. Concurrent with each transition in this development, the body can be seen to become gradually less physically involved in the photographic process. The invention of the camera lucida enabled its user the simultaneous viewing of the object and the drawing ground through the use of a prism. Roland Barthes found the camera lucida more useful in the task of locating a technical origin of photography than the camera obscura, so much so that he named his book of reflections on the medium after it. His reasoning draws a relationship between Blanchot's concept of the mysterious 'absence-as-presence' of the image, and the peculiar mode of vision the camera lucida introduces by creating a singular plane of representation where an utterly intangible image is created and fused with the ground it is to occupy³. This, he says through Blanchot, is what 'constitutes the essence of the image': that it is the locus of the photograph's impenetrability and fascination.⁴ Here Barthes identifies in the camera lucida, the next step in the evolution of the human desire to better control light for the

purpose of retaining its images. However, what Barthes offers as an alternative ‘technical origin’ for photography appears to be more an origin of the nature of our contemporary *experience* of photography. This is evident when compared with the actual technical details that the camera obscura bestowed upon the first photographic cameras, not least the dark cloak draped over the back of these cameras and the photographer so that he or she might better view the image on the ground-glass. Nevertheless, the legacy of both cameras obscura and lucida combine to eventually drive the body of the artist out of the dark and the photographic act becomes less physical and more mechanical.

The body’s movement out of and away from the camera culminates today in the digital camera’s position at the end of our arm, a new behaviour is initiated in direct response to a specific technology. As a result the existing primacy of technology is enforced, as is the inevitable emphasis on the finished image and the eradication of any remaining hint of subjectivity. This is however, the space in which the current problems of visual representation may be solved, through an ironically virtual ‘return to origins’. When photographic technology reached a point that enabled it to mechanically produce and reproduce images *as objects*, the problem of representation began in earnest. It is because photographs are objects themselves that they are so reluctant to *show* the truth of any other. The difficulty arises when the photograph’s image invites us to see just that. The qualitative and quantitative differences in the innumerable manifestations of photographic objects are obvious. Nobody would, for example, argue that such a formidable object as a Daguerreotype constitutes anything other than the antithesis of the ephemeral digital image inhabiting the truly virtual space of a tiny ‘memory card’ or hard drive. The problems of representation though, that are common to much photography, seem to reach a crescendo in the digital realm. However rather than confuse the situation, the unabashed dominance of subjectivity that digital imaging provides, locates and identifies precisely where these problems lie, or rather defines exactly the kind of truth we can obtain from the photograph. With the digital image, whether printed or viewed on screen, we no longer expect or even want to see truth. The truth is, we see what we want to see, but this is, of course, still *a* truth – a subjective truth.

In Barthes’ famous search for the essential truth of his mother in *Camera Lucida* there is a striking similarity between his approach to looking at his photographs and the digital photographer’s approach to the customisation of images. The fact that Barthes refuses to reproduce the photograph of his mother in which he finds the ‘essential truth’, reveals that this is indeed the most subjective of truths. What Barthes has effectively done is manipulate the image of a little girl whom he never knew into an image of the mother he did, in order to find the truth – his truth. In Barthes’ analysis of this truth a theme of physicality, or of an *essentially physical* rather than solely visual relationship to the photograph, becomes apparent. Barthes finds succinct expression of this physicality in a most influential association of the experience of the photograph with death. His motivation toward this association reveals a link within the photographic process between the viewer’s corporeality and that of the subject and even that of the photograph. The ‘essence’ that Barthes eventually finds, and the strange fascination that all photography elicits, relates to a tension created between the object that can never be fully grasped and the image that brings it within range. A tension that operates more on a physical level in the viewer and less on a visual level. The viewer experiences (however, subtly) the photograph as an object itself, but it is the painful (as in Barthes’ case) or at least curious physicality of *being in* the time of that object and *not* of that which it represents that informs photography’s unique experience. As a faint echo from the past, it is perhaps this quality of subtle corporeality that is the one element that remains true for all photographs. It is their very nature, after all, that they are about the past, in the present.⁵ By way of its perpetual stillness – the stillness of the object – and its insistence on life, or more precisely, on life past, the photograph becomes not a ‘still life’ but animated death. Or as Barthes has it, the photograph ‘produces Death while trying to preserve life’, and in turn it animates the viewer and is animated by the viewer.⁶ The one true thing in life is the one thing that not only retains its truth, but finds its proof, in the photograph. The photograph bears the weight of the viewer’s death by testifying to, rather than representing, life *‘that-has-been’*⁷.

It is apparent from the fact that the photograph exists at all, that there was *at least* the photographer’s body present at the time of its production. The photograph is less testimony to the body (or object) in front of the camera than to the body behind it. The body in front has the shortcoming of being a visual translation fused with another object. The body behind or outside the image however, is the body that is preserved in the

photograph, and this is not necessarily the body of the photographer. The photograph's foremost capacity as evidence of a play of light at a particular time, is also evidence of the existence of a general milieu of bodies, experiences and thoughts that are not represented in the image but rather linger outside it, in the physical world now gone, that is, in the imagination. Barthes describes this temporal corporeality of light as a 'sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.' Strangely, the image we see fixed on the photographic paper actually represents a negative space: through its insistence on the visual, it foregoes the physicality from which it was derived. Thus, if we reverse this process by insisting on the corporeal history associated with the photograph rather than a myth of visual truth and objectivity we are able to locate the essence of the photograph, its truth, and its magic.

What Barthes experienced in front of his photographs was a kind of blockage resulting from a conflict between their impenetrability and the fascination they command within them. It was only through a subjective cerebral manipulation of the image that Barthes was able to resolve the impasse. It is however the nature of this impasse that is of interest in a re-evaluation of traditional photography from the viewpoint of a digitally aware society. The materiality of the traditional photograph is the sole element that kept the physical reading of the photograph, as detailed above, at bay. Traditionally the photograph is an image-made-object and in terms of its power for conveying visual truth and testifying to personal history, it is its status as object, as much as its image, that makes this possible. This characteristic has been difficult to process until the emergence of the definite yardstick that digital technology has provided. It strips away the element of materiality from the photograph, and with it the blockage that the fixed image/object creates. With its emphasis on capabilities of manipulation, editing and selection, digital media privileges image over materiality. This represents a shift in how we experience photography and what we require from it. The perceptual shift to a digital way of seeing is largely directed by the increased control granted by imaging technology over how the image looks, overtly empowering personal taste (and no less, established pictorial conventions). However this is not at all far removed from how traditional photography has come to be seen to operate under the scrutiny of its theorists. The idea that the subjectivity of the photographer is inscribed onto the image is now played out on a practical level in digital photography. It appears that the need for photography to be objective has waned. This has occurred at a pace indexed to the advances in technology that have gradually transposed the nature of the photograph to become less and less object-like. It is only when the object disappears from the image that the sense of objectivity follows. By its nature of customisable immateriality, digital imaging emphasises the rigid materiality of traditional photography, but emphasises it as the assurance of objectivity.

Kodak's online Digital Learning Centre demonstrates exactly how much easier and innocuous it is to manipulate our images with digital media. At the 'DLC' we discover how we might aesthetically correct our family snapshots so as to avoid the closed eyes of a sleepy uncle and the grotesquely contorted tongue of the mischievous youngster, or just make them compositionally sound, by removing a bird or flagpole disrupting the picture⁸. These are all liberties that we are now able to exercise through the use of the most modern of technologies. The fact is though, that they are all liberties that the *artists* using the camera obscura also had when recording their light images. On the domestic level, image manipulation is now permitted and (commercially) encouraged, as it is in many other areas of photographic practice such as advertising, art photography, even in photographic competitions. Perhaps the only area that this has not occurred is in photojournalism, where image manipulation is punishable by dismissal.⁹ The ethics



departments of such organisations as the National Press Photographers Association in the United States, for example maintain what is becoming an anachronistic view that ‘the power of ... photographs comes from the fact they are real moments in time captured as they happened, unchanged. To change any detail in any of these photographs diminishes their power and turns them into lies.’¹⁰ But photographs themselves do not actually need to be manipulated in order become lies, all that is needed is manipulative people.

The next major turning point has occurred in photographic technology and it appears to be the total antithesis of its origin. When we compare the interior of the dark chamber with the small digital device we hold away from our bodies, the difference in the physical involvement of the body is obvious, it is however, no less important in understanding the role of photography today. Now that the body has been brought out into the light, so has its subjectivity. The gradual acceptance of, and willingness to alter, or perfect the sacred picture plane, reveals a shift in consciousness regarding the photograph. And it is no mere coincidence that this shift occurs at a time when the photograph achieves a state of pure image, as opposed to what Geoff Batchen calls ‘the brute objectness of the photograph’. Its emancipation from the world and system of objects has driven the photograph back into the world of light from which it came. A world that communicates more directly and instantaneously with the world of imagination. In practical terms, the operation of the camera, keyboard and mouse taking place ‘at arms length’ becomes, like all technologies, a gradually habitual experience and eventually an unconscious one.

This process reflects what Walter Benjamin said toward the end of his ‘Work of Art’ essay:

‘... the tasks which face the human apparatus at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit under the guidance of tactile appropriation.’¹¹

Has photography not become habitual, in relation to our use and our experience of it, to the point that it is just short of unconscious? And is this mastery not the result of tactile appropriation? Digital media appears to have eradicated the conditions of the problem of representation and identified and met exactly the requirements of our contemporary mode of perception. To search for truth in images only becomes a problem if they are experienced visually, if however the dialogue is carried out physically, that is, that if the poles of communication are recognised as physical and that the visual element between them is neither end nor beginning, truth is permitted to stay where it belongs... in reality.

¹ Camera obscura information taken from, Ross Woodrow, ‘Origins in Shadow’ *Analysis of the Visual Image*, Online available: Internet Explorer <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/discipline/fine-art/theory/analysis/anal-2.htm> (19 June 2003)

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (trans. Maria Jolas), Boston, 1964, 74

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (trans. Richard Howard), New York, 1981, 106-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Barthes’ theme of death informs much of *Camera Lucida*, but he begins to use the analogy in earnest from page 92.

⁶ *Ibid.* 92, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.* 94.

⁸ Kodak Digital Learning Centre, Online Available: Internet Explorer <http://www.kodak.com/US/en/digital/dlc/> (20 June 2003)

⁹ A case in point is that of Brian Walski, photographer for the LA Times stationed in Iraq to cover the recent conflict there, who submitted a composite image for publication and was subsequently fired and publicly disgraced. Jay DeFoore ‘Brian Walski Discusses His Doctored Photo’ *Photo District News Online*, Online Available: <http://www.pdnonline.com/news/archive/2003/050703.html> (25 August 2003)

¹⁰ John Long, ‘Ethics in the Age of Digital Photography’” *National Press Photographers Association* Online Available: Internet Explorer <http://www.nppa.org/services/bizpract/eadp/eadp6.html> (25 August 2003)

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, (trans. Harry Zohn) New York, 1969, 240.

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