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The Photographic Real

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The Ontology of Photography

Starting in the 1850s, photography became the principal purveyor of the real in our representations. Personal memories as well as the visual arts, cosmology, microscopy, medicine, administrative identity, eroticism and pornography, war reporting, historical reconstruction, legal testimony, and advertising, all developed by relying on a naturalist attitude¹ of ontological trust in the photographic product, ceaselessly furnishing the given real (*donné réel*) to various disciplines that manipulated representations. We might advance the idea that the visual modernity inherited from the nineteenth century relates in large part to the formula that the real is what is photographed, and representation is what one does with it.

For this reason, the *ontology of photography* played a prime role from the start: it was indeed necessary to give an account of the real being of what entered into a photograph, and to conceptualize and name what in a photographic image is communicated of reality. We wanted to be assured that when we are dealing with the photographic, we are actually dealing with something real that is captured by an image, which we then have time to work over and treat, for either aesthetic, scientific, informative, or political purposes.

As distrustful as we may be today about the construction of images, the fact that photography has served as the universal material of our visual representations may only be explained if we understand that we have never stopped acknowledging in photography something that escapes our constructions, something that was *given* to us.

However, after more than a century and a half of the ontology of photography, we have to admit the desperate situation into which the very concept of photography has fallen. The current situation has pushed into a corner all those who still think that photography is at an impasse—or rather, it has sent them back to a terrible dilemma. The first option is to recognize that the ontological trust granted to the photographic was an illusion from the start, and that there was never any real given in photography. The second option obliges us to name this given real, which unfortunately reveals our incapacity to make this kernel of reality resistant to destructive doubt. Everything that seems designated as pure reality in a photograph increasingly appeared in the course of the technological mutations of the photographic medium, as the complex product of an optical device and our gaze (it is our gaze that attributes to photographs a coefficient of reality that they do not possess in and of themselves). We feel caught in a trap. To understand the origin of this dilemma, we have to go back to the history of the ontology of photography, as we go back up a river, in the hope of finding a single concept of the real that suits all kinds of photography (film or digital) and resists the trend by which any history of photographic thought seems to suffer an interminable military retreat. Overly ambitious positions of realism are gradually abandoned in favor of more modest positions; the realist citadel is on the verge of collapsing—and if it is evacuated, then the photographic will have to be thought of as a particular genre of pictoriality, understood as the simple inscription of lines, and eventually of colors, onto surfaces. But considering the photographic as a genre of pictorial and not as a separate species, is to make photography into a mere technique distinct from stained glass, as stained glass is from engraving, or from oil painting, or from the blown projection of pigments in parietal art. It means admitting that there is no essential difference between inscription by the human hand of ink or ochre or charcoal onto a surface, and the inscription of variations in luminous intensity onto a sensitive surface by the intermediary of a photographic device. But the ontology of photography was born precisely from this feeling—so difficult to explain—of an essential distinction between the pictorial and the photographic, which pertains basically to an inversion of causality between the object and subject of representation.

This is the idea we no longer manage to believe in today. Let us begin our journey back up the river of photographic thought with the simple intuition that at first (in the nineteenth century), the pictorial was conceived as the inscription of lines on a surface, whose cause did not relate to the object represented but to the subject performing the representation. By contrast, in the photographic device, we admit from the start that the

cause (one of the causes, in any case) of the representation is the represented object. Nobody to our knowledge has thought that the object represented in a photograph was the *absolute* cause of the representation, but only that the subject (here the photographer) was no longer the exclusive cause of the representation. To put it simply: in any kind of depiction, the object aimed at is perhaps the purpose of the painting or drawing, but it is certainly not the material cause of the representation. The face of Thomas More, as Hans Holbein paints him, is in no way the material cause of the painting in which he figures. On the other hand, the face of Baudelaire, in the famous portrait that Nadar took of him, enters into a series of causal chains (which obviously must be clarified) that lead to the portrait. The very head of the poet, the form of his skull, the fineness of his hair, act in some fashion on the light, which in turn acts on a sensitive plate, which finally acts on the image obtained.

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By photography's "given real," we now mean the determination of this causal continuity between what is photographed and the photograph of it. It is this given real that has always been the Holy Grail of the ontology of photography. Thanks to the definition of this given real, it has always claimed to justify the modern trust we placed in the photographic, which is on a par today with the distrust that threatens to conquer our minds.

To avoid reducing photography to a sort of luminous drawing (the reality of which the moderns strangely believed in) we must go back through the history of the ontology of photography in search of a definition of the photographic real that stands up, that resists the movement by which the ontology of photography seems ineluctably to be beating a retreat.



Liz Deschenes, "Gallery 7". Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2014. Installation view. Courtesy the artist, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Gene Pittman

Ontological Retreat I: Nature

The first moment in the history of the ontology of photography could be called “naturalist.” By “naturalism” we mean (especially in scholarly circles and among those who first thought about photography) the shared belief that what is essentially given in the photographic image is Nature. In the first texts that tried to define what distinguishes the apparatuses of Daguerre and Niepce from paintings, the frequent recourse to the term *achéiropoiétos image* (“that which is not from the hand of man”) and the recurrent metaphor of the natural writing of light, both indicate the very first ontological status of photography. We were no longer before an image that man took of Nature, but before an image that Nature took of man: photography would allow a

human to have objective knowledge of his face thanks to the art of portraiture; it would reveal a human being who was no longer the subject but the object of the image, which was able to offer a natural point of view of himself.

This is one formulation of this first ontology of photography.

And what in this photographic naturalism allows us to define the continuity of the real between what is photographed and the photograph itself? It is *exact* natural form of things. In a famous speech to the Chamber of Deputies, Francois Arago, the French scientist and politician (1786-1853), illustrated and defended the recent invention of Daguerre by quoting the painter Delaroche:

M. Daguerre has discovered the particular screens by which the optical image leaves a perfect imprint—screens where everything that the image contains is found reproduced in the minutest detail, with incredible exactitude and fineness. In truth, it is no exaggeration to say that the inventor has discovered the means of fixing images—if his method conserved colors In a word, in M. Daguerre’s black chamber, light itself reproduces the forms and proportions of external objects with an almost mathematical precision.²

Thus what is conserved by the photographic image of the real, by the intermediary of light, are the natural forms of external objects, imprinted directly on sensitive plates. The contours of the photograph of a tree resemble in every point of detail the real silhouette of this tree, seen at a certain distance from a certain viewing angle. It is so accurate that we may imagine why the theoretician of the image John Hyman would much later call a photograph an “occlusion shape”: “the occlusion shape of an object is what some philosophers called its ‘apparent form,’ in other words its contour under its silhouette ... for example, a circular dish seen obliquely would recover (or be covered by) an elliptical spot on a plane perpendicular to sight.”³ These forms of recovery indicate the possibility of an exact correspondence, term by term, between the natural qualities of physical objects and the qualities of the photographic image, which theoretically has just recovered it.

This exactitude was indeed presupposed by the first amazed theories of photography. Even Baudelaire refers ironically to it, though he prefers the Beautiful (which is the object of Art) over the exact truth of photographic forms (which should be left to technique, “the very humble servant of the arts”).⁴ However Baudelaire (as well as Elizabeth Eastlake⁵ in the same period) was beginning to doubt the perfect correspondence between natural forms and photographic forms.

Naturalist faith in photography, which primarily relates to conceiving of it as a tool of knowledge, will in fact crumble quite quickly, attacked on at last three fronts.

First of all, the proposition that the natural forms of things are said to be communicated by light to the photographic image implies adopting a modern variant of Epicurean physics. Natural things had to be considered to be diffusing in all spatial directions the objective images of themselves—what the Epicureans called “*simulacra*”—which the eye or mirrors arrests and captures. To consider that photography was a means of “fixing natural images” was to judge that images preexist their being photographed, hence they are constantly diffused in the luminous milieu, and the photographic device merely authorizes catching them on the wing. In effect, the naturalist can scarcely claim that photography *immediately* seizes objects’ natural forms, which by definition are located *at a distance* from the lens. Hence the light must somehow transport the natural forms of things through space to communicate them to the photographic device. Outside any conception of the photographic, one must therefore defend a natural conception of the images produced by the things themselves, and not by perception of them. So it becomes indispensable to revive a physical conception despised by the history of optics: images of things are detached from the things themselves, like the tiny filigrees that hit the sensitive surface of the apparatus, which is then simply a new mode of fixing and tearing from the course of time these natural flows of images in ambient space. Of course, everything in modern physics runs against such a representation of light and of images. The second difficulty encountered by naturalism relates to the evolution of the photographic art: pictorialism (but also the first experimental manipulations, which would lead to the rayograms of the Surrealists and the Soviets), quickly indicates within photographic aesthetics a desire to make *the taking* triumph over the natural given of photography. The effects of blurring, the use of gums, the first montages, and the superimposition of images all tended to weaken the idea of a natural photographic real, communicated objectively and *en bloc* to the image, and instead favored the conception of power relations between something given and something seized or constructed in any photographic act.

The final objection is the most serious for a naturalist ontology of the photographic image: it relates to the failure of the conception of “forms of recovery.” In a photographic image there exist no natural forms of things that might by themselves recover the things seen. Nothing is cut out *in itself* in such an image. If one may identify in a photograph various entities distinct from one another, the difference between these entities is not inscribed in the photograph itself, but must be generated by the perception and

consciousness that is brought to the image. Any photograph is a homogeneous surface in which all parts have an equal ontological dignity, such that inside the image there exists no difference in kind.

Ontological Retreat II: Presence

This inaugurated the second phase in the ontology of photography, no longer naturalist, but “presentist,” which served as paradigm for any modern thinking about photography in the twentieth century. The ontology of photography gradually turned away from the natural and exact form of things to embrace the much less determined term of “presence,” applied no longer to differentiated entities, but to the ensemble of what appears in a photograph. The photographic image no longer attests to the primary or even secondary qualities of objects (size, figure, color, texture, etc.), but to the simple fact that *this* existed, that it was there. What is real in any photograph? Not so much the objective qualities of a being than their existence, prolonged by the image beyond their disappearance.

The modern ontology of photography exchanged an overly ambitious classic realism, which made photography an analogous and perfected technique compared to the human eye, for a more modest realism (but perhaps more intense), which made photography a secular version of the miracle.

In the emblematic essays of Walter Benjamin, André Bazin, and Roland Barthes, we see the desire to believe in the power of photography, which is of course incapable of being the expression of the natural form of things, but yet capable of transmuting the religious hope of resurrection into aesthetic affectivity. This hope is still tinged with melancholy, since the general presence conserved in the image does not prevent the death of any living being that was saved by photography. What is living remains in some fashion present in the image, but it does not remain living. On the contrary, its death is endorsed or anticipated by photography, which is compared by Andre Bazin to embalming.

Of course, Bazin never stopped being a naturalist, and he believed in the objective character of photography, but his ontology indicates a clear inflexion toward a presentist conception. What distinguishes the photographic image above all from the pictorial image is the power it possesses to *make us believe*: “Whatever the objections of our critical mind, we are obliged to believe in the existence of the object represented, effectively re-presented, that is to say, made present in time and space.”⁶ Fetish figure of the presentist thesis, Saint Suaire of Turin, who “realized the synthesis of religion and photography,”⁷ showed that photography arises essentially from *attestation*: it attests to

what was really present. As a mechanical witness, it accomplishes a transfer of presence, tearing from the destructive power of time the presence of what no longer is, embalming it and conserving it in the image.

The final pages of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* represent the best example, the culmination (and at the same time the swan song) of photographic presentism. It incarnates a powerful modern faith in the capacity of the photographic device to accomplish the promises of Christianity, the Eucharist, and the resurrection of the body. Something of Barthes's mother, who had just died, appears almost resuscitated in her photographic image. "The photo of the dead person comes to touch me like the deferred rays of a star," writes Barthes,⁸ "and finally the Winter Garden Photograph, as pale as it may be, for me is the treasure of rays that emanated that day from my mother-child, from her hair, her skin, her dress, her gaze."

What has been photographed has caused "to emanate" from itself the luminous rays that are preciously conserved by photography. The presence of Barthes's mother as a child has passed into radiance, which has passed onto the sensitive surface, which has constituted the image. And the image reproduces these rays, as if the loved were still present in the image, as if it were a dead star whose rays touch the eye long after it has died. But unless we understand "emanation" as the magical transmission of presence, the luminous rays that were conveyed by Barthes' mother did not carry along with them the material presence of the young girl—quite the contrary. At the most, we might think that she was present in the luminous rays, just as the cause is present in the effect. But now what do we understand by "presence" (on which Barthes insists in order to affirm that it is not "metaphorical")?

Ontological Retreat III: The Index

The long retreat of the ontology of photography has continued just as if such a conception of presence and its magic step-by-step communication were not a tenable position.

While presentism served as a *modern* ideology of the photographic, the indexical became the *contemporary* ideology. Indexicality is a reinterpretation of the semiotic categories of Charles Sanders Peirce, notably that of the *index* (by Rosalind Krauss,⁹ then the diffusion of this model, from the theses of Philippe Dubois in *L'Acte photographique*¹⁰ to those of Jean-Claude Lemagny); indexicality means envisaging the photographic image as an "index" of its real cause. For Peirce, the distinction among three types of signs (or *representamen*)—the icon, the index, and the symbol—rests on the difference between

possible relations between the sign and its object: the icon (for example, a drawing of a tree) is linked to its object by *resemblance*; the symbol is associated with it by *rules* or *laws* (hence by convention, as with the word “tree,” which in no way resembles a tree); the index is connected to its object by *causality*. Smoke is the effect of fire, which it indicates and betrays. The footprint in the sand is the effect of the foot, of which it reveals the form.

Rosalind Krauss, in order to characterize not photography but a particular current in American art of the 1970s, reutilized the category of the indexical, which enabled conceiving of photography as the effect of what was photographed. “Photography is an effect that reveals and betrays its cause,” writes Jean-Claude Lemagny.¹¹

Presentism did not directly confront the previous naturalism, and the indexical position did not confront the precious presentism. Very discretely, even laying claim to its heritage, it performed a simple strategic retreat. To the extent it appeared untenable to maintain that what had really been there in front of the lens was still present in the image, the indexical position revisited the lowering ambitions of presentism, adding a mediation: What is real in photography is not what was, but the *imprint* of what was. Photography as an index would be this physical object that has lost contact with the reality that has left it because it is past, but has conserved *something* from its effective encounter with this luminous reality that has now disappeared: an imprint, in this case luminous.

We see clearly the difference between presentism and indexical theories. For the latter, nothing of the thing photographed is still present in the image, but the image is the real index of what was once there. What is real in a photograph is a certain *effect* of the real. Something real remains in all photographs, but it is significantly distanced, since one never has access in photography except to its effect. But at least the continuity between the real and the photographic image is not totally broken;¹² it barely persists, but it persists just the same.

Ontological Retreat IV: Photonic Imprint

Alas, it seems that the retreat of the ontology photography must be endless. Even the thesis of measured realism has suffered a significant reversal. In Henri van Lier’s *Philosophie de la photographie*, it finds itself attacked (correctly) as the last residue of magical thinking, which introduces a link and a continuity where none exist. Henri Van Lier reminds us that nothing of what was represented in the photograph was ever imprinted on the sensitive plate of the photographic device: the face of the beloved never

touched the lens, it was never imprinted (except metaphorically) on the film. Van Lier thus proposes a more exact (but also more reduced) version of indexicality, considering that this alone in a photograph is real: the photonic imprint. The sole real and material continuity between what was photographed and the photograph relates not to the scene, which remains at a distance, forever separated in its fleeting presence, but to the photons, vehicles of the light that, affected by the photographed scene, struck a sensitive surface, upon which it left a material imprint, conserved by the photographic negative.

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But no quarter will be given the defender of the real in photography, who finds it increasingly remote as he fences to defend and circumscribe it. In a recent article, André Günthert cites an astonished critique by the physicist Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond of the ignorance among photographic thinkers about the physical process by which phototonic recording occurs:

The transparency of a milieu or its opacity ... result from a very complex mechanism: the luminous incident photons are absorbed by the electrical charges of the milieu ... and set them in motion; these charges then reemit new photons, etc. Thus it is only the result of these iterated processes of absorption and reemission that enables establishing if and how the body lets the light pass, or else blocks it.

In other words: “The photons that enter into a glass plate are not those that leave it ... There has indeed been a complete renewal of these constituents of light within the material.”¹³

However, Henri van Lier’s defense of a photonic imprint as the minimal formulation of a photographic realism cannot withstand a fresh attack: the photons that were in contact with the faces of our youth are not those that entered into contact with the photographic device, and those that entered the lens are not those that left it.

Thus, nothing that was in contact with the photographed materially enters into the photographic image. If we understand photographic reality as what we might define and call a *continuity* between the photographed and the photograph, then today we seem unable to designate any photographic reality at all.

And if the ontology of photography is no longer able to define such a specific reality, then photography is no longer thinkable except as a genre of pictorial images. Here we have ended up with our initial point: the trust of our natural attitude toward photographic reality is no longer correctly founded on any concept whatsoever. It is merely a habit. As soon as the habit is worn away by time (since it will have no well-founded discourse to

sustain our trust in the photographic) then it will completely disappear. Here we are cornered at the edge of the void upon which it now appears that our conception of photography has always rested.

At the Edge of the Void

At the finale of this step-by-step retreat, the current ontology of photography finds itself like a routed troop at the edge of a cliff, after suffering a protracted withdrawal from the field of the real, along the way abandoning nature, presence, the thing's imprint, matter's imprint, and material continuity.

One possibility is that it jumps, totally renouncing (in the current conditions of production and conception of what is still called photography) an ontological difference between the pictorial and the photographic. It might lay down its weapons and admit that the ontological difference of the photographic was an illusion of modern aesthetics, and that photography consists—neither more nor less than all the other pictorial genres—of lines inscribed on surfaces by certain technical devices. Then it would stop saying how the photographic is distinctive, because it is no longer able to define what in photography comes from a causality that is imputable to the object represented rather to the device of representation.

But then we could have to stop believing in the photographic as the principal purveyor of the real in our representations. We would have to revise our irrational belief in photographic material. This would surely be a painful revision for human culture, and it would long bear the bitter taste of defeat—the defeat of modernity as a whole.

The other option is to refuse surrender. Such a position presupposes our remaining in opposition to everything, with our backs to the void toward which the history of the ontology of photography appears to be pushing us, we *realists*.

Let us try a last desperate movement. Let us wager that this realism is still possible. How could we find a way to hold a last impregnable position, except from a lucid awareness of the price to pay? To conserve realism, we have to sacrifice a notion with which it was associated until now. To keep the real in photography, we have to completely give up something to which the ontology of photography has blindly clung: the material presence of things. The very being of photography in fact invites us to separate realism and materialism. In order to remain a realist about photography, we are barely starting to understand that we must necessarily admit that what is given is not material, but that there does exist a real continuity between the photographed and photography—*which is not a material continuity*.

The Real without Matter

The given real of photography is not the material presence of light but rather a state of matter, specifically of light, and hence of *information*. Charges are exchanged, energy is transmitted, and the result of this energy is passed from photon to photon. Photography is a technical device that precisely makes an abstraction of the singular presence, here and now, of each photon, and extracts from it information (a state of matter) at the encounter between a sensitive surface and a bundle of photonic particles.

Let us sacrifice a little more matter: this bundle of particles in question is not necessarily a bundle of *photons*. If we consider the progress of scanning electron microscopy, it is possible to identify a sort of scientific photography whose resolution descends to the wavelength of visible light, which is determined by photons. We may now take photographic images of minuscule portions of matter, at a scale smaller than the visibility threshold of material objects. In such an operation, the technical device somewhat mimics photography, by organizing the encounter not between a bundle of photons and a sensitive surface, but between a bundle of electrons—in interaction with the portion of matter of which one wants to take the image—and the measuring apparatus. Grasping details on the order of a tenth of a nanometer, scanning electron microscopy cannot be considered “photography” by anyone who would still define photography as a luminous medium. Here, the image appears indeed below the threshold of visibility, below what photons can reveal, but there is still a way of relating to images of the infinitely small just as to ordinary photographs: Simply consider that any photograph consists of the abstraction of a piece of information on the basis of the encounter between a bundle of particles (affected by a state of matter) and a sensitive surface sensible or a measuring surface. For a long time, these particles were exclusively thought of as photons, thus appearing to link inseparably the essence of photography with light. Even though photography remains (and no doubt will always remain) mostly conceived as photonic, scanning electron microscopy shows us that the most general and most correct definition of the photographic does not necessarily involve photons—vehicles of light—but rather all sorts of particles, which a directional flow (affected by the encountered matter) brings to be cut out and recorded on a plane.

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In any kind of photography, film or digital, retouched or not, there is in fact an infrangible kernel of the real, but this real is not material, but rather a relation (or a series of relations). It is a piece of information abstracted from matter *hic et nunc*. To judge the

photographic in this way means to assure ourselves that—in the current state of knowledge and of contemporary technical devices—we may have a trust in photography that does not risk being betrayed.

Such a realism-without-materialism—which considers that what passes from the real in a photograph arises only from a relation between certain material elements and not from the material elements themselves, or from their presence—has the first beneficial consequence of reunifying photography *a priori*. Instead of wondering about the ontological transformations effected by the shift from film to digital, we should consider that photography has *always* been digital *without knowing it*. It has always dealt with information, not with presence. Of course, the photographic devices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could make us believe that photographic images do conserve of the real something other than information; but we must acknowledge that photography introduced the digital, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, into our cultural representations. This is the first victory for our ontology: we no longer have to think of the digital as a destruction (at least partial) of the essence of photography, but on the contrary as the accentuation of its being. We are no longer condemned to read the history of photographic techniques as an interminable succession of reverses, of ontological catastrophes. What today we call digital images are merely the realization of the latent character of all photographic images, which withdraws from light the relations between its elements, which are capable of being transmitted and reproduced.

Information

Here “information” signifies that which, of the material presence of several entities, may be abstracted, treated as a relation, and thus reproduced with other entities (in this case, other photons). From this standpoint, there is no difference between the ontology of sound recording and the recording of light. On the occasion of the recording of a Bob Dylan song in 1964, to maintain that the sound waves that traversed the studio space were captured and conserved in their very presence on the master tape means producing a magical image of the recording, in effect taking metaphors—such as the spectral nature of the recording of voices¹⁴—as concepts, and being fated in time to feel disappointed and tricked by the reality of the recording. Any mystique vanishes once you think about the recording process.

To be ontologically realist about a recording means not asking it to conserve the nature of things, any more than to conserve presence or matter: nothing of the presence of the hand of Bob Dylan striking the chords of his guitar one day in May 1964 passed

concretely into the recording of the song. The sound waves caused by this movement are not immortalized by this recording: instead, the movement of the air entrained the movement of the membrane of microphones, which entrained mechanically, step by step, the inscription not of the sound wave itself but of certain relations between the sound waves on the magnetic tape. This step-by-step effect of the movements of Bob Dylan's hand and his voice is effectively conserved as a physical object, but to be a realist means to consider that in this transmission, presence is never conserved. On the contrary, the material presence of the voice is abstracted in favor of the relations between the material elements of the effects of the voice. It is these relations that are inscribed, transcribed, recorded.

No recording is merely a technical resurrection. One must not understand a recording as an effect that reproduces its cause. The sound waves caused by the movement of the vinyl disk entraining the arm of the gramophone that plays Bob Dylan's record are not the same sound waves as those that traversed the recording studio in 1964. They are not the same in a precise sense: their material presence differs. It is a matter of other waves, but their relation conserves (at least in part) the relation they maintained with each other on that day back in 1964.

No recording conserves or reactivates the essential qualities of things, or their presence, or their materiality. Quite the contrary, the sole means of being a realist in the face of the challenge offered by recording techniques is to admit that recording always consists of making an abstraction (absenting the material presence) of the qualities specific to the things recorded, and conserving solely the relation (or certain relations) between these things in order to be able to reproduce these relations with other singular material entities, whose presence has nothing to do (except metaphorically) with that of the things recorded.

To think of the ontology of recording, you have to shed any fetishism, any magic belief in the conservation of the present and material presence of things—of the voice, of bodies, of faces. All that, like everything else, is always engulfed by the passage of time, and sees its presence diminish tendentially in intensity as it becomes the past. No living being, in being recorded, has ever been torn out of time. But the composite of several beings together might be replayed with other beings, as one performs the same play with other actors. It is solely by thinking about recording like this that one avoids fetishism—and ultimately the disappointment that always leads to a denial of the given real of a recording. Recording is not of matter, but of information.

Photography and sound recording somehow invented modern information as the conservation of the relation between entities, reproducible at will with other entities. And the modern real that is revealed by recording is in fact information.



Liz Deschenes, "Tilt / Swing". Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2009. Installation view. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo by John Berens.

Recording: Transforming Events into an Object

Thus the character of recording (of sound as well as of light) relates not to the conservation of acoustic or luminous matter, but arises from material information, which occurs by the transformation of an event into an object. To record is to arrest by a device one or several events—acoustic or luminous—in order to make an object. Let me clarify this point. What a photograph captures is an ensemble of luminous events—in this case the passing of bundles of particles, of photons. By extracting relations from these bundles, the photographic device arrests the event, which is no longer taking place. The events that are the encounters by these bundles of particles of a sensitive surface

henceforth appear as an object, a stable portion of space-time. If an event is what is represented in language by a verb, then an object is what corresponds to a noun.¹⁵ Events are “to do” and objects are deeds that are done. Thus an object is identifiable and identifiable through time, whereas an object is what can remain identical. The photograph objectifies real events in the course of their happening, since it extracts luminous information from them. But the transformation of events into objects corresponds to a change in ontology, not to a material transfiguration: it is always possible to sort the world into events and objects. Photography, as a form of recording, is *a machine that obliges the gaze to treat an event as an object*. A photographic image, once it is taken, never totally ceases to be a possible event. We may continue to consider a photograph like an event, hence as an entity that changes with the passage of time. For example, this is the aesthetic effect produced by the works of Liz Deschenes,¹⁶ which are images whose time of revelation is mixed up with the time of exposition: moment by moment, in front of the viewers, the image never ceases evolving. Any photograph, as an event, does not stop changing, even imperceptibly. As an event, the photograph of our younger face, taken years before now, does not date from a decade ago: now it dates from now. Today, it dates from today. It is a continuous doing, not a done deed. The photograph, as an event, is not unidentifiable, it is a process that never stops, and at the present instant it is of the present instant.

However, we see the photographs that we actually have in our hands as real testimony of a past event. We are in effect brought to consider them as objects, hence as identities that are durable, identifiable, and re-identifiable through the course of time. This is the rule of any recording: to record is to produce a device that enables cognition to pass from a world of events to a world of objects. The recorded object may still be considered as an event, but it then loses its capacity to really retain a past event. As soon as I see a photographic image as an actual event, it stops conserving something—real information—of the past. This is the price to pay. And the photograph, as a technical device, permits my cognitive apparatus to see a certain image among events no longer as an event, but as the objectification of several luminous events of the past.

To Represent: To Absent Something from the Present

As a machine to really transfigure the information of past events into a trans-temporal object for my cognition, photography (as well as phonography) is not a materialist resurrection, but a recording that cannot prevent itself from representing. Evidently

Photography is not content with *recording* luminous information: it *represents*, on the occasion of this recording, scenes that engage the bodies, figures, and attitudes of both living beings and landscapes.

If we understand representation primarily as *absenting something present*, rather than as the *presentation of something absent*, then photography necessarily does represent. In effect it consists of absenting the singular presence of matter. Far from actually communicating the natural qualities of objects, either their presence or their matter, photography makes an abstraction of them. It absents presence and materiality from the real *hic et nunc*. Photography is the real luminous abstraction made from its matter. It suffices to conceive of a technical discipline as absenting a portion of presence in order to be able to represent. Thus pictorialism has always consisted of abstracting from space one of its dimensions, and treating a three-dimensional space as a quasi-surface. Any pictorial image (any painting, any drawing) represents first of all what is presented as a surface effect, which obliges our cognition to deal in two dimensions with what in fact has three, hence to abstract a surface from matter. But photographic recording is ontologically distinct from pictorial images in that it does not abstract a surface from matter, but instead information. The pictorial image withdraws from matter only one of its dimensions; the photographic image lifts out of matter its whole presence. It absents everything that was present. It withdraws the relations between elements and matter, which it conserves by reproducing them with the help of other elements. Everything that in matter is not luminous information is absented by photography.

And for this reason, any photograph represents something. By a rational rule of compensation, everything that absents what is there presents also something that is not there. This does not mean that any photograph represents something preexisting, something that existed before being photographed: photography may invent what it seizes. But it cannot fail to *represent* it, that is to say, to present to the eye something that is not materially found there.

There is always a sacrifice at the heart of being in order to be able to represent. This is because the present matter of this fine day no longer exists, because it has not really passed into the image, because the image has absented something of the present. *And this is why something of the absent will never cease being presented by the image*, as long as the image lasts. This explains why I may see in the photograph something other than a code, than abstract information, and why this abstract information makes present to me something—which is not there.

And this is exactly what photography has never ceased purveying since the nineteenth century: information that tears light from presence, that records it, that arrests events and transforms them into an object, which absents from the real its materiality, and which incidentally presents scenes peopled with bodies, faces, and landscapes that are not materially there. Whoever grants to what is photographic a trust based on this reasonable certitude does not risk being deceived or fooled by photographs and their scientific, artistic, journalistic, or even intimate usages. At the end of its long retreat, the ontology in search of a just definition of photographic reality may hold onto (at least for a while) this idea of photography. What truly is photography? It is what taught our perception to untangle reality and materiality in the light of things. It is what has furnished to our modern representations a sort of basic representation, a figure of the real as information of matter. Phonography has given this to us in the sound element, and photography in the luminous element, even if today these particles enable us to accede to an infra-luminous photography. Photography has furnished us with a new form of the image, which makes an abstraction not only of a dimension of space (as drawing already was doing), but of its whole materiality.

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However, if we still want to confuse the *affirmed* real with the matter *denied* by photography, then the whole house of cards of our modern representations will suddenly collapse, and will fall to the level of pre-modern pictorialism. Because of having demanded too much and the wrong things from photography, we will no longer grant photography anything distinct from what we have always recognized as our everyday points, lines, surfaces. This would be an aesthetic tragedy, and turning our backs on all the old modernity as if it had never been more than a gigantic error of judgment. From our entry into the modern era, we will have believed too strongly in photography, and at our exit from that era we will have believed in it too weakly. We will never have proved capable of a perceptive attitude that is just and equal to what photography communicates to us of reality.

Let us try to demand of any photograph nothing more nor less than what it can do: photography is neither a technical miracle of nature nor a simple constructed and manipulable symbol. Finally, let us endeavor to regard everything that has been photographed in this way: as a determined absence of matter that empties the real of everything that was found present there, in order to retain its information, to make it visible.

Translated from the French by Susan Emanuel.

An unabridged version of this text is available of the Research Platform (<http://www.glass-bead.org/research-platform/le-reel-photographique/>) (french only).

Footnotes

1. In the sense Edmund Husserl gives to this expression: an attitude consisting of making incessant judgments about the being of objects in themselves.
2. François Arago, et al. *Rapport sur le daguerréotype*. 1839. Preface by J. Bérezné. La Rochelle: Rumeurs des Âges, 1995. Print. Quoted by François Brunet in *La Naissance de l'idée de photographie*. Paris: PUF, 2000. 100. Print.
3. John Hyman. "Pictorial Art and Visual Experience." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (1) 2000: 8. Print.
4. Charles Baudelaire. "On Photography" (from "The Salon of 1859"). Quoted in Jonathan Mayne, ed. *Charles Baudelaire, The Mirror of Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1955. Print.
5. "Far from offering a mirror up to nature—an expression as triumphant as it is erroneous—offers something that although beautiful, ingenious, and estimable for its power of reflection, nevertheless remains subject to distortions and deficiencies, for which there is no remedy," François Brunet wrote in his article devoted to Elizabeth Eastlake. "Et pourtant des choses mineures...." *Etudes photographiques* 14 2004. Print.
6. Andre Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *What is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray. University of California Press, 1971. Print.
7. Ibid. Barthes also mentions this.
8. Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980. Print.
9. Rosalind Krauss. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America." *October* Autumn 1977. Print.
10. Philippe Dubois. *L'Acte photographique*. Brussels: Labor, 1983. Print. In this book, Dubois says that what we have called the "retreat" of the ontology of photography has three stages: "photography as mirror of the real," "photography as transformation of the real," "photography as trace of a real." The index arises in the third phase.
11. Jean-Claude Lemagny. *L'Ombre et le temps. Essai sur la photographie comme art*. Paris: Nathan, 1992. Print.
12. This is what André Rouillé calls the "continuity of manner between things and images." *La Photographie. Entre document et art contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005. 615. Print.
13. André Günthert. "L'Empreinte digitale. Théorie et pratique de la photographie à l'ère digitale." *Actualités de la Recherche en histoire visuelle* October 2007. Web.
14. The notion of "hauntology" (invented by Jacques Derrida about the specters of Communism) has been recuperated by the ontology of sound recording. It discussed by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University, 2003. Print. And by Simon Reynolds in *Retromania: Population Culture's Addiction to its own Past*. London: Faber

and Faber, 2011. Print. Moreover, Reynolds cites Bazin and Barthes and takes up all the images of presentism and indexicality and applies them to sound: material continuity, embalming, imprint, the phantom, etc.

15. Francis Wolff. *Dire le monde*. Paris: PUF, 1997. Print.

16. Liz Deschenes. "What is a Photograph?" International Photography Center, New York 2014. Exhibition.

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