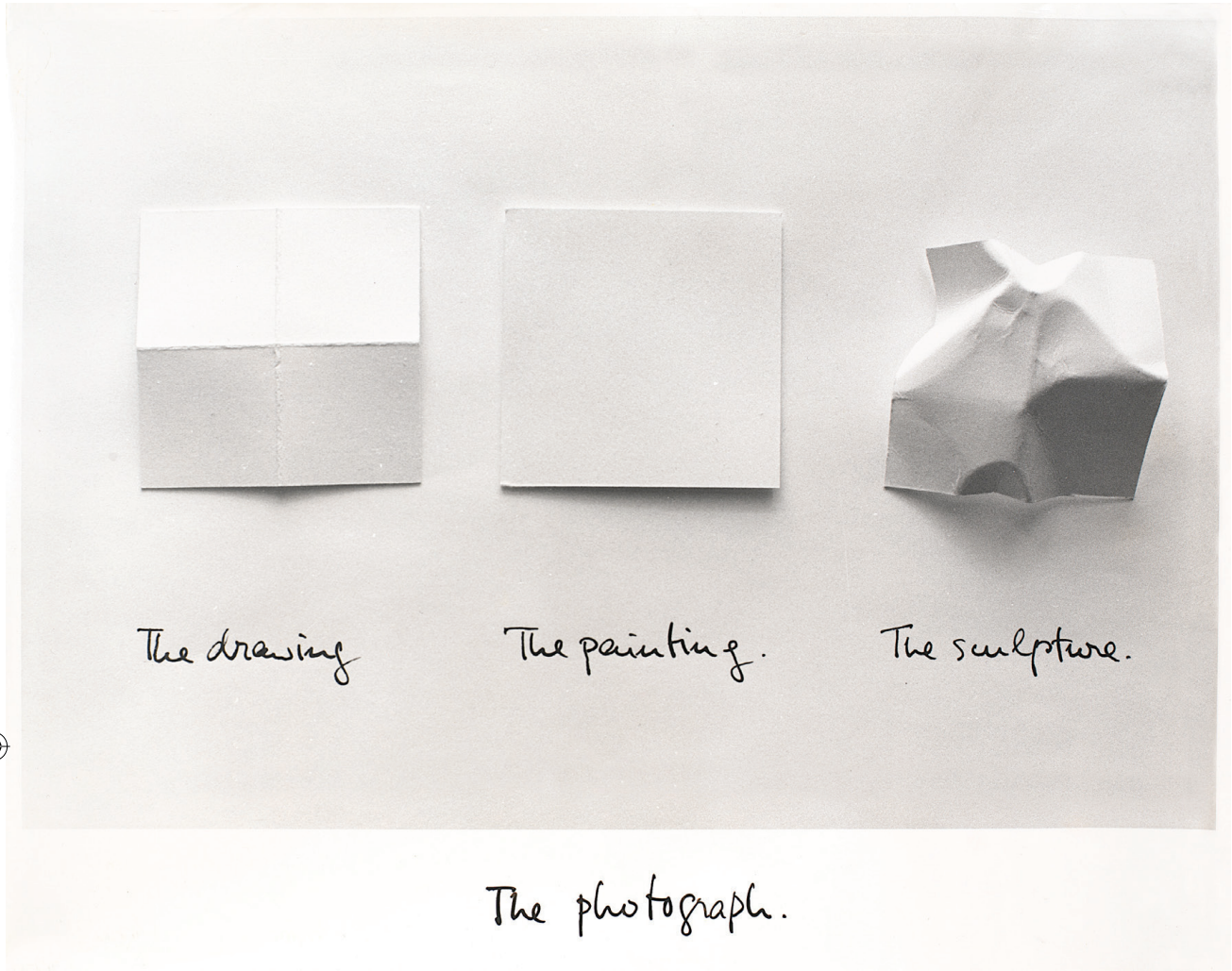


The photograph.

The photograph

Title: *The Photograph*, 1981

Artist: Luis Camnitzer

As simple as this may sound, a photograph can be defined by its difference to other mediums, e.g. painting, drawing, or sculpture. As opposed to these, photography is a photo-mechanical medium that records fragments of this world as they appear to a particular observer and at a particular moment in time. Camnitzer's work reveals one more quality of photographs: transparency. Often, when looking at photographs, we look at the content and forget that we are dealing with yet another means of representation.

Looking at photographs is based on recognition. As with any other image type, viewers recognize shapes and decode messages, or narratives. Nevertheless, looking at photographs also implies an awareness of the means by which the images were produced.

Essentially, photographs are always of the past. These documented moments can be made with different intentions and can be used in many ways to bring relevance to the present. Understanding how these contexts can affect an image's role and meaning is most significant (in his 1990 book *Criticizing Photographs* [96], Terry Barrett calls these the 'original' and 'external' context of a photograph respectively), and it is the main topic of the next two chapters of this book; however, the viewers' expectations of the medium, their expectations of the 'internal' context of 'The Photograph', which is the main concern of this first chapter, underlies all other understandings and ultimately defines this conundrum that is photography.

An image's references to reality, to 'truth', as well as notions of form and materiality, are determining factors in photography. These considerations are sometimes overlooked because of the presumed directness and objectivity of the photographic image; their significance becomes more apparent in 'unreal', constructed images that invite questions such as: What is it that makes us think that we deal with photographs when we look at images that do not respond to reality? The answer to this, which is explored in the next sections of this chapter, but is also central throughout this book, seems to be that photography's realism, or the particular realism of the photographic image, allows us to immerse ourselves in an image as if it were part of reality, creating immediate, yet complex, forms of engagement.

1

Levels of truth

Debates concerning truth and reality have surrounded photography since its inception. Photographs have the ability to literally depict visual appearances, but they can also be subjectively, conceptually and technically constructed or manipulated to present a particular view or idea (the latter ties in with the 'original context' of the photograph and the photographer's intentions that are explored in greater detail in chapter 2, 'Visual Approaches').

Most photographs do both: they replicate appearances, but they also conceal the codes and decisions that have been imposed onto the reality they represent. Even the most accurate photograph of an object differs from the object itself. This refers to the object's transformation from a three-dimensional entity into a two-dimensional one and the related lens distortions; changes in size, texture, colour etc.; and the context in which the image is shown (see chapter 3, 'Contexts of Presentation'). In their pursuit of the perfect document, photographers often create images that no longer respond to the object as we would experience it in reality. The resulting paradox is that the photograph reveals more than what empirical reality has to offer.

Photography's capacity to divert from reality becomes significant in documentary or photojournalism, where questions such as 'whose truth?' come to centre stage. Codes of ethics ensure transparency, but the photographer's view is always and necessarily a selective one and is influenced by his/her viewpoint, ideas and aspirations. Also the vast number of faked/transformed or manipulated images that surface in mainstream media outlets suggests that transparency is just an expectation.

At the other end of the spectrum is the argument that the photographer's responsibility lies with the ideas he/she communicates. In order to engage the viewer and evoke ideas, photographs need to communicate fluently; this is hardly the case if the photographer operates as just an assistant to the camera, which is presumed to record objectively whatever is in front of its lens.

The fashion and advertising industries have traditionally employed photography to promote and idealize products. Their commitment to images does not lie with objective truth but the creation of suggestive realities, dreams and fantasies of perfection. If these suggestive realities are likely to mislead or deceive the consumer, again there are mechanisms that protect consumer rights. And then there is art, whose purpose is to reveal an altogether different truth that is reserved for art alone.

Photography's complex relationship to truth and reality has led to a whole field of enquiry that belongs unto itself. Photography is ever-evolving, but some ideas that have surrounded the medium since its invention persist. For example, the capacity to manipulate images has increased with the advent of digital technologies, but this development does not undermine the realism of the photographic image and its ability to give evidence, provoke thought or create beauty.

Images are invested with expectations, and dependent upon the desired result, the photographer will engage with these 'levels of truth' in varying degrees, in both a practical and conceptual manner. The following pages provide a brief overview of some of the basic functions of a photograph in order to explore these 'levels of truth' in different photographic approaches. By no means an exhaustive or definitive list, the groupings highlight basic points relevant to some generalized functions of the photograph that will inform the photographer's approach in relation to notions of truth and reality and project development, as well as an image's production and reception, which are explored further in the next two chapters.

The literal depiction of appearances

In his 1844 book *The Pencil of Nature*, William Talbot, one of the principal inventors of photography, presents some potential applications of the newly invented medium. Talbot suggests that in the future photography could provide a valuable solution to archivists, publishers and collectors who would be able to record, copy and enlarge images faster and more accurately than ever before. Photography still had a long way to go towards expanding tonal range and recording colour, but its potential in documenting was already evident. As a mechanistic medium, which was produced using the 'pencil of nature', 'without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil' (Talbot 1844: 96), photography could potentially guarantee impartiality and objectivity, two main qualifying characteristics of documents.

Indeed, in the following years photography became a main tool for documentation. Museums, the police, scientists and schools all developed archives containing photographic documents. Geophotography, archaeological photography, art reproduction, microscopic photography, medical imaging (such as X-rays or MRI scans), police mugshots and crime-scene photography are only some of the genres that emerged out of this desire to document the world. Photographic documentation became the most common method of gathering information for analysis, and in a variety of disciplines.

The main function of photographic documents is to depict or record the visual appearance of something, someone or someplace. These photographs exist as evidence; so in these circumstances, the main thrust of the photographer's goal is to produce high-quality images that replicate the subject as closely as possible and according to the specifications indicated by the respective discipline. To achieve this, the photographer is required to be technically expert and make choices dependent upon equipment, lighting, composition and quality.

Title: *Sandy Springs Bank Robbery*, c.1920

Photographer Unknown, Courtesy of National Photo Company Collection (Library of Congress)

A scene-of-crime photograph; note the level of attention paid to exposure and tonal quality, thereby allowing the image to be as detailed as possible.

Enhancing the accuracy of a photographic document

- Think in advance: Which parts of the object/person/location are important to include/highlight in the image? This relates to the purpose and use of the image. In the case of documenting the effects of a blizzard, for instance, a clearly identifiable object like a car buried under the snow will be clearer than a wide-open landscape.
- If possible, isolate the subject. If you are documenting a small object, include a plain background, or, if on location documenting, for example, a building or architectural structure, choose a quiet time of day.
- Use direct/frontal camera angle and a telephoto lens to avoid perspective distortions. This is particularly important when recording abstract shapes and objects that viewers are not familiar with, such as an abstract sculpture.
- Illuminate the object from the sides to avoid reflections. When photographing paintings, for example, it is important to eliminate reflections that could be perceived as part of the work.
- Avoid harsh shadows: use soft light or a cloudy sky.
- A sharp lens and high resolution, or a fine grain film, can bring up the detail of the subject.
- For best results, use a medium/large format camera and a tripod.
- Use maximum aperture to increase depth of field.
- If scale/colour is important, include size/colour scales.

The documentary tradition – truth or fiction?

The photographic camera cannot produce an image out of a vacuum; therefore, documenting or recording reality could be seen as an inherent call of the medium. However, documentary photography exceeds the sole purpose of documentation.

In *What is Documentation?* Suzanne Briet (1951: 9–10) defines a 'document' as 'a proof in support of a fact'. 'Documentary production', on the other hand, is a process whereby documents are 'selected, analyzed, described, translated'. As such, documentary photography illustrates a secondary process of selection, analysis, description and translation of facts. This also applies to photojournalism, which is a subgenre of documentary that implies a weightier relationship with current events, text and news stories.

In simple terms, documentary photography and photojournalism can both refer to the photographic telling of a story with a particular intention. Storytelling in photography is extensively discussed in the second part of this book; what matters here is the character of these intentions. Karin Becker Ohrn (1980: 36) offers a definition that hints at this: 'The photographer's goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change.' Effecting social change requires a degree of responsibility, but it does not necessarily guarantee objectivity or access to truth.

Levels of truth | Research and documentation →

Levels of truth

Title: *Dr. Ceriani Examines a Boy's Hand*, 1948

Photographer: Eugene Smith

For example, the photographic stories of British publication *Picture Post* (1938–1957) and American publication *Life Magazine* (1936–1972) were mass-produced and distributed and had the capacity to affect people's perceptions, but they were also often staged. It is an open secret, for example, that stories such as Eugene Smith's 'The Country Doctor' for *Life* in 1948 were staged. The story was written before the editors of *Life* had even identified a suitable doctor or a potential photographer. Further, Eugene Smith (2013) never denied that he was staging his images.

Documentary photography may not be entirely objective, but, as is also highlighted in chapter 2, 'Visual Approaches', it can be considered the means of conveying what the photographer feels to be the spirit or essence of a person, place or event. Social documentary is rooted in the photographer's experience of the subject and can offer a visual experience in order to initiate, share or convey an understanding or a narrative that goes beyond words. Documentary and photojournalism require the photographer's involvement with the subject; a sense of responsibility toward the photographic brief, subject and audience; and the ability to negotiate with ethical issues.

'I ask and arrange if I feel it is legitimate. The honesty lies in my – the photographer's – ability to understand.'

Eugene Smith, 1956 (Smith 2013)

Title: from 'Boys and Girls', Gladys, East London, 2009

Photographer: Shaleen Temple

Temple describes her series of photographs as follows: 'This project is about black South Africans who work in white South African homes. Growing up in South Africa before moving to the UK means that this part of African culture is something I grew up with. The project questions how far the country has come since the end of the apartheid. It also looks at the relationship between the workers and their white employers' (Temple, 2010).

A different kind of truth

Photography's capacity to record the world did not only influence the development of documentary photography. Principles of objective and/or subjective adaptation of reality inspired photographers working in all genres, including fine art photography. Considering that the conventions regulating content and presentation that apply in other genres do not apply in art, photography's possibilities for expression in this field are limitless. Nevertheless, despite the exciting potential of this plurality of possibilities, the question of 'what art-photography should be?' has dominated the field since the beginning, and the answers vary greatly.

One answer that still dominates today is that photography should be concerned with its own characteristics as a mechanical medium of recording instead of trying to imitate techniques and styles coming from other mediums – as happened, for example, in pictorialist photography in the late nineteenth century that imitated painting in introducing colour, texture and atmosphere achieved through the physical manipulation of prints. In *The Photographer's Eye* John Szarkowski suggests: 'It should be possible to consider the history of the medium in terms of photographers' progressive awareness of characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium' (1966: 7). In this particular book, the characteristics that photographers became progressively aware of and increasingly drew their attention to consist of: 'the thing itself', meaning the objects and scenes that the photographer points their camera at, 'the detail', 'the frame', representation 'time', and 'vantage point'. The *Photographer's Eye* contains documentary images that are arranged according to their emphasis on one of these 'formal' photographic characteristics without any reference to the photographers' intentions or the issues addressed in the images. The description of the work is reduced to its title. This shift of attention from the work's social function to photography's inherent characteristics illustrates photographic formalism.

'A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense, and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety. And the expression of what one feels should be set forth in terms of simple devotion to the medium a statement of the utmost clarity and perfection possible under the conditions of creation and production.'

Ansel Adams, 1943: 378

Title: *Untitled*, from 'Los Alamos', 1965–68

Photographer: William Eggleston

Formalism can be understood more as a system of interpretation more than an attitude that can be recognized in some images more than others. For example, William Eggleston's work could be seen as a life-long documentary project that illustrates the ethos of South American suburbia. Eggleston started taking pictures in the early 1960s and was soon 'discovered' by John Szarkowski, who organized an exhibition of his work in MOMA in 1976. The exhibition was accompanied by the now classic catalogue *William Eggleston's Guide* (1976: 10), where Szarkowski praised Eggleston's work for its 'intelligence, imagination, precision, and coherence', and its educated vernacular colour. From there on, his work became associated with developments in art-photography, which was also supported by Eggleston's interest in stand-alone images and indifference to any social issues raised by the work.

Levels of truth

Formalism is a mode of visual analysis that was influenced by principles dominating art in the 1920s and which has received much criticism for ignoring the photographers' intentions and for a lack of social considerations. However, there is also a whole range of images that have been made with formal issues in mind. From the 1920s onwards, a strand of photographers – including Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Minor White and others – started depicting the world using sharp lenses and fine-grain film, as well as techniques such as the zone system – Ansel Adams's technique for identifying optimal exposure to create images of immense clarity, detail and tonal range. The value of these works does not lie in their use as 'proof in support of a fact' (see previous section), but in their aesthetic value and their reference to genres that had traditionally been linked to art, i.e. the landscape, the still life, the nude.

Formalist principles were also embraced by New Topographics, a photography movement characterized by deadpan aesthetics and a sense of detached objectivity. This style defined the work of a number of different photographers who were active in the 1970s, both in Europe and Northern America, whose work came together in an influential exhibition at George Eastman House in 1975. The show was titled 'New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape' and provided a name, an umbrella term, that since then illustrates the work of a number of different photographers that shares similar principles and aesthetic values. The work of New Topographics photographers, such as the images of industrial structures taken by Bernd and Hilla Becher in post-war Germany, could find no use outside gallery spaces. Their typologies are reminiscent of archive records, but the Bechers had no desire to associate their work with any scientific or historical research, nor did they think that their work could be useful to researchers; their interests lay with pattern, rhythm and repetition. What kind of 'truth' could such work that operates outside social realities reveal? According to Blake Stimson (2004), the value of the Bechers' work lies in pleasure and commitment, without any aim or personal/collective interest. This idea may contradict the principles of documentary photography, but it resonates with much photography in contemporary art and ties in with philosophical investigations of aesthetics dating back to the Enlightenment.

Title: *'Colours of Ethiopia': Somali VI*, 2014 and *'Colours of Ethiopia': Somali VIII*, 2014

Photographer: Leikun Nahusenay

Nahusenay's series 'Colours of Ethiopia' documents everyday life in Jijiga, Ethiopia's Somali capital. The images replicate signs of documentary photography in terms of content, but his choice of double-exposure, the images' saturated colours and superimposed textures encourage an emphasis on form. This body of work presents a tension between content and form, through which the series also achieves its meaning.

Even though the distinction between form and content has, for a number of years, marked the difference between photography in art and general culture, more recently the boundaries between the two have started to dissolve. As will also be discussed in chapter 3, 'Contexts of Presentation', documentary photography is now comfortably shown in art galleries and museums, and the emphasis on colour or composition does not seem to challenge the documentary value of a work. The current consensus seems to be that both form and content contribute to an image's meaning, within and outside art. This topic will be further discussed in chapter 2, 'Visual Approaches', with reference to the technical execution of the work and its importance in supporting the photographer's conceptual approach.

Beyond the recording of appearances

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes embarked on an exploration of the ontology of photography, meaning, 'what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images' (1980: 3).

Barthes starts with a classification of images based on his own emotions. Even though most images discussed in the book are by the well-known photographers – Alfred Stieglitz, André Kertész and Robert Mapplethorpe, amongst others – he is not particularly interested in the technical quality or artistic nature of the work. The images allow him to distinguish between what he calls, the *studium*, i.e. a generalized interest in an image because of its subject-matter, composition and 'mastery' of the photographer, and the *punctum*, a detail or a set of details that hold his gaze for much longer and manage to stir emotions and forgotten memories.

This distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* does not only apply to images that we see in books and exhibitions but also to images of people we know. Barthes is in the apartment in which his mother died, looking through a collection of her photographs; looking, in his words, for 'the truth of the face I had loved' (Barthes 1980: 67). Eventually he finds a photograph that contains aspects of his mother's character that he was searching for. The faded image, taken before he even knew her, when she was five, allowed him to rediscover his lost mother. This incident helped him illustrate his definition of photography's essence.

According to Barthes, photography manages to transform a subject, e.g. a person or a scene, into an image. Within the fragment of time it takes to take a picture, we have a separation between the world and its image. The reality depicted in the image is irretrievable; there is no way we can literally return to the past. Yet, a photograph is a trace of the past, of a past that the image is already separated from. This reference to the intractable past, this notion that 'that-has-been', for Barthes, illustrates photography's essence and is an awareness that is sometimes experienced with indifference and some others with great astonishment.

Title: *A collection of family photographs*

Photographer: Unknown

A collection of formal and informal family photographs that offers a gateway into the existence of ourselves and others.

Barthes articulates a way in which many of us relate to photographs; the manner in which they convey an aspect of the shared human experience and provide some form of tangible evidence or gateway to the existence of ourselves and others. The manner in which the photograph can go beyond the recording of appearances and convey something of the individual's character or circumstances is something that we can relate to in both the production and sharing of our personal photographs. We may hold dear photographs of the deceased or from a time long past. Photographs may help confirm, or indeed even create, our sense of personal history and identity. In a similar way, we can use photographs to portray our identity, an identity that may be consciously constructed or simply revealed with a smile or gesture. Photographs can keep memories alive, but they can also create, distort or substitute memories.

Some questions for consideration:

What makes us recognize beloved people in some pictures and not in others?

Why do images divert from the essential 'truth' of a person as we have experienced it?

What are the implications in relation to members of the family that we have never met?

Photographs as objects

The value of a family album lies with the personal or collective memories that constitute a family's identity. We might not always recognize scenes and members of the family, or some images might be too old to reflect personal memories, but the images invite a particular type of engagement. This means that it is not necessarily the content of the image that invites personal engagement and identification. The images' authenticity is validated by their appearance (signs of aging, technology used, any written notes) and inclusion in personal archives.

This is to say that photographs are not just images; they are also objects, and sometimes their materiality and function as objects is crucial for their significance or meaning. In the introduction of *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart explain: 'thinking materially about photography encompasses processes of intention, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding and recycling, all of which impact on the way in which photographic images are understood' (2004: 1).

The technology and chemistry used for a particular image, as well as its signs of aging, can provide useful information about its history. These days, with the wider marketability of photography, marks on the surface of an image are seen as signs of authenticity that can influence the image's price.

Title: from 'Mother of Martyrs', 2006

Photographer: Newsha Tavakolian

Every Thursday and Friday, Iranian mothers who are proud that their sons have given their lives for Iran visit the cemetery. Their sons died fighting Iraqi Republican Guards. They all cherish the portraits of their sons. This photograph is a clear example of how significant photographs can be to those who have lost loved ones.

Levels of truth

Regardless of its reputation as a medium for the reproduction of appearances, in the course of its existence, photography has employed a number of different technologies and has allowed for a great deal of choice in presentation. The size and quality of a print can influence our impression of the image's content. For example, from its appearance, we can tell whether an image has been made for publicity and is to be shown in a public space (e.g. a poster). A landscape on a postcard most likely illustrates a tourist destination. Fine art prints are usually of high quality, allowing greater access to the image, and are usually made in limited editions for exhibition or archival purposes. All these conclusions are drawn from the format of the image and its material basis.

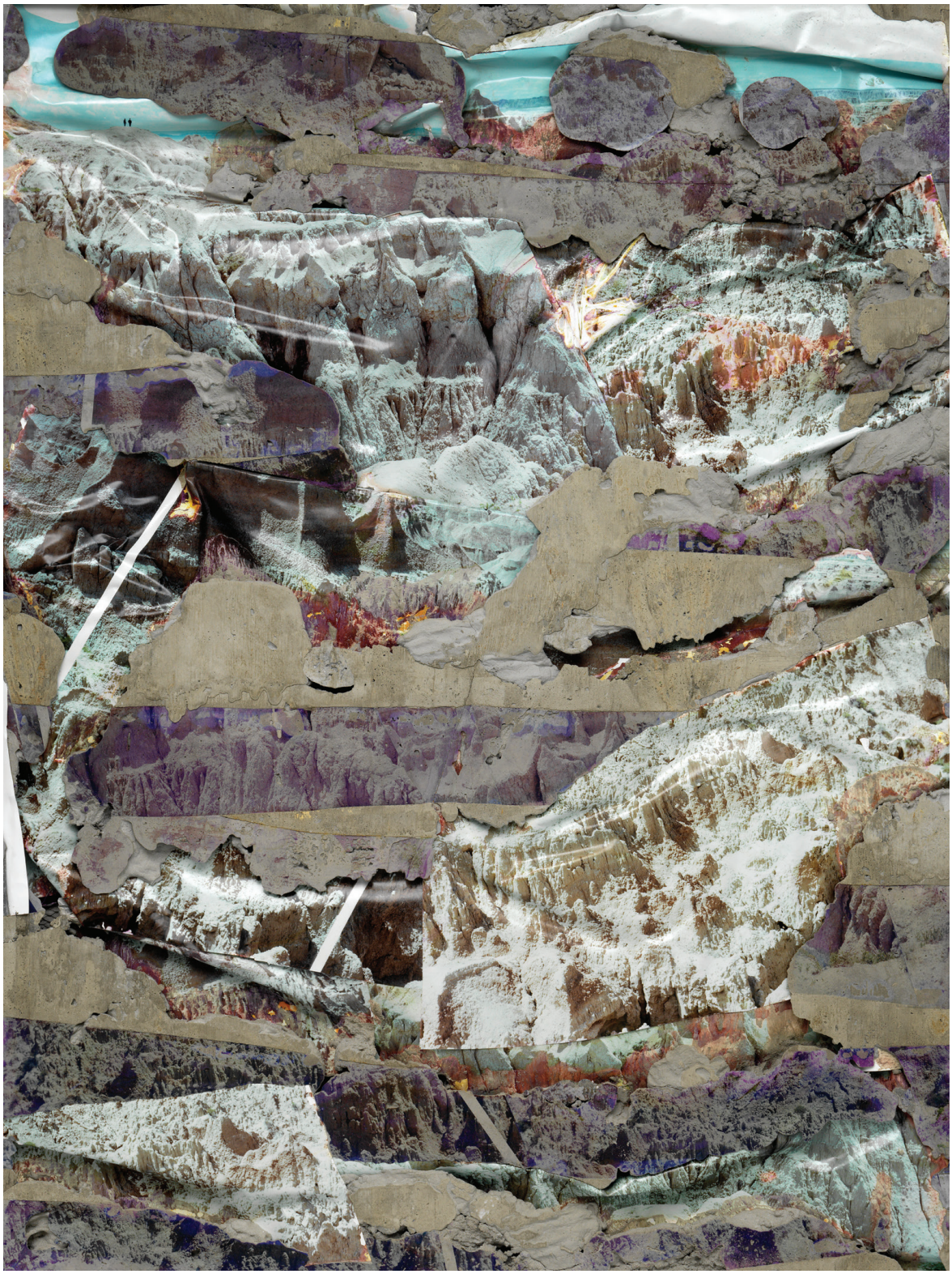
The materiality of photography seems to be less relevant in the digital age, where most images are made and viewed on a screen. Nevertheless, the material support of the image, i.e. the screen, can again reveal a lot about the image: the technology through which it was produced, the data that it consists of (including metadata), its capacity to network.

The function of photographs as objects has largely been ignored in the past, but it is increasingly inviting attention because it allows access to photography's myriad uses. Thinking about photographs as objects has also received attention in art, where artists employ different technologies and modes of presentation to enrich the meaning and communicative possibilities of the work, or they appropriate and re-contextualize existing images to highlight the difference between the image's initial purpose and its function in art (see chapter 3, 'Contexts of Presentation').

Title: *Ghost of a Tree*, 2012 and *Badlands Concrete Bend*, 2015

Photographer: Letha Wilson

Letha Wilson is an artist who works predominantly with photography, but her work is presented in a three-dimensional form. Wilson calls her work 'photosculptures'. The sculptural effect is often achieved through the arrangement of the images in space or mixed media techniques that create a play between reality and representation.



Altered photographs

The previous sections explored the idea that both content and form are crucial to our understanding of photographs. There are certain expectations linked to the photographic image. There is an expectation that photographs are made in reaction to light with the use of a photographic camera, and that even though they might not necessarily produce recognizable shapes and scenes, the images are records of actual moments in time. These expectations do not necessarily come consciously to mind when we look at photographs, but they underlie our understanding of them.

However, our ever-increasing encounters with images come with a growing awareness that images can lie, and that this has always been the case. In 'The Heroism of Vision' from *On Photography*, Susan Sontag describes: 'In the mid-1840s, a German photographer invented the first technique for retouching the negative. His two versions of the same portrait – one retouched, the other not – astounded crowds at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1855. . . . The news that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular' (Sontag 1971: 85-86).

As Sontag illustrates through this incident from the early days of photography, our expectations are not reduced to recording the world. The camera can lie, and this dynamic between a mechanical tool and its highly subjective use has been central to photography since its inception.

Choosing between documenting real objects and scenes and constructing realities drawn from one's imagination defines two different approaches to photography and marks the distinction between documentary, where truthfulness and accuracy are of crucial importance, and creative uses that entail a degree of fiction. Some photographs operate as objective records of an object or scene; others are enhanced; and, finally, some images are clearly constructed in order to convey a particular idea or concept. This might be achieved through photographing a constructed set or by manipulating an image either in-camera or post-production, and sometimes both.

Brands and companies – from local independent businesses through to international conglomerates – use photography to varying degrees to state their company identity and promote their products and services. In some circumstances, the photographer is concerned with enhancing the product and its effects on the consumer. In other circumstances, the main thrust of advertising photography is to create a spirit of lifestyle. The photographer creates a piece of theatre, a stretched or distorted setting to allude to something beyond the product itself. Constructing an altered reality often leads to complex, playful and sometimes even shocking images that require the photographer to engage with an idea in a way that is often removed from the ordinary existence of daily life.

Title: *Untouched* and *Retouched*, c.1895

Authors: Robert Johnson and Arthur Brunel Chatwood

In 1895 Robert Johnson and Arthur Brunel Chatwood put together a comprehensive guide to photography that illustrates developments during the first half-century after the medium's invention. The authors have included a whole section on 'Retouching'. In this section they defend its use and justify their choice to retouch most parts of the face in a portrait: 'judicious retouching is a very great advantage we have no doubt whatever; it is an absolute necessity, in our opinion, in order to obtain the best result, which is admittedly the object of all art' (Johnson and Brunel Chatwood 1895: 121).

For example, musicians rely heavily on photography and other visual communication to convey their artistic identity. Often the visual language employed in album covers and music artworks extends beyond the visual representation of the musicians or the music and becomes a cultural experience of the band's creative ethos. The album cover for Nirvana's *Nevermind* (showing a baby swimming and reaching out for a dollar bill) was photographed in California in 1991 by underwater photographer Kirk Weddle. Designed by Robert Fisher at Geffen, the cover makes a striking image and is an ironic allusion to the band's counter-culture ethos.

Whether destined for private use or to be exhibited in a gallery or for use in advertising, the constructed photograph engages the viewer in a manner that challenges or distorts notions of truth and reality. Narrativization is inherent in many uses of photography, including documentary (see second part of this book); however, constructed images, more often than not, invite the viewer to immerse themselves in a fictional world. For example, Dolce & Gabbana's campaigns '# Italia is Love' (2016), '# Napoli' (2016) and '# DG Palermo' (2017) draw on the brand's origin in Italy. The images feature typical Italian street settings occupied by a mixed crowd of locals, fashion models and consumers dressed up in high fashion attires. The images illustrate warm-hearted interactions between the locals and the fashionistas, with the locals' attitude and gestures connoting tradition and hospitality and the fashionistas connoting openness and excitement. The strong sense of location, with 'trattorias' and fruit stalls in the backgrounds, marks Italy as a place where these two worlds meet. People's exaggerated gestures, as well as the vibrancy of the scenes, their saturated colours, and polished floors, suggest a stretched reality.

Advancements in technology, and computer-generated imaging (CGI) in particular, have allowed the creation of convincing images that closely resemble photographs and do not require any use of a camera. The proliferation of CGI in certain fields that were previously dominated by photography – such as architecture, the automobile industry and product imaging – has provided a new challenge to photographers who have lost some of their influence in the industry. However, the implications of technological developments do not concern commercial applications of photography only: they also concern philosophical questions regarding photography's survival. Will CGI replace photography as we know it, or should CGI be considered a strand of photography instead?

CGI is not new. In the 1990s the film industry and artists were already employing computer technology to create creatures and settings that had no correspondence in reality. Whether this was to refer to future or past realities or constructs of the maker's imagination, computer technologies opened up new avenues in the creation of alternative worlds that look as real as reality itself.

Lev Manovich in his influential 1995 essay 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography' claims that computer generated images are too perfect to be credible. Computers can create images that do not contain any 'flaws'. This still applies today, and does not only refer to unattainable ideals of beauty, an issue that has received much attention in the media, but also 'flaws' of vision, human and photographic. The difference between a computer-generated image and an image created through a recording device, such as photography or video, becomes immediately apparent in composites that contain both, as happens for example in *Jurassic Park*, a film that is also discussed in Manovich's essay. The solution in this film, as explained by Manovich, was to reduce the quality of the computer-generated images in order to make them compatible to the inferior quality of the video.

Twenty or more years later, such issues of compatibility have been reduced. Digital technology has improved, and images are often composed in their entirety, eliminating issues of compatibility. Image-makers have found solutions in imitating textures to the point where they can produce three-dimensional virtual versions of objects that are more detailed than what the human eye can see. However, even though it does not have to, CGI technology continues to imitate flaws of photographic vision, such as depth of field, lens flares and camera distortions. What is at stake is not limitations of technology anymore but something entirely different, which links back to the content of this chapter: the notion that photographic vision is the means through which these images become plausible. The images are made as if through a camera in order to invite readings as if they were records of reality. CGI's truth is informed by our understanding and experience of photography in any mode of documenting, narrating, objectifying, idealizing, faking and ultimately, relating to reality. Such make-believe rules do not apply to CGI only but to every constructed photograph ever made during the history of photography: CGI only made them more apparent. CGI highlights the point that photography's realism is yet another realism. Photographs are not direct depictions but versions of reality that are defined by photographic technology and the flaws of its vision.

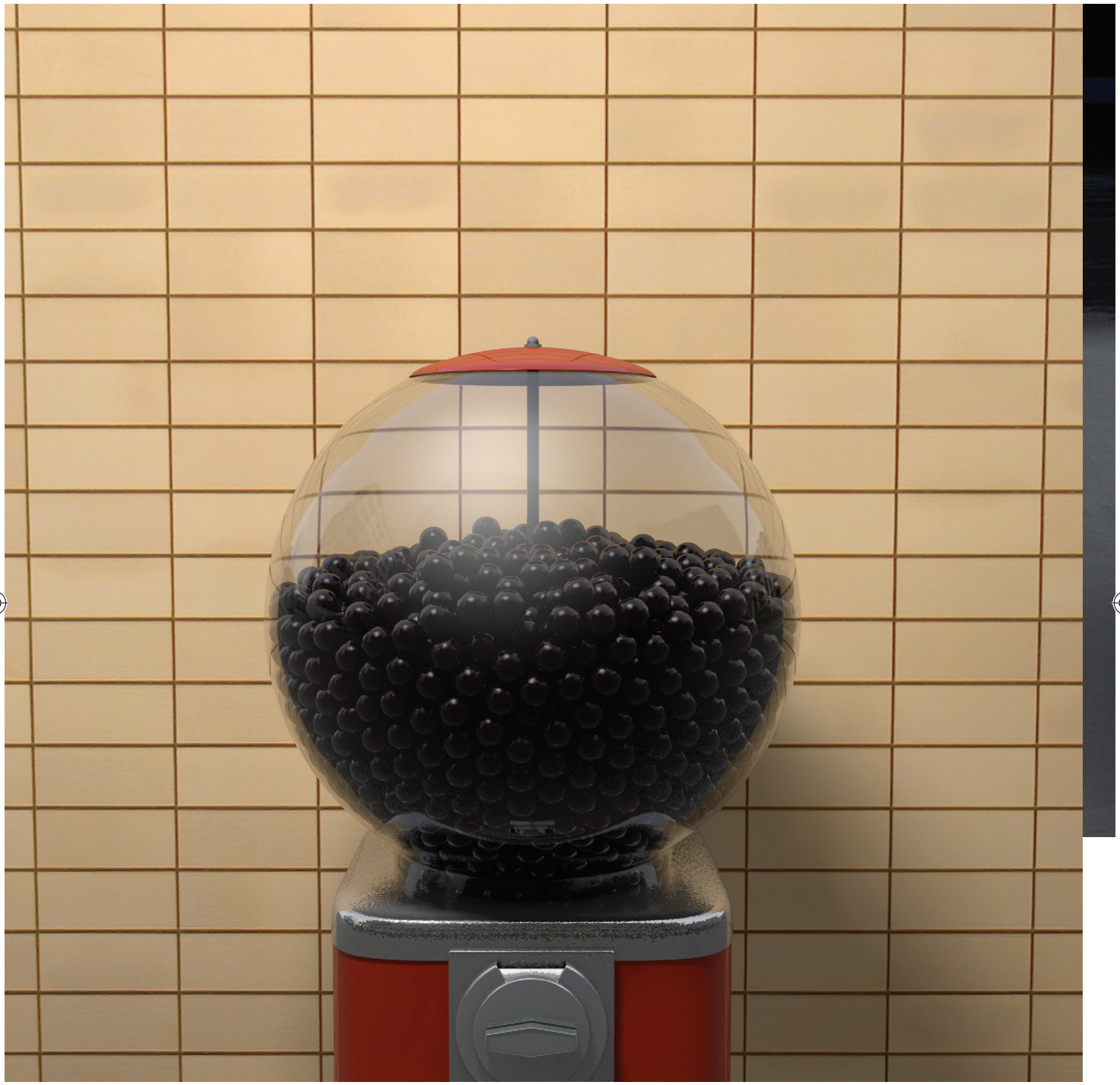
Levels of truth

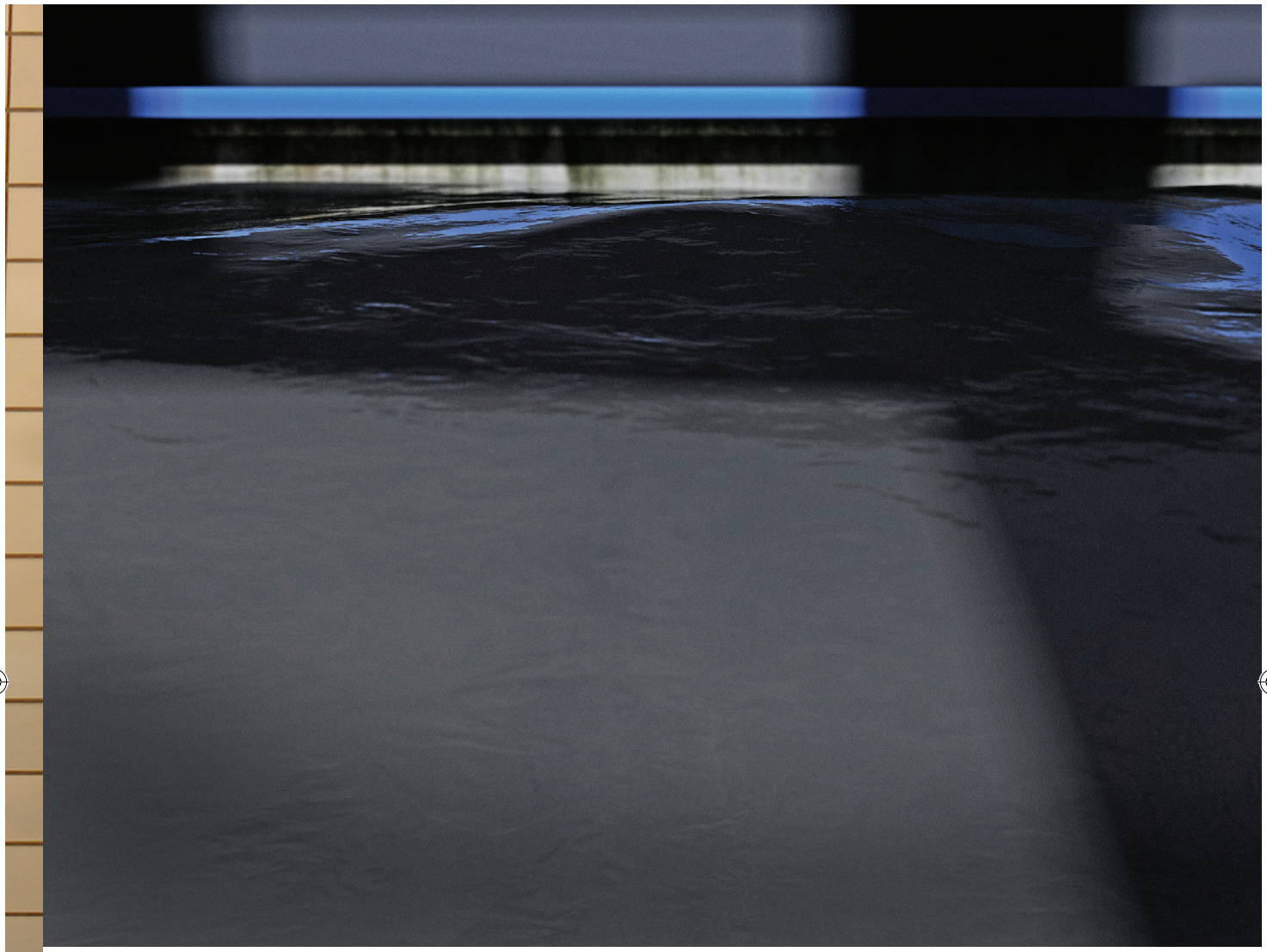
The value the audience attributes to the photograph can be evidential, scientific, aesthetic, emotional, and physical. As such, expectations in relation to the truth-value of the image can vary greatly.

Further, a photograph can distort reality by:

- Portraying the moment, person, place, event or idea in a particular way.
- Including/excluding relevant factors, composition and timing.
- Encouraging projection of the viewer's feelings and ideas onto the image (e.g. in family portraits).
- Abstracting reality, e.g. focusing on detail, form and unexpected viewpoints.
- Being altogether fabricated, staged or constructed.

Do your photographs distort reality? To what degree does it matter?





Title: *Gumball*, 2012 and *Lost Water*, 2010

Photographer: Richard Kolker

Kolker started creating complex computer-generated images while he was still studying photography in the London College of Communication. The images are created with a computer, without the use or aid of a camera; they are, however, exhibited and discussed as photographs.

Research and documentation

Regardless of the nature of a project – professional brief or self-directed – it is important that the photographer is conscious of the way their work communicates. Chapter 2, 'Visual Approaches', will expand on notions of research and documentation with reference to the photographer's intentions and approach. However, as a project develops it is important not to lose sight of basic questions, such as the following: Why a photograph? Why not present the subject through another form of representation, such as words or painting? Such questions, as simple as they may sound, are crucial for the development of mature projects. By choosing to make a photograph, one is engaging with a range of references and implications that the audience will bring to their reading. It is therefore important that photographers too are conscious of these references.

As a photographer's awareness of his/her chosen medium and the issues they deal with grows, their projects and approaches change. Research and documentation can help formulate ideas/concepts as they develop, as well as bringing consciousness to different decisions.

Research

Research aims at a better understanding of a topic or a field. Photographs can be . . .

a. Subject to research: Photographs can be used in order to extract information relevant to research and in a variety of disciplines such as medicine, ethnography, anthropology, archaeology, history and art.

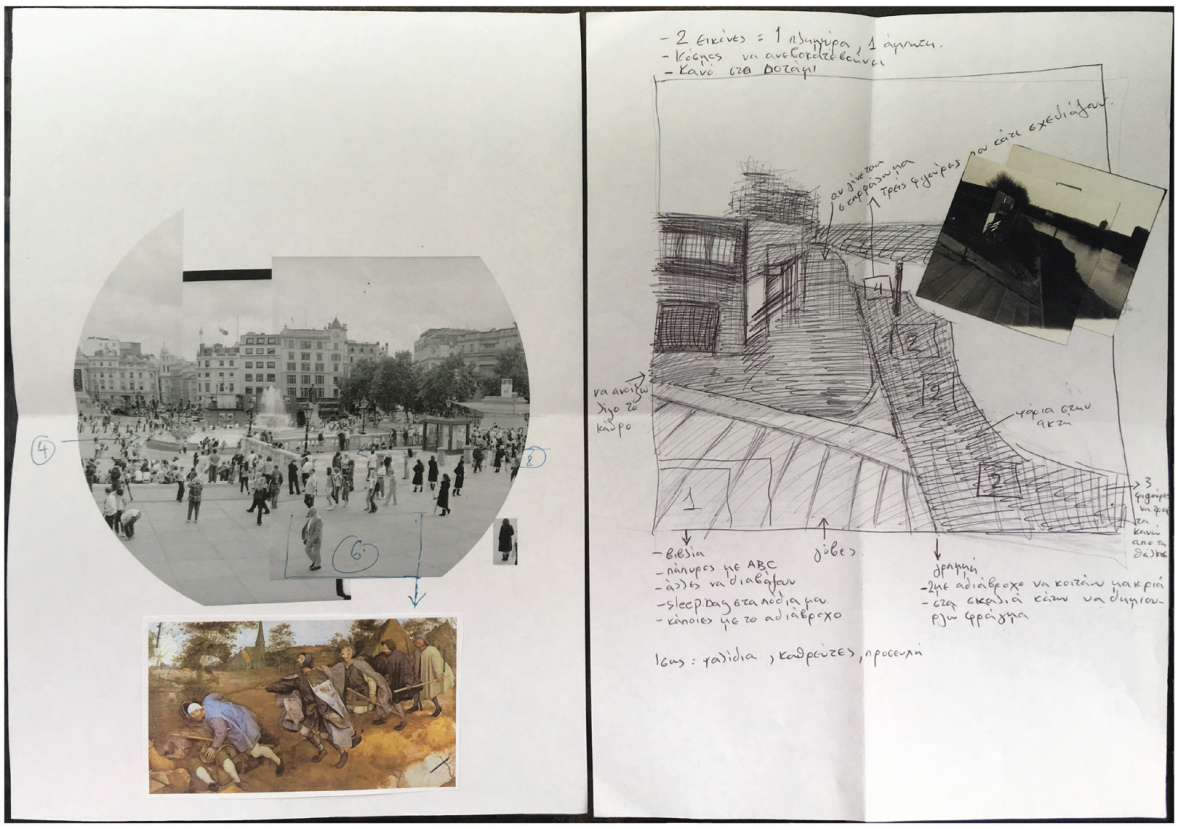
b. Outcomes of research: In this case, research precedes and informs the photographer's approach. Research can be primary (including interviews, questionnaires, surveys and direct observations); or secondary, drawing on existing knowledge bases (including historical, political, aesthetic, legal and market).

Documentation

Most photographers keep a record of their research and project development. This can take the form of a sketchbook, a container or a digital folder containing a range of material relevant to a project and ideas under development:

- Outcomes of research
- Diaries and field-notes
- Release forms
- Budget calculations
- Sketches
- Photo-shoot plans
- Ethics and risk assessment forms
- Technical experimentations
- Sources of inspiration
- Contact sheets
- Ideas about presentation
- Letters and communication

And much more . . .



Title: *Pages from the artist's sketchbook*, 2009-2011

Photographer: Elisavet Kalpaxi

These two pages from the artist's sketchbook illustrate the gradual development of her composite narrative images. This series of images is further discussed in chapter 4, 'Visual Narrativity'.

'Photographers should actively look for ideas, attitudes, images, influences from the very best photographers of all ages. You cannot learn in a vacuum. The whole history of photography is a free and open treasure trove of inspiration. It would be masochistic to deny its riches and usefulness.'

David Hurn and Bill Jay, 1997: 90

‘The Regency Project’ – Richard Rowland

Title: from ‘The Regency Project’, 2007

Photographer: Richard Rowland

Guided by his previous working life as a drugs counsellor and homeless support worker, Richard Rowland applied a documentary approach to photograph the space, its marginalized inhabitants and the objects left behind by previous residents. Using a Kodak Portra VC 400, a Hasselblad 6x6 format and mainly natural lighting with the occasional use of direct flash, Rowland made approximately fifty-five visits to photograph the location and its inhabitants.

Case study 1

For almost a quarter of a century the Regency House, a building dating back to 1827, has offered privately run accommodation for homeless men in the south of England. By the early 2000s, when it was acquired by the Brighton Housing Trust, the building had developed a reputation as an abandoned and dangerous place.

Change came in the shape of the Brighton Housing Trust's plans for a radical refurbishment. During the next three-year period, the building would be divided into two halves and the entire interior would be dismantled and restructured, whilst the residents still lived there.

At this time, Richard Rowland was working for the housing association that had recently purchased the building. When he heard about the state of the building and the plans to redevelop it, he thought it seemed like a great project to get involved with. He arranged a meeting with the director and outlined his project proposal: to document the restoration process of the building.

Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Rowland recorded the building's restoration throughout its refurbishment until the project's completion in 2007 in the book *The Regency Project*, released the same year and co-authored by David Chandler. He conducted interviews with the building's previous and current tenants and compiled a complete record of the property's ownership history. Although his initial intention was to record the building's interiors only, his motivations gradually changed, as he writes: 'People's lives had become enmeshed with this place and the initial process of recording the physical refurbishment became more of a response to the human presence in the building' (Rowland 2007: 11).

Rowland drew upon his professional experience as a drugs counsellor and homeless support worker to interact in an appropriate manner while photographing on location and when engaging with the ethical issues surrounding the project. Rowland's vision of the potential for this project comes from him combining his cultural and social awareness with his personal approach to photographic language; thereby employing his own personal and professional strengths.

Case study 2

Originally trained as a painter, Keith Arnatt is a photographer whose work, besides its references to documentary, exposes an interest in form. Unlike the formalist critics of the 1920s, however, Arnatt believed that art should not be separate from life.

‘Miss Grace’s Lane’ (1986–1987) is a series that emerged out of his continuous desire to document his immediate surroundings in Wye Valley, on the border between England and Wales, but also out of his awareness of the conventions of the landscape as a genre in painting.

Wye Valley is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and through the ages it has lent itself to romantic representations by painters such as J.M.W. Turner and Samuel Palmer. Instead of idealizing the landscape, as these painters had done in the past, Arnatt decided to include signs of human intervention that earlier artists and photographers chose not to include.

Arnatt’s approach embraces – and objects to – elements from both photographic and painterly traditions of image-making. His decision to use a 5x4 camera and his interest in ‘matter-of-factness’ derives from the documentary tradition. However, unlike documentary photographers whose main intention is to raise awareness and to be a vehicle for social change, Arnatt’s intentions were to comment about ‘the nature of picture making’ (Oral History of British Photography 1993). His decision to depict landscape in colour, which was still an unusual decision in the 1980s, was influenced by Samuel Palmer’s use of colour and light. The fact that some of these images could make reference to that tradition through their light, colour and composition was a determining factor in the selection of the images for the series.

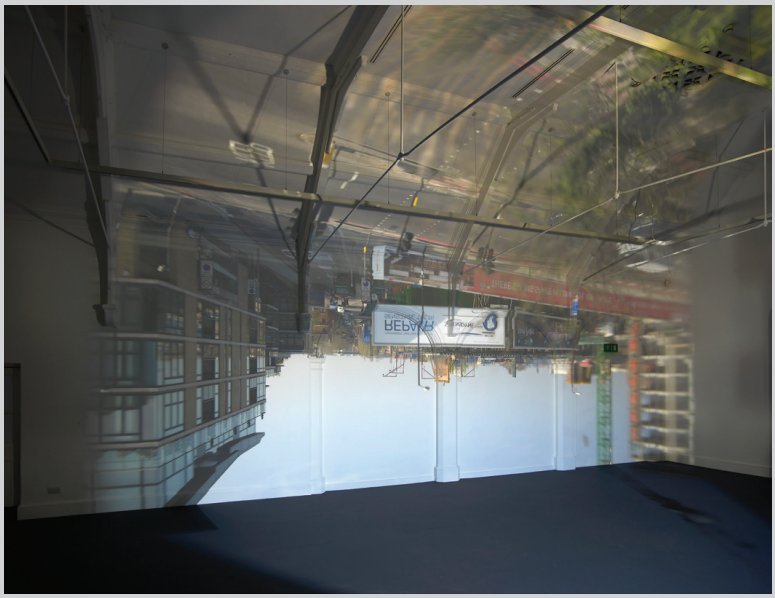
Arnatt’s images draw on different traditions of picture making and were made with an art-historical framework in mind. As such, the kind of audience that this kind of work invites is an informed audience that understands or can recognize these references. Without this awareness, the work’s meaning is lost.

Title: from 'Miss Grace's Lane', 1986–1987

Photographer: Keith Arnatt

'The idea of making pictures . . . which are not chaotic, out of chaos, is something that interested me. . . . What you have in front of you is so, so, so chaotic, that you are almost bound to take chaotic results. . . . But by positioning, by a number of devices, choosing the right light, the right time, and so on, occasionally you will bring some kind of sense to it.' (Oral History of British Photography 1993a)

‘Observation Point’ at Camden Arts Centre – Zoe Leonard



Title: *Arkwright Road*, 2012

Artist: Zoe Leonard

‘Neither analogue nor digital, the camera obscura offers a state of looking, an experience that is not fixed. It opens doors between things, brings awareness into our looking’ (Leonard 2014).

Title: *Survey*, 2009-2012

Artist: Zoe Leonard

Survey provides a geographical mapping of the most popular views of Niagara Falls. The work addresses a number of ideas relevant to mediation, collecting and a systematic, even obsessive, sense of organization.

Title: *Lost for Words*, 2011

Artist: Zoe Leonard

‘Turning to the sun breaks every rule – it’s not only the textbook “Don’t shoot into the sun,” but also a more primal rule, “Don’t look at the sun” – since, as you say, it will burn your eyes out’ (Leonard 2014).

Case study 3

'Observation Point' (Camden Arts Centre, 2012) by Zoe Leonard is an exhibition that is set apart from other photography exhibitions in that, instead of presenting a photographer's response to a theme, its main concern is photography itself. Each gallery, each body of work in the exhibition, suggests different understandings of photography.

Lost for Words (2011) is a series of hand-printed photographs of the sun. The work presents source (light) and outcome (prints), eliminating anything in between.

Survey (2009-2012) presents a collection of 6,266 postcards of the Niagara Falls. Similar images are stacked together in uneven piles, indicating the popularity of each vantage point.

The third space of the exhibition was converted into a camera obscura, *Arkwright Road* (2012). This work is not photographic per se, i.e. it is not a photograph, but it takes the viewer back to photography's ancient origins.

Zoe Leonard is looking at photography as a changing medium. She has often claimed that much of her work is about what we seem to be losing with the advent of digital technologies and photography's contemporary condition:

> I was frustrated by many of the conversations I was encountering around contemporary photography. They often seemed defined by a series of binary categories: analogue versus digital, subject versus material, representation versus abstraction, conceptual versus so-called straight photography. I wanted a more expansive way to think about the medium and found myself asking what photography is, what its limits are, what defines it (Leonard 2014).

Through this body of work, Leonard takes us back to Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, his search for what photography was in 'itself'. Her response to the question is a practical one, taking photography's history, processes, and channels of distribution as a medium for her work. Leonard's work shows that the quest into photography's ontology is an ongoing one and receives new currency alongside technological, theoretical and creative developments.

Exercises: Considering the photograph

- Assemble some photographs by photographers whose work you are instinctively drawn to; put the photographs somewhere you can see them regularly and try to identify the inherent qualities that you are attracted to.
- Compile a set of photographs from your personal collection or ‘family album’. Contemplate the photographs and think about their key components in relation to your response or relationship with them.
- Visit a photojournalistic image bank such as MAGNUM. Think about a general topic and type it into the search field, such as ‘drone’ or ‘Syria’. Have a look at the results, choose five images that you feel best represent the topic, and explain why.
- Pick a documentary image from a newspaper. Read the relevant article and discuss with your peers: How effective is the image in illustrating the story?

- **Choose an existing image that you are interested in and try to imitate it. Create two images, each one imitating a different aspect of the image: content and form.**
- **Visit an exhibition and consider the presentation of photographs: Did it inform your response?**
- **Think about different output formats for an image (for instance: colour or black and white; colour transparency, print or digital file; different sizes and shapes) and presentation methods (newspaper, postcard, book, light box, a three-dimensional sculpture, an installation). How would each option affect the meaning of the image?**
- **Go through a book on the history of photography. Make a choice of images that refer to different traditions, and try to identify contemporary examples that refer back to these traditions.**