History of Photography: The State of Research

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Fifteen years ago there appeared in these pages a brief statement by then Art Bulletin editor Richard E. Spear announcing a series of stock-taking essays on the principal fields of the discipline. These were intended to address "the current state of art-historical research" and question "those recent research tendencies that appear to be most important intellectually." The impetus for the series was reported unambiguously: Spear, as the quarterly’s manager, had observed what he held to be a disturbing downward trend in the quality of manuscripts submitted to it—to the point where peer review judged five out of six unworthy of publication, for want of "substantive art-historical contribution" or failure to raise any question whatsoever involving "historical consequence." Openly concerned for the scholastic well-being of the discipline and troubled that this trend from history to theory might indicate some kind of growing taxonomic incoherence, the editor prescribed his course of methodological self-examinations as a way to diagnose "what research methods are producing the most promising results, and how scholarly inquiry from other disciplines may be affecting art history, whether beneficially or not." Some essays would extol experimentation and interdisciplinarity, he predicted, while others would oppose change in favor of what the editor termed "conventional approaches."

The history of photography never appeared among the topics in this first series of deliberations on the state of research. From an editorial standpoint, this is no surprise: photographic subjects had as a rule fallen outside the wonted purview of the Art Bulletin, deemed better suited to occasional treatment in the pages of the College Art Association’s second house organ, the Art Journal, and other periodicals than to the organization’s more established quarterly. Yet, ironically, at the very moment of the so-called crisis in the discipline there stood no province of art historical writing more contested along these exact lines—methodologically, ideologically, as theory—than photographic history. A latecomer to institutional attention and intellectual respectability, the field suddenly found itself in the 1980s in the uncomfortable position of being the arriviste of academic subjects, both newly sanctioned by officialdom and an occasion for heated controversy. As the decade witnessed, on the one hand, endowed chairs and university courses created specifically to address a burgeoning interest in photography and its history, increasing numbers of doctoral students gravitating toward study in the area, the widening popularity of photographic activities within museums and the book trade, and a voracious new collecting market, it also encountered a growing body of critical writing that took exception to the methods of photography’s formal canonization, one that argued against the mapping of traditional art historical approaches and values onto photographic subjects and, ultimately, for the nonidentity of photography and photographic history itself.

We might imagine this situation as having two moving targets—the advent of a permanent critique of the domain nominally indicated “the history of photography” at the moment of, and in reaction to, its academization on the pattern of (chiefly) the history of art, and the concurrent event of art history itself emerging as an unsettled, contested discipline internally at odds about method, theory, and its relationship to the sphere of visual culture. This situation, generally speaking, obtains today.

But is the history of photography a discrete field? Or is it an essentially interdisciplinary area of study, and if so, how then does it stand in relation to the “conventional approaches” of art history? Does it have its own traditions, canon, and literature? Is photography, in the last analysis, a medium? A set of social practices? A technology with its own identity, unique in its imagistic capacities? These fundamental questions frame any clear understanding of the current state of research into photography’s history, for they decide not only what kinds of problems will be posed of its materials but even who is qualified to pose them, and what criteria are used to judge the results. Where previous installments in this series enjoyed the luxury of assessing how vigorously and in what directions their fields were growing, this one must treat as an open question whether photographic history ever amounted to a delimitable academic subject in the first place, and why whatever promise it might have had as such now seems all but dissolved or reallocated to other areas and specializations. If nothing else, the casebook on the history of photography’s abortive field formation offers a general lesson, for the way it demonstrates the essential contingency of any intellectual cosmology and—perhaps of more immediate concern—for how its long-standing implication in visual culture might predict the disciplinary fortunes of art history as a whole. Classification has its consequences: redrawing of frontiers of knowledge in a particular fashion not only circumscribes, in the abstract, what can and cannot be thought about a subject, but also determines the real-world constitution of departments, careers, curricula, dissertations, research programs, grants, symposia, exhibitions, the language of textbooks, the editorial policies of academic journals, and a host of other concrete exigencies. To discern the historical a priori that brings (or fails to bring) a new object of knowledge into being is, as Michel Foucault once argued, to glimpse something of the threshold conditions that shape our modernity.

Therefore, before arriving at a description of the present state of affairs, it is crucial to recognize the means by which the past has staged discussion of photography as a historical proposition before now, and how this discussion has been handed down to the present generation. If, as a working proposition, we understand a field to be simply the consensus of knowledgeable people, reflected through joint activity, that a subject has appreciable cognitive density and order,
then a field’s imminent “history” may be perceived most directly by tracing the shadow of its written histories. With photography, interestingly, the critical enterprise of formulating official history begins simultaneously with its public announcement in 1839. That announcement was fraught with controversy: both the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot and the Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, backed to varying degrees by their respective national science establishments, claimed priority to the invention, with Daguerre’s bid being further complicated by a challenge from his countryman and original partner, Nicéphore Niépce, and the civil servant Hippolyte Bayard.4 For this reason, both the French and English announcements logically featured a narrative of their claimants’ actions and intentions leading up to their independent successes, with the clear polemical aim of affording precedence. Photography’s literature begins with tremendous self-consciousness about the invention’s origins in experimental science, its potential as technology, its relationship to the traditional representational arts, and the seemingly superhuman properties of its results.

The most noticeable strain in the first fifty years of writing about photography’s history, accordingly, is the partisan, sometimes disguised, usually nationalist debate over who might profess to be its true author, with arguments often hinging on how much of a workable method one need assume to declare the process discovered. Works with titles such as Historique de la découverte imprévue nommée Daguerriéotype, La vérité sur l’invention de la Photographe, and The Evolution of Photography, with a Chronological Record of Discoveries, Inventions, etc., frequently taking the form of practical manuals or handbooks, installed the literature that would administer the earliest accounts of photography to posterity.5 The result was to embed a Whig version of history into its foundations, emphasizing technological improvement over any other element. “The inventors of photography did not wait for the historians to make their discoveries part of written history,” notes Eugenia Parry Janis. “They assumed the task themselves. By situating the discoveries within the evolution of science and technology . . . they established a tradition that would mark every written account that followed: the story of photography would be the history of its technique.”6

The model of photographic history as the history of its technical refinement lived on into the twentieth century, its nationalist overtones becoming more virulent in the 1920s and 1930s, as French- and then German-speaking historians rendered increasingly factional and self-serving versions of photography’s first hundred years.7 More important, these same decades witnessed the advent of the first synthetic histories of the photographic image—the first discernible art histories, monographic studies, and social histories of photography as picture making. To be sure, camera aesthetics had been discussed and debated regularly, from the very moment of announcement, in the journals of photographic societies and the popular press, but an awareness that individual creative achievement, artistic biography, stylistic influence and periodization, or other art historical concepts might be brought to bear on photography had to await the alignment of several factors. One was the capacity for inexpensive photomechanical reproduction. As Anne McCauley has noted, illustrated histories of art of any kind were rare in the nineteenth century, and thoughtful consideration of specific images, when it happened, fell more to the province of art criticism than art history in this period.8 Furthermore, the audience of professional historians, collectors, and interested laypersons needed to make publishing an art history of photography commercially viable did not yet exist. Technical histories and handbooks, fashioned on a popular history-of-science model, were written by and appealed to practitioners of the medium, a specialized but at least extant market.9

Another factor was the more universal presumption by the 1930s that photography could function as art. The saga of Peter Henry Emerson, Alfred Stieglitz, the Photo-Secession and its international counterparts, and the fin-de-siècle promotion of photography as a legitimate form of high art is too familiar to want rehearsing here. The relevant point is that the pictorialist movement, reflecting contemporary Arts and Crafts philosophy, wished to disavow photography’s technological basis—its adherents took great pains to make the by now industrialized photograph appear to be a handmade, unique object, expressing the sensibility of the artist (Fig. 1)—and as a corollary went searching for a usable past, one in sympathy with their ideological aims. For pragmatic as well as intellectual reasons, two nineteenth-century figures were doggedly advanced to serve as forebears: Julia Margaret Cameron and David Octavius Hill. Stieglitz showed Hill’s images at his 291 gallery in 1906 and reproduced gravures after Hill and Cameron in his periodical Camera Work; Clarence White extolled Cameron’s contributions in the pages of the Platinum Print; Alvin Langdon Coburn included Hill and Cameron in the 1914 exhibition he organized for the Ehrich Gallery in New York and the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, titled (significantly) Old Masters of Photography.10 The selections were strategic: Cameron was generally held to be careless of technique, yet the imaginative force of her compositions suggested a prophetically “modern” character in her efforts. Hill represented “naiveté and freedom from all theory,” as Paul Strand wrote in 1920, and possessed an intuitive understanding of camera aesthetics that might now ground “a living photographic tradition.”11

The fact that the first art historical studies of photography in the 1920s and early 1930s chose Cameron and Hill to be their subjects is thus no accident. Roger Fry was conscripted by Virginia Woolf, Cameron’s grandniece, to furnish art world authority to her 1926 biographical study Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women by Julia Margaret Cameron. He complied, with certain qualifications, but along the way theorized in expansive historical terms about the coincidence of the cult of personality and the rise of photography in the 1860s.12 Heinrich Schwarz, a classically trained modernist art historian, is credited with writing the first scholarly, full-length photographic monograph, David Octavius Hill—Der Meister der Photographie of 1931.13 Schwarz, born in Prague, studied under Julius von Schlosser and Max Dvořák at the University of Vienna after World War I, completing his doctoral thesis on the origins of Austrian lithography in 1921.14 He brought to his analysis of Hill the Vienna school’s engagement with the social history of art and its openness to neglected periods and materials. Even the structure of his text is remarkable. Nodding to tradition, the book begins with a deliberation on photography’s genesis, but Schwarz, as stu-
dent of the graphic arts, was singularly concerned with how photography’s invention might be integrated into a cultural history of continuous-tone reproductive printmaking. (This discussion prefigures William Ivins’s published theory of “visual syntax” by some twenty years.15) In the hands of an artist like Hill, Schwarz argues, the graphic potential of photography—“a medium of artistic expression having undreamed-of strength and effectiveness”—might be realized.16 He consequently links early photography with the Realist project, tying it to an urge for naturalism in both the arts and sciences. Hill is made to embody “the essential character” of photography: its truthfulness, its democratic reproducibility, its modern marriage of technical and artistic knowledge. Though ostensibly monographic in intention, Schwarz’s study activated the brand of Geistesgeschichte explanation that would bedevil photographic history for the rest of the century.

Out of the 1930s and these trial projects emerged the English-language text that has shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other. Beaumont Newhall’s The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day began its life as the exhibition catalogue to his 1937 survey exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Photography 1839–1937. Newhall, trained in art history at Harvard under Paul J. Sachs, had developed an amateur interest in photography as a young man and set about exploring photography as an art historical topic privately as early as 1932. In 1934 he delivered a paper at the College Art Association’s annual meeting in New York on the relationship between painting and photography in the nineteenth century, which was printed that same year in the CAA journal Parnassus. By then he was already regularly publishing book reviews on photographic titles, such as Helmut Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann’s pictorial Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie, and reading what available literature he could find.17 When Newhall was appointed librarian in 1935 at the six-year-old Museum of Modern Art in New York, he was immediately put to work compiling the bibliography for Cubism and Abstract Art, the first of four sweeping, didactic exhibitions organized between 1936 and 1938 under director (and fellow Sachs student) Alfred Barr Jr.18 Barr had written into the museum’s prospectus plans for an eventual department of photography, and a step toward that goal would be some major exhibition, which, when it was offered to him, Newhall decided to treat as a historical overview of the subject. As it turned out, of the 841 items included, some 40 percent of the photographs were contemporary.19

Newhall’s formulation of the project followed closely the schema inaugurated by Continental antecedents of the previous decade, such as the 1929 Film und Foto exhibition of the Deutsches Werkbund in Stuttgart. Reflecting current Bauhaus thinking, such presentations actively leveled distinctions between fine and applied photography; the Stuttgart show, for instance, contained astronomical images, X rays, advertising illustrations, and press photos, as well as works by the European “new vision” photographers. Indeed, László Moholy-Nagy was adviser to both the Stuttgart exhibition and Newhall’s: the Museum of Modern Art installation, designed by the Swiss modernist Herbert Matter, included the same large blowups and groups of works hanging on panels, to avoid the “monotony of row upon row of frames” (Fig. 2).20 Barr and Newhall were each aware of the revolutionary po-
litical ethos informing this approach to display in Europe, but in New York the radical motives of the avant-garde were by and large suppressed.

The exhibition’s catalogue proposes a history of photography’s first century built on a tacit technological determinism; its chapters address “Daguerreotypes,” “Calotypes,” “The Colloidion (Wet Plate) Process,” “Dry Plate Photography,” and “Contemporary Photography,” in addition to applications such as “Scientific Photography” and “Moving Pictures” (Fig. 3). But this periodization by technique is offered in the service of a larger aesthetic proposition, what Newhall calls “the Basic Laws.” In an ersatz Wölfflinian move, the author isolates “two fundamental factors which have always characterized photography—whatever the period”: “detail” and “mass.” The daguerreotype and Edward Weston’s _Sand Dunes_ could typify the first; Hill’s calotypes and modern enlargements from miniature cameras represent the second. The aesthetic “schism” created by the medium’s diverging technical potentialities remains a historical constant here, as its two faces—one optical, the other chemical—compete for dominance. Function, intention, authorship, the history of technique per se are secondary to this master concept, whose pedagogical aim was not strictly historical but institutional. As the exhibition’s press release indicates, “it is the hope of the Museum and of the Advisory Council that this exhibition will enable visitors to understand the principles which have governed photography since the earliest days and that it will demonstrate the capabilities of the camera as a medium of expression.” “Detail” and “mass” inaugurates a long line of antipodal constructs that the Museum of Modern Art’s department of photography would subsequently use in the performance of that demonstration.

The important things for us to consider about this, the urtext for most photo history to follow, is its lack of novelty, its pronounced aesthetic bias, the model of historical causation that drives it, and its essential untenability as a self-sufficient explanatory framework. Newhall always acknowledged the written sources he used to prepare his manuscript. He cites Victor Fouque’s 1867 account of the invention, the largely process-based histories of Josef Maria Eder and Georges Potonié, the contemporary writings of Erich Stenger, Gisèle Freund’s 1936 dissertation _La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle_, and, most important, the Hill monograph of Heinrich Schwarz. “His writing had a great influence on me,” Newhall later recounted. “To my knowledge he was the only art historian of the period to consider the spiritual aspect of photography above the technical.” As a graduate student in art history, Newhall was much attracted to _Weltanschauungsphilosophie_, moving from Heinrich Wölfflin to Wilhelm Worringer to Alois Riegl in his search for alternatives to the fact-based “archaeological” approach taught at Harvard. In Schwarz he found ready-made the ghost for his machine; the earlier monograph had already sketched out a zeitgeist theory for photography’s invention and development.

The practically simultaneous, and at first independent, efforts toward it as an end bear witness that the time was ripe: and they refer the individual act of invention back to some motive power greater than the personal, to an impulse that was strictly determined by historical forces. . . . The burgher’s picture of the world had been small and narrow. Now at once he expanded it on every plane of his middle-class existence, in a great, wide circle that spread from his spiritual focus and mental attitude. And with this expansion the need of pictorial witness to his newly awakened sense of life began to grow prodigiously. He felt a pressing desire to have the novel aspects of the new life
In Schwarz’s The intends. as near aid current methods graving century cheaper they could answer text, bourgeois demand, this demand, photographer into conflict with the truthfulness and unequivocalness of his medium, his material, his technique. Moholy-Nagy argued, “In today’s photographic work, the first and foremost issue is to develop an integrally photographic approach that is derived purely from the means of photography itself.” Strand wrote that photography “finds its raison d’être, like all media, in a complete uniqueness of means. This is an absolute unqualified objectivity. Unlike the other arts which are really anti-photographic, this objectivity is of the very essence of photography, its contribution and at the same time its limitation. . . . The full potential power of every medium is dependent upon the purity of its use. . . .” Such differentiation of photography from the manual arts had the local agenda of distancing modernists from their generational predecessors, the pictorialists, whose aesthetic they felt was mongrelized, adulterated with painterly impurity. Newhall’s text was direct on this point: “We are seeking standards of criticism generic to photography.”

The net effect was a history constructed as teleology. If the only good or true photography was “straight,” then the history of photography would be a chronicle of the medium’s erratic climb from primitive intuition to modern-day aesthetic self-knowledge. The pictorialist phase, which modernists viewed as a dead end but which in 1937 occupied about a third of photography’s life span, is treated summarily, its antitechnological underpinnings curiously distorted to fit the author’s scheme. “Instead of ‘improving’ or altering the camera’s image by manual processes,” Newhall writes, “the members of the Photo-Secession believed that the camera’s image was the only valid basis for an artistic photograph. Any control which the photographer had over the image was admitted, insofar as that control was ‘photographic,’ that is chemical or optical.” Late in life, Newhall admitted the narrow and monopolistic criteria that informed his decisions:

I was absolutely bowled over by the school of straight photography. . . . When I began making my selection of photographs for the 1937 retrospective exhibition, I treated soft-focus work as an aberration that should be eliminated. And I found a strong affirmation of straight photography in the magnificent nineteenth-century work of Nadar, the Brady school, Hill and Adamson, among others, and in the twentieth-century work of Eugène Atget, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston.
In this version of history, Timothy O’Sullivan predicts Ansel Adams, Talbot’s contact images anticipate Rayographs, and Civil War documentation looks forward to modern “candid” photography. The rhetoric of the exhibition put the stress on these pioneering “primitives” and on contemporary work, which by Newhall’s estimation made up almost half of the survey’s contents.

The point of this excursion is not, of course, to disparage Newhall—for its day, his was an intellectually ambitious and groundbreaking text, and the author was personally the most genial of men and generous of scholars. His History went through five editions over a period of forty-five years, doing more than any other one source to develop a subject practically nonexistent in this country at the time of its drafting. (Even after other histories began to appear in the 1980s, many instructors retained Newhall as their primary course reading; its concision, clarity, and narrative linearity made it in many ways a model textbook.) Nor is it to privilege a single author as the voice for all photographic history in the high-modern period. We simply need to appreciate how the structure, the assumptions, the scope—to say nothing of the canon—of this work became something like the field’s subconscious, so invariably did its ideas, directly or otherwise, remain before us. Newhall envisioned himself to have written a “vertical” history; “I think that what we are doing now is spreading out horizontally from this core into many areas,” he observed in 1986. That “core” reflected a set of personal and generational values operative in the interwar period, and once instated, they did not change fundamentally or suffer serious challenge until the 1980s.

An example of this horizontality may suffice. Newhall, following Schwarz, embeds an essential tension into his 1937 text: he introduces the notion of an integrated social history of picture making (the photograph as reproducible print) and argues, per New Vision ideology, for photography’s pictorial uniqueness, its exceptionalism. The history begins not in 1839 with the invention of photography but in the fourth century B.C., with Aristotle’s observation of the effect of the camera obscura. Improvements of the camera over two millennia set the stage for the invention, which is “brought into being by a desire to make pictures. Without exception, those men who were instrumental in making it practical were impelled by an artistic urge.” This thesis was elaborated by Schwarz in a paper delivered at the 1965 CAA annual conference in New York, titled “Before 1839: Symptoms and Trends,” where the speaker would contend: “Only in 1839—or to be exact, as early as 1827—does photography emerge. . . . Its spirit, however, has been somehow present ever since, to quote Panofsky, ‘the Renaissance established and unanimously accepted what seems to be the most trivial and actually is the most problematic dogma of aesthetic history—the dogma that a work of art is the direct and faithful representation of a natural object.” The supposition that “in spirit” photography was an invention of the Renaissance impressed John Szarkowski, who, as director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in 1963, heard Schwarz’s lecture. In 1979 Szarkowski invited his student Peter Galassi to develop an exhibition and catalogue around this thesis, namely, that “the ultimate origins of photography—both technical and aesthetic—lie in the fifteenth century invention of linear perspective.” Citing Schwarz as his point of departure, Galassi counters the argument that photography’s invention was primarily technical by proposing its derivation to result from a stylistic Kunstwollen. In his much-quoted formulation, “the object . . . is to show that photography was not a bastard left by science on the doorstep of art,
but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition”—or, as Newhall had put it, brought into being by the desire to make pictures. 28 The exhibition’s title, Before Photography, happened to be the same as that designating the first section of Newhall’s 1937 catalogue. A postmodern and more highly nuanced variant of Newhall’s “desire to make pictures” appeared as recently as 1997, in Geoffrey Batchen’s Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography. 29 Each of these studies engages the terms of the one before it; none stops to consider if the initial premise stands up to scrutiny—if, indeed, the desire/invention scheme is not tautological, built on a by now exhausted model of historical causation.

Insofar as it branched away from Newhall’s vertical core, photographic history of the past several decades has suffered from the intellectual weaknesses introduced by the original configuration. A genealogy of photographic exceptionalism could be traced, most noticeably in the writings of John Szarkowski, and it also finds a curious parallel manifestation in the many discussions of photographic ontology and indexicality by such writers as Andre Bazin, Roland Barthes, Hubert Damisch, Stanley Cavell, and a host of others. Little attention has been paid to how the imperative to define photography’s “essence”—formally, semiotically, or phenomenologically—brackets out discussions of epistemology, that is, how such essences have been (and continue to be) constructed socially, discursively, as de facto apologia for certain preferred stylistic approaches or other ideological agendas. 30 Also latent in Newhall is the potential for a broader cultural history of photographic picture making, but modern attempts remain encumbered by the vast umbrella the 1957 project attempted to throw over its subject. 31 By using history to justify function with aesthetics—by refusing to separate a tradition of photographs conceived as pure aesthetic objects from those intended for documentary or other utilitarian purposes—Newhall consolidated every type of photographic image into the rubric of art history, as he knew it. But where cultural history might ably handle aspects of the complex social, political, and economic circumstances surrounding the production and consumption of art photographs, traditional art history has proven insufficient to the task of handling nonart photographs. The structural deficiencies of such aesthetic totalization lay behind much of the debate arising around photography in the period after 1975.

With the growth of a collecting market for photography in the 1970s and 1980s and its mounting assimilation by the museum into the precincts of high art, the theoretical limits and market interests of formalist criticism’s application to photography—especially vernacular photography—became apparent to several writers, most of whom approached the subject from outside its perceived disciplinary boundaries. Nineteenth-century photography, in particular, was seen as being repositioned and functionally decontextualized, as the imperatives of the museum wall and catalogue page declared the object’s aesthetic autonomy over its historicity as a (usually) published commodity of complicated authorship. The blanket importation of traditional art historical concepts (artist, style, oeuvre, masterpiece) to photographic materials of all stripes in this period engendered forceful reaction in the form of a metacritique, as commentators as diverse as Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, Sally Stein, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Douglas Crimp, Victor Burgin, Christopher Phillips, and John Tagg lined up against photography’s indiscriminate appropriation as art. 32 Though arriving from a variety of theoretical perspectives—Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and linguistics among them—these writers brought to their task an orientation steeped in the 1960s politics of confrontation, and they joined with certain contemporary artists in prompting photography to assume a central position in the larger project of postmodern criticism. In the pages of the journal October, photography became a favored object from which to extend theory, whether it was the putative indexical character of the photographic image (brought to bear, for instance, on Marcel Duchamp and the conceptual art of the 1970s), Freudian or Lacanian exegesis (Jean-Martin Charcot’s 1870s photographs of hysteric, for example, as entrée to a phenomenology of psychic states), or the critique of institutions (Christopher Phillips’s analysis of photography installations at the Museum of Modern Art and Louise Lawler’s picture essay on the arrangement of pictures in museums and private homes appeared in 1982 and 1983, respectively). 33 At the extreme, this metacritique denied all but a nominal existence to photography and its history, as the logic of photographic exceptionalism was turned on its head:

What alone unites the diversity of sites in which photography operates is the social formation itself: the specific historical spaces for representation and practice which it constitutes. Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work... Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. 34

Building on an alternative literature and tradition (Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, John Berger, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, and so on), the period cleared the way for what in principle could have become a cultural history of the photographic image—an analysis of the precise historical and material conditions out of which discursive meaning and authority is constituted—though that program has seen only sporadic realization since.

It is important to note that the postmodern critique of photography responded directly to its apotheosis as a museum object; since Newhall’s day, a disproportionate share of what might be termed the “normal science” of photographic history has arisen from that institution rather than from academic quarters. This continues to be the case today—and therein lies a difficulty. While we must be grateful for the new information and insights museum-based research has tirelessly brought to light, it is undeniable that the practical imperatives of museum business and the museum audience reflect the sorts of scholarship that might be generated there. Monographic exhibitions are favored over thematic projects; marketable subjects get better catalogues than specialist topics or unknown artists; the contents of a show will invariably be dictated by the condition, availability, and attractiveness of original objects. 35 Scholars realize, too, the ongoing problem of art history’s “two cultures,” as the generally shorter texts of nonjuried exhibition catalogues are not perceived to carry
the same intellectual weight as publications through university presses. Moreover, the arena of the photographic exhibition has proven itself a sometimes precarious setting in which to venture critical or revisionist approaches to contemporary practice. One need only remember how the curators of the Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano exhibitions in 1988 and 1989 were rewarded with criminal trials and culture-war campaigns over their contents and funding to recognize how overt political pressure induces self-censorship in the all-too-public realm of display. The traditional conservatism that surrounds museum culture and its congenital difficulty in abandoning the transhistorical, transcendental aesthetic assumptions of its trustee-and-audience-derived power base handicap whatever impulse toward open consideration of photographs as historically and culturally begotten artifacts to which scholars within that institution might aspire.

Photographic history’s identity as an academic subject, meanwhile, is even more fraught with contradiction. What seemed like an emerging new area of study for art history in the 1970s and early 1980s discovered its ordination encumbered by the dual challenges of critical theory and art history’s own disciplinary crisis. With a categorial urge born of the flourishing collecting market and museological attention to the subject, that period saw new positions created specifically to teach the history of photography within art history departments on a number of American campuses, including the University of New Mexico (Beaumont Newhall was hired there in 1971), the University of Chicago (Joel Snyder, 1976), the University of California, Santa Barbara (Ulrich Keller, 1982), the University of Rochester (Carl Chiarenza, 1986), and, notably, Princeton University, where Peter Bunnell was appointed to the first endowed chair in the field in 1972. At the same time, the history of photography became increasingly visible as a subject area within modern or American art curricula: William Innes Homer at the University of Delaware, Eugenia Parry Janis at Wellesley, Alan Trachtenberg at Yale, Carol Armstrong at the University of California, Berkeley, Sally Stein at the University of California, Irvine, Abigail Solomon-Godeau at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh at Columbia, Anne McCauley at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Mary Warner Marien at the University of Syracuse, and Kim Sichel at Boston University are but a few of the more prominent scholars who would make photographic topics an important part of their academic compass henceforward.77 To varying degrees, this later generation absorbed critical theory and the lessons of photography’s postmodern critique and incorporated it into their writing and teaching, helping to set the stage for photography’s reconfiguration as a material available to interdisciplinary, visual-culture analysis.

Yet whatever consensus existed twenty years ago that one’s subject could legitimately be identified as “the history of photography,” in the 1990s a reverse trend was witnessed: that of photography’s redirecting but as one kind of material worked on by scholars likely to declare their primary affiliation to social history, cultural history, or theory, if not literature, the history of science, philosophy, anthropology, or American studies. In real terms, this shift has manifested itself in a general contraction of the field as previously defined. Newly created positions in photographic history are now practically nonexistent, while those left by retiring specialists in the field are customarily filled either with scholars who would identify themselves with theory and media-and visual-culture studies or with modernists who may teach photographic history as a secondary subject. While the effects of this intellectual realignment have in many regards been salutary in redressing the deficiencies and narrowness of a formalist art history of photography, too little attention has been directed toward what might be getting lost in the process. The argument for photography’s social determination and ultimate nonidentity, as drafted by Benjamin and forcefully articulated by the likes of Sontag, Sekula, Tagg, and the early Barthes, is based on the notion of ideology—specifically, the idea that photography is not a medium or mere class of imagery but a commodity subject to the invariable distortions and “false consciousness” that characterize (in Marxist thought) all superstructural products of bourgeois culture. Capitalism “traffic” in a photography that is here taken as pure ideology, an empty vessel or conduit for the transaction of power relations. This is, in other words, a negative, iconoclastic critique of culture, played out through and upon a system of representation that, in its seeming naturalness, transparency, and rhetorical authority, is taken to be disquietingly efficacious to the ends of creating and sustaining power. Marx himself famously selected the camera obscura, with its perfectly inverted rendition of reality, as a metaphor to describe the operation of ideology’s deceptive projections onto consciousness.66 The legacy of photography’s theorization in the 1980s is thus a split: while the countless ontological and indexical discussions have seemingly overplayed deliberation of photography’s essence, it may be said in equal measure that the subject of these Marxist writings was never truly photography at all.

If the nascent field of photographic history failed to establish a secure academic foothold in the 1970s and 1980s, at least part of the reason must be that those recognized as its voice in this period neglected to counter its negative critique adequately with any positive program of study or foundational theory of their own, or even attempt to define for the field coherent limits and scope. One area that might well have been claimed as a proper, albeit more limited, subject of an art history of photography—and what seems to have languished most under the conditions of the past two decades—is what could justifiably be considered the object most immune to extradisciplinary critique: the expressive photograph, consciously conceived to take its place within a tradition of previous artistic expressions and ideas and operate socially within such context. The current state of research has thrown out the baby with the bathwater, tacitly associating art photography with formalism and making its choice as a topic of research appear unfashionable, even as the cultural ascension of this type of object outside the academy continues unabated. Instead, almost by default, the project of photography’s metacritique—the questioning of photography’s social and virtual identities, with the attendant doubt that something called the history of photography is even possible—has been installed in academic circles as its hegemonic subject. As W.J.T. Mitchell once aphoristically put it, “When the tigers break into the temple and profane the altar too regularly, their appearance rapidly becomes part of the sacred ritual.”
To a large degree, the history of photography is now caught up in more comprehensive debates about its inclusion as an object of scrutiny in the realm of visual culture and the implications of standing down what Aby Warburg referred to as the border guards protecting the disciplines. One need only look to the official reception of books such as Anne McCauley’s study of commercial photography in nineteenth-century Paris and Molly Nesbit’s reinscription of Eugène Atget as a working photographer to find the perturbation still looming over what academic photo history is supposed to be. In her 1995 Art Bulletin review of these books, Judith Wechsler betrays the same anxiety about theory that motivated Richard Spear ten years before her: “the emphasis on possibilities rather than on objects of knowledge . . . characteristic of the New Art History and its dismissal of the view of values inscribed in works of art.” McCauley’s and Nesbit’s books were hardly the best examples of overweening theory read into photography (what the reviewer calls “the reduction of the history of photography to discourse”); both works are meticulously researched and annotated source-based studies in the social history of photographic patronage. Wechsler’s objections seem to lie in her colleagues’ decision not to treat their materials as self-evident “art” with self-evident “values”—to not privilege style, aesthetic quality, individual talent, or individual photographs—but rather concentrate on cultural context and issues of reception. The Kunst versus kitsch debate, which, as in this case, wants to frame these terms as mutually exclusive and antagonistic, might appear to have taken on relevance to discussions of traditional art history’s relationship to the study of visual culture, but the art/not art dialectic has haunted photography from the moment of its discovery, and the time has come to move beyond it. What is at stake in scholarship is the probity of the scholar’s thought, not his or her allegiance to real or perceived “camps.” Since judgments about the quality of a scholar’s work are now caught up in a proliferating set of standards and the confusion that arises from their cross application (for example, theoretical compelling but potentially ahistorical arguments versus the more forensic, Rankian model of history writing), the disciplinary specificity of those standards should become the starting point of debate.

Photographic history’s imminent demise as an aspect of art history is neither natural nor inevitable. The elements of its resuscitation and future articulation have already been introduced, though whether these see formulation into integrated programs of study has yet to be decided. The investigation of photographic discourse and the social construction of photographic authority—the study of photography as an idea—remains a productive intellectual vein to mine, as does the work that brings discourse analysis to bear on the issue of photography’s historically constituted relation to vision, perception, cognition, attention, and spectacle. (Geoffrey Batchen’s work and Mary Warner Marien’s recent study Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839–1900 illustrate the potential of the former topic; the writings of Joel Snyder within the field and of Martin Jay, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Jonathan Crary outside it come to mind as promising points of departure for the latter.) A theory of the “photographic apparatus” and lens-based media might be postulated, along the lines of Christian Metz and also Friedrich Kittler’s treatment of inscription systems and mechanisms of memory, wherein the technological possibilities of photography as a medium of information are historized and the camera, like the printing press or the typewriter, is seen to fundamentally change the codes of representation in culture—an especially timely concern in the light of photography’s latest mutation, digital imagery. The intellectual self-consciousness with which photography’s social agency can now be contemplated is the beneficial and necessary end product of two decades of soul-searching on its behalf, but how (or whether) the remains of this process get reassembled into something vital will be determined largely by the institutional forces that presently control photographic history’s fate. Will it, like the field of cultural anthropology over the past two decades, effectively dissolve in the face of an internally directed challenge to its ideological presumptions and limits, only to reappear in a new configuration so different as to be hardly recognizable as the same field? Thomas Kuhn once observed that “successful research demands a deep commitment to the status quo . . .” At this moment, the appearance of a status quo for photography, or for art history generally, seems a speculative notion indeed.

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Frequently Cited Sources


Notes

2. See, for instance, the special issue published twenty years ago, Art Journal 41 (spring 1981), and sporadic individual articles since.
5. Isidore Nippe, Histoire de la découverte imprévue nommée Daguerrotype (Paris: Anis Librairie, 1841); Victor Fouque, La vérité sur l’invention de la Photographie (Chalon-sur-Saône, 1867); Michel Eugène Chevreul, La vérité sur l’invention de la Photographie (Paris, 1875); and John Werge, The Evolution of Photography, with a Chronological Record of Discoveries, Inventions, etc. Contributions to Photographic Literature and Personal Reminiscences extending over Forty Years (London: Piper and Carter, 1890), cited in Martin Gasser, “Histories of Photography 1859–1939,” History of Photography 16 (spring 1992): 59 nn. 11, 14, 15, 39. Gasser’s historiographic study has provided a solid framework for elaboration by subsequent scholars, such as Anne McCauley, cited below, and myself, in this article. He has my appreciation. I would also like to thank those who offered to speak with me about or proposed revisions to this essay; Joel Snyder, Anne McCauley, Peter Bunnell, Joel Smith, Carl Chiarenza, John Szarkowski, Kim Sichel, Mary Warner Marien, and Perry Chapman.
Przybysz also read the text and allowed me to present an abbreviated version of the results (title "Photography besides Itself") in her session at the 2001 College Art Association annual meeting, Chicago.


For instance, Georges Potonié could write in 1925, in his Histoire de la Découverte de la Photographie: "Photography is the art which renders permanent, by other means than that of manual design, the images perceived in the camera obscura. It was invented by the Frenchman, Nícphore Niépce, in 1822. . . . The history of photography is essentially French." Erich Stenger, building on the suggestions of the Austrian historian Josef Maria Eder, published Die Photographie in Kunst und Technik: Ihre Geschichte während 100 Jahren in 1938, wherein he acknowledged the contributions of other countries, but continued: "We know, however, of the excellent contributions by Germans and we protest against the general belief that photography is a purely foreign invention. It was a German who produced the first image by light, it was a German who first used the word 'photography' in a newspaper. It was a German who contributed to the perfecting of photography. . . . The volume includes an essay by Adolf Hitler's personal photographer. Potonié and Stenger, quoted in Gasser, 51–52, 99 n. 19, 20, 30.


See ibid., 89.

10. Hill's early calotypes were reproduced in Camera Work in 1909 and 1912. Cameron's portraits in 1913. (The contribution of Hill's partner Robert Adamson was not recognized at the time.) See McAuley's excellent discussion of this episode in n. 8, 92–95. Hill reviews the Old Masters of Photography project in the Platinum Print 1 (Feb. 1915): 5. The singling out of these precursors was not confined to the United States, however. The German collector Ernst Juhl, for instance, proposed Hill and Cameron as historical antecedents in his 1913 survey of art photography for Berlin's Königliche Kunstgewerbe Museum. McAuley notes that Alfred Lichtwark, the director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle, was already promoting Hill and Cameron in 1893. In 1926, the German Photo-Secessionist Heinrich Kühn was still lauding Hill's achievement in the pages of Photographische Rundschau and other local publications. See McAuley, 93.


13. Heinrich Reymann, David Octavius Hill: Der Meister der Photographie (Leipzig: Insel, 1931). The book was published in English the same year by Viking Press as David Octavius Hill: Master of Photography (subsequent references are to this work).


16. Schwarz (as in n. 13), 18.


22. Quoted in Newhall, 1993, 47.

23. Robert Taft's Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1899 (New York: Macmillan, 1938), published the year after the Newhall text, does not appear to have been an influence; Newhall was indeed Macmillan's outside reader for Taft's manuscript, but only after his own catalogue had already gone to press. See Newhall, 1993, 54, 23.
the other European countries, despite a thriving interest on the part of
museums and the publishing world in photographic studies.

47. These two rosters obviously conflate individuals with different back-
grounds, interests, and generational outlooks in order to underscore the
degree to which scholars identify themselves alternately (or simultaneously)
with photo history and other fields. Another way of sorting working scholars
in the field would be genealogically, by training: Kim Sichel, Anne McCauley,
Molly Nesbit, Maria Morris Hambourg, and Peter Galassi, for instance,
emerged from graduate programs at either Yale or Columbia at roughly the
same time, taught by such modernists as Robert Herbert and Theodore Reff.
Janis and Krauss, both trained at Harvard, represent an earlier moment in this
trend, as do those American art or American studies figures such as Homer
and Trachtenberg, who became important teachers of photographic history
within the purview of their specializations (Sally Stein, for example, studied
under Trachtenberg).

48. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm: Marxism, Ideology,
and Fetishism," in Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago: University of Chi-


50. Aby Warburg, "Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo
Schifanoia, Ferrara" (1912), in The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to
the Cultural History of the European Renaissance (Los Angeles: Getty Research
Institute, 1999). My thanks to Christopher Wood for this reference.

51. Judith Wechsler, review of Appet's Seven Albums by Molly Nesbit (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) and Industrial Madness: Commercial Photog-
raphy in Paris, 1848–1871 by Anne McCauley (New Haven: Yale University

52. Friedrich A. Kittler, Discourse Networks: 1800/1900 (Stanford: Stanford

53. Bob Scholte has written of how the notion of a permanent critique in
cultural anthropology stemmed from a desire mounting in the 1960s to
revitalize and contextualize the "established" anthropology with which many
had by then become disillusioned. Through an "anthropology of anthropol-
ogy," as Scholte puts it, critics "were in a better position to evaluate [the]
discipline as the intellectual symptom of an ethnocentric and imperialist
culture or, ideally, as the empathetic and humane response to a cruel and
fragmented world in political and moral crisis"; Scholte, "Cultural Anthropol-
ogy and the Paradigm-Concept," in Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories,