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# A Document that Transcends Itself: Between Abstraction and Reality

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**A Document that Transcends Itself: Between Abstraction and Reality**

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### **Abstract**

In *A Document that Transcends Itself: Between Abstraction and Reality*, I first present a historical analysis of photography that complicates traditional assumptions of how photographs operate in the world. Rather than functioning as merely an objective record, the photograph takes on a dual status as both a document and an abstraction from reality. The photograph's ability to selectively decontextualize the origins from which it came from and present itself as something other than what it simply records becomes the core of my artistic practice. This paper will also discuss my conceptual investigations into how we perceive photographs when they are placed into new contexts, which inevitably change their meaning. Rather than fixed and unchanging, the photograph is fluid and multivalent in its interpretation. *A Document that Transcends Itself: Between Abstraction and Reality* presents a self-reflexive practice that attempts to deconstruct and understand the very nature of the medium.

### On Truth and Indexicality

The history of photography is a history complicated by the medium's very nature. The relationship between signifier and the signified—what the photograph represents and the relationship of that representation to the thing in the real world, has been the subject of numerous theoretical debates, scholarship and academic publications. Because of photography's indexical nature, the medium has long been credited with the ability to accurately represent our external reality—what modern day film and media theorist Tom Gunning refers to as the “Truth Claim” (Gunning 41). Gunning uses the term “truth claim” because it is just that—not a property inherent, but a *claim*. This claim would prove instrumental in shaping much of the early modernist photographic canon, but would inevitably be outright disputed later in the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of postmodernism, and in particular, the work of artists associated with the Pictures Generation.

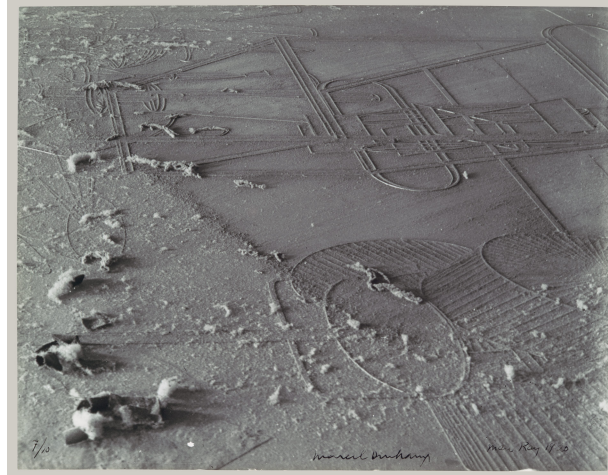
Historically, the photograph's ability to “objectively” represent its subject was instrumental to its primary and intended function in the nineteenth century as a recording device—a means to document an important event, subject, or person for practical purposes. Before I considered myself an artist, this was all photography had been for me. One could say I came to art photography relatively speaking, by accident. Employing it in my youth simply as a means to document my travels with family, looking through the camera inadvertently allowed me to see aspects of the world that would have otherwise been hidden from plain view. The conscious and heightened act of looking, rather than



seeing, an active, rather than passive role, allowed me to unveil the unfamiliar within the familiar, and the extraordinary within the mundane. Photography's unique ability to abstract from reality, to deconstruct and restructure the very world in which it draws from is critical to the conceptual underpinnings of my practice.

### **A Dual Status**

Photographic history is populated with instances of photographs transcending and at times betraying their intended function as truthful, objective documents. Man Ray's 1920 photograph *Dust Breeding* depicts a field of dust accumulated on the surface of what was to become Marcel Duchamp's famous sculptural piece, *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelor's, Even*, also known as the *Large Glass*. The photograph was originally taken as practice for a commission Man Ray had received from his friend, the collector Katherine S. Dreier, who needed several artworks documented in advance of setting up the Société Anonyme, then the predecessor to the Museum of Modern Art (Company 7). Man Ray had been using photography to document his own paintings and sculptures for years, and until 1920 that was all photography had meant for him. Upon Man Ray's visit to Duchamp's Manhattan studio, noticing the dust that had accumulated on the sculpture's glass surface while Duchamp had been away in Paris, he decided to practice for his future assignment by setting an exposure. The resulting photograph was technically sound, but bore little resemblance to any type of photographic documentation Man Ray had ever made previously (Company 8).



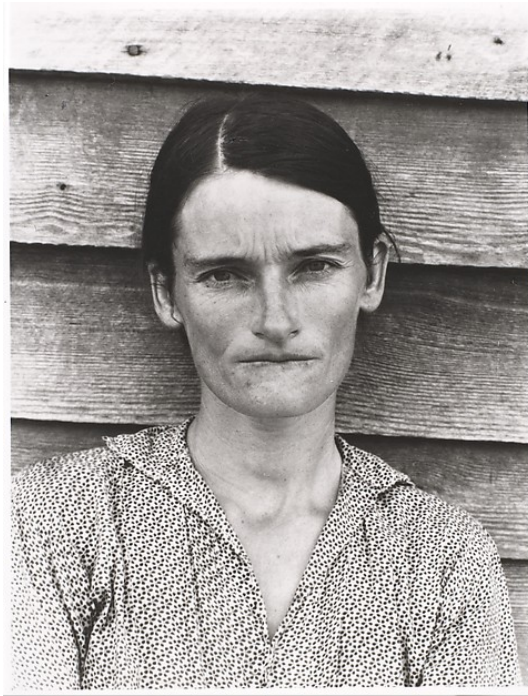
Man Ray, *Dust Breeding*, 1920, gelatin silver print, 9 7/16 x 12 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

The photograph technically exists as a document of another work of art, but appears too singular and out of the ordinary to be considered an accurate record or representation of the sculpture. Man Ray's original negative shows the edges of Duchamp's glass piece and the wall of his studio, but when the image was submitted to the surrealist publication *Littérature* in the October issue of 1922 to accompany an essay on Duchamp by André Breton, Man Ray had straightened the composition and cropped it down to increase the spatial uncertainty (Campany 10). This spatial dislocation is heightened by the fact that the clumps of dust accrued on the etched surface of the glass resembles clouds hovering above an agrarian landscape. At just around the time the photograph was taken, aerial reconnaissance photography from World War I was entering the popular imagination. The spatial uncertainty caused by the way in which the photograph was taken and cropped when printed abstract the photograph beyond simply the objects or scene it represents. The photograph takes on a dual status, both a visual record and an allusion to something else.

## Pictures in The World

As my critical engagement with understanding the nature of the medium grew, I become more interested in photography within an expanded vocabulary—the ways photographs function and operate in both art and non-art contexts. From newspapers to printed advertisements to the proliferation of digital images on the Internet, the history of photography is deeply embedded in the history of the reproduced image. The Pictures Generation artists of the 1970s and 1980s were the first to clearly articulate that when a photographic image is distributed and presented in a new context, its meaning shifts. While artists such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Robert Longo and Louise Lawler are noted as just a few of the prominent figures to directly refer to this in their work, artists have been exploring or hinting at this understanding of the medium since photography's inception.

Ironically, the modernist canon is populated with examples of distinctly postmodern interpretations of photography. While Walker Evans is primarily known as a documentary photographer, his fascination with and depiction of the printed and reproduced image in popular culture predates the work of pictures generation artists such as Sherrie Levine, who would in 1981 famously photograph reproductions of Evans's depression era photographs, such as the 1936 portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, the wife of an Alabama sharecropper (Burton 2). Levine's series would become a landmark of postmodernism; a questioning of artistic authorship, the patriarchal canon, as well as a demonstration that a photograph's meaning is partially influenced by its history and the context of its reception.



Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 5 1/16 x 3 7/8 in.,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

In a striking image by Walker Evans, taken fifty years prior to Levine's appropriation, a tattered movie poster is photographed head-on, so that the flat surface of the poster occupies the same plane as the surface of the photographic image. The careful cropping of the image dislocates the subjects and their emotional responses from its original source. The large rip in the poster appears to slash directly through the woman's head. The artificiality of the printed image is brought to the forefront of our consciousness while simultaneously serving to heighten the expression of horror by the woman represented in the poster. The disruption in the picture plane paradoxically heightens the impact of the subject depicted.



Walker Evans, *Torn Movie Poster*, 1931, gelatin silver print, 6 5/16 x 4 5/16 in., Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

The production and dissemination of imagery increased dramatically in the last couple of decades due to the rise of the Internet, digital technologies, and the proliferation of image-sharing platforms. As someone who was born in the wake of the Internet, the circulation of millions of images created daily has always been a context for making work. In *Blue Sky with Clouds* (053594.jpg), a readily accessible, generic image taken from Google image search has been downloaded, printed and physically manipulated into the three-dimensional form of a paper airplane. This was then photographed in a professional lighting studio on a printed background of the same image. The final result was a printed photograph of the construction, framed and hung in a gallery.



Seth Lewis, *Blue Sky with Clouds* (053594.jpg), 2017, framed inkjet print, 24 x 36 in.

This process involved multiple levels of translation, from two-dimensional digital image to three-dimensional object to digital image and physical object again (in the form of a framed print). The work presents the photograph as an infinitely reproducible and malleable material. In the age of the Internet and digital technology, this understanding of the photograph is now more present than ever before.

### **Evidence for a Fiction**

In a departure from focusing on the mass distribution of the digital image, an analog photograph I came across from a second-hand source became the impetus for making a work that delved into a deeper understanding of the private life of photographs. *Circa 1998: Should Have Spent The Money on Food Instead of Beer and Drugs* is a series of images based off a found photograph depicting a teenage boy, most likely eighteen or nineteen, posed somewhat awkwardly within a domestic interior, staring at the camera with a cigarette in hand. The original photograph, a 5 x 7 in. print taken on

35mm film, was found with no other context except for a post-it note stuck on the back, which read, “C. 1998: should have spent the money on food instead of beer and drugs.”



*Circa 1998: Should Have Spent The Money on Food Instead of Beer and Drugs, 2017, found photograph, 7 x 5 in.*

The project stemmed from my own curiosity regarding the subject of the photograph and his upbringing, briefly alluded to in the contents of the post-it note on the back. The project involved a critical investigation into the subject matter of the photograph, mentally describing and interpreting its contents, and attempting to construct the personality of the subject through subsequent photographs taken from the perspective of the subject himself. The project was largely a process of editing and curation. The photographs were framed and hung without spacing, with the exception of the found photograph, so as to be distinguished from the rest. The order in which I arranged the images was determined based on both what the specific sequence suggested in terms of a narrative and the visual rhythm of horizontal and vertical orientations seen as a whole.





Seth Lewis, *Circa 1998: Should Have Spent The Money on Food Instead of Beer and Drugs*, 2017, found photograph, ten 5 x 7 in. inkjet prints, installation view



Seth Lewis, *Circa 1998: Should Have Spent The Money on Food Instead of Beer and Drugs*, 2017, detail

Theoretically speaking, through my own interpretation of the photograph's contents, the construction of a narrative and reenactment of the subject's persona through



photographs, I am changing the history, contents, and meaning of the original photograph, proving that photographs are anything but static and fixed. The wide room for interpretation associated with reading photographs, especially in the case of personal photographs, is closely tied to the shifting nature of processes involved with memory production.

In Annette Kuhn's essay *Remembrance: The Child I Never Was*, the author meditates on a photograph taken of her in the sitting room of her childhood home in Chiswick, London in the early 1950s. In the photograph, Kuhn is roughly six-years old and admires a brand new pet parakeet, happily perched on her outstretched hand. The parakeet is a recent gift from her father, who also happens to be the photographer. On the back of the photograph, an inscription by the author's mother dating the photograph has been crossed out and replaced by the author with a different one based on her own recollection. As Kuhn's meditation unfolds, so does a family drama, a tangled, fragile web of memories associated with the author and her upbringing, as told through the contents of the family photograph. Kuhn interprets the conflicting attribution of the photograph's date as an attempt on her mother's part to reclaim ownership of a memory that through the contents of the photograph circumvents her presence entirely. Kuhn acknowledges in the essay that her own reading of the photograph is inherently biased, and is affected by her own memories, each colored by subjectivity and emotion. Kuhn, like every other protagonist in the story, has a different tale to tell, which is always subject to change at each retelling.

Kuhn sums up perfectly the nature of a photograph in the beginning of her essay: "Photographs are evidence, after all. Not that they are to be taken at face value,

necessarily, nor that they mirror the real, nor even that a photograph offers any self-evident relationship between itself and what it shows. Simply that a photograph can be material for interpretation—evidence, in that sense: to be solved, like a riddle, read and decoded, like clues left behind at the scene of a crime. Evidence of this sort, though, can conceal, even as it purports to reveal, what it is evidence of’ (Kuhn 395).



Annette Kuhn, *As a Child*, Annette Kuhn Archive

### **Scratches on the Surface**

The photographs that culminated in the body of work titled *Surface Details*, were an attempt to get back into the active process of looking, capitalizing on photography’s ability to abstract elements of the world from my surroundings. The common thread tying each image in the final installation was glass as a subject matter in the composition.



Seth Lewis, *Surface Details*, 2018, four inkjet prints, 20 x 16 in. each, installation view

In one image, a potted plant, cramped within the frame of the composition, appears to be pressed against a clear glass window. When viewed closely, the orientation of the leaves and the smudges and dust accumulated on the surface of the glass window become visible.



Seth Lewis, *Surface Details*, 2018, four inkjet prints, 20 x 16 in. each, detail

In another photograph, the surface of the glass itself becomes the primary subject. Heightened by selective focus, a long, winding abrasion on the surface of a glass storefront display mimics the curve of the electrical wire attached to a sign encased behind it. The framing of the printed photographic images behind glass when installed in the gallery subtly echoes the details of the surface of the glass captured in the photographic image. The title of the work, *Surface Details*, signals for the viewer to look closely, so that one begins to discern that the smudges, scratches and dust occur in the actual image rather than the glass they are mounted behind. This prompted act of close looking also functions as a metaphor for the medium.



Seth Lewis, *Surface Details*, 2018, four inkjet prints, 20 x 16 in. each, detail

### **Looking Through Glass**

The decision to compose a suite of photographs that take glass as a subject was an intentional nod to the physical and symbolic identity of photography. Glass not only functions as a compositional tool in the production of visually striking images, fragmenting a scene or projecting one onto another using the material's slick, reflective surface, but is itself a physical property inherent in the medium. In the nineteenth century, photographs were originally made on glass wet-plate negatives, and then on portable glass dry-plate negatives before the advent of film (Cole). Photography is by and large only made possible through the high quality optical glass of a camera lens. Today, countless photographs are taken through the glass of a mobile phone, and seen through a never-ending cacophony of fragile glass screens. The most striking visual example of glass occurring as a physical characteristic of the medium is in a photograph by André Kertész taken in Paris in 1929. The photograph depicts an ordinary rooftop view of the district of Montmartre, but appears to be taken through a broken glass window. In actuality, the photograph is the result of a broken glass plate negative, badly damaged in transport after Kertész left Paris for New York (Cole). Kertész decided to print from the broken glass negative anyway. The photograph is symbolic on multiple levels, and perfectly sums up the complex and contradictory nature of photography.



André Kertész, *Broken Plate*, 1929, gelatin silver print, 7 5/8 × 9 3/4 in., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA

### **Between The Mirror and The Window**

Throughout its history, photography has long been likened to being both a window and a mirror. In 1978, MoMA Chief Curator of Photography John Szarkowski's exhibition *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* would take these two analogies as its curatorial framework (Szarkowski). Rather than an encyclopedic survey of individual photographers, Szarkowski grouped the work into two separate categories: photographs made by artists who used photography as a *window*—through which the exterior world is explored and depicted accurately for all its presence and reality, and those who used photography as a *mirror*—a projection of the photographer's own identity and artistic expression onto his or her surroundings. While the exhibition may have unintentionally proposed these two metaphors as opposite ends of a spectrum, Szarkowski is the first to admit this dichotomy is not a finite one: "It must be emphasized that the distinction proposed here...is not intended as a method of dividing recent

photography into two discrete and unrelated bodies. On the contrary, the model suggested here is that of a continuous axis...No photographer's work could embody with purity either of the two divergent motives..." (Szarkowski 19). As Szarkowski suggests, but does not fully articulate, the window is not transparent, and is always to an extent a mirrored reflection of the photographer's own inclinations and interpretations. Kertész's view of Montmartre makes visible for us the fragmentation and distortion that occurs in a photograph. What we see is really an abstraction. The glass windowpane between ourselves and the world is fragile, and susceptible to shattering. This facet of photography becomes problematic for any claims for complete objectivity in representation, but it is also one of the medium's greatest strengths.

The photograph's ability to abstract elements from reality and transcend its status as a mere document is why I find the medium so compelling and choose to work within its technical and formal parameters to this day. The lens of the camera becomes a tool by which the world can be restructured to formulate new meaning. This unique characteristic of photography itself becomes a subject matter of my work. The result is an artistic practice that in a self-reflexive gesture looks to its own inner-workings for structure and significance.

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