DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY: TRUTH, MEANING, AESTHETICS

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One of the perennial themes in the history of photography is the introduction, application and reception of new technology. Be it the dry-plate or the Polaroid, upon introduction, the practical and aesthetic potential of every innovation has been vigorously debated by photographers, journalists and critics. It is not surprising, then, that the emergence of digital photography has generated fraught proclamations, each announcing the dire effect of electronic imaging upon the practice and understanding of still photography, as we have known it. The current dialogue is often framed in terms that historians of photography have long applied in other contexts: truth and primacy. The first discussion explores the impact of the digitally mediated image on our perception of the ‘truth value’ of photography. The second discussion, regarding ‘primacy’, compares the influence of photography on existing modes of visual representation (printmaking, painting) in the mid-nineteenth century, with the forecasted effect of digital media on photography in the early twenty-first century. The contention, in this case, is that as photography toppled the representational pre-eminence of painting, so too digital picture-making will undermine and, eventually, supplant the chemically produced image. A critical examination of the ideas surrounding these discussions leads to a wider and richer understanding of digital imaging, its artistic possibilities and its place in the ongoing history of photography.

Truth and the Photograph

Much of the writing on digital imaging concerns itself with the erosion of the reportorial value of the photograph in the face of the capacity of the computer for seamless or invisible alteration. Max Kozloff, an articulate partisan for the chemical photograph, concedes that the digital image is a ‘big deal…If…certainly not a clean break with our past visual culture, computer generated imaging bids to undermine it’. The intellectual basis of Kozloff’s opinion is a familiar one. The conventionally made photograph enjoys, what film theorist André Bazin termed in the 1940s, an ‘indexical’ tie to its subject. That is to say, in order for a photographic image to exist, some pre-photographic scene, object or event must first have impressed its features on the film’s emulsion. This must happen regardless of the mediating activities of the photographer, who determines point of view, framing, focus and a host of other important, but ultimately tertiary, qualities. This is not to claim that traditionally made photographs are completely free of the imprint and subjective decisions of the image maker, but the chief effect of the photograph, that quality that distinguishes it from all other modes of representation, is this decal-like relationship back to the subject.

Digital imaging, which allows image alteration without detection, stimulates some to question the photograph’s tether to actuality. Writers in the popular press, but also many informed authors of theoretical studies, highlight the capacity of the digitally revised image to subvert our ‘faith in the photographic image’, to use Bazin’s phrase. Review a dozen or so essays on the subject, and one is variously informed that the digital image ‘challenges, nullifies, damages, undermines, subverts, and perturbs’ the veracity of the chemical photograph.

The pitched rhetoric that often characterizes such discussions would certainly be justified, were it not for the fact that a reassessment of the photograph’s authority as objective witness has dominated critical and creative work of the past twenty or so years. Historically speaking, the proposition that the digital manipulation of the photograph undermines its tie to objectivity is really little more than an intriguing coda to what has, after all, been an ongoing withering assault on the notion of photographic certainty. Even if we accept the concept of the indexical nature of the photographic representation, recent commentary on photography concerns itself more with issues of representation, than with ontological essence. As Roland Barthes pointed out as long ago as the 1960s, no photograph operates purely in terms of its denoted, literal content. Always and simultaneously, an entire constellation of connotative meanings attend the image, and at this second level of signification, all interpretation is culturally (and therefore, situationally) coded. The

‘truth’ offered by images is, in fact, highly contingent. Any emphatically fixed notion of photographic veracity must be regarded as highly suspect.

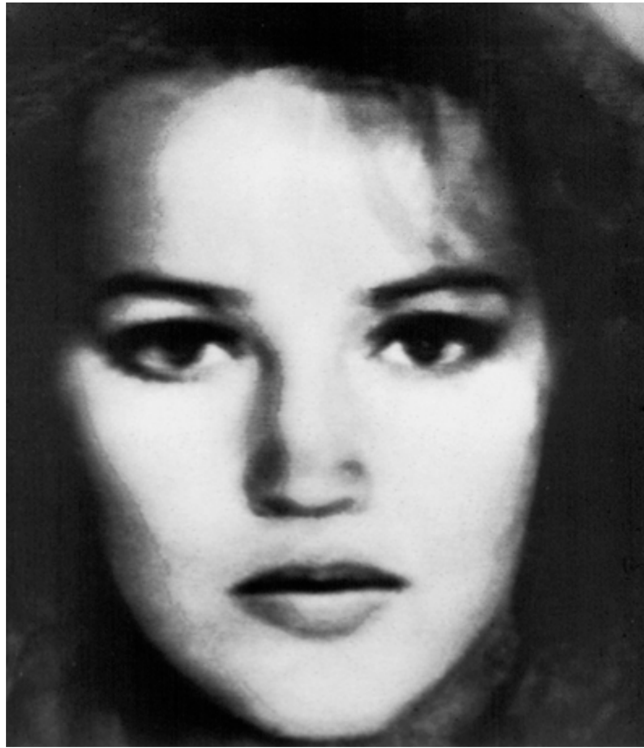

Figure 1. Nancy Burson, ‘Beauty Composite (Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep)’ 1984.

A look at some recent photographs, digital and conventional, makes the point. Nancy Burson’s well-known digital composite portraits of the 1980s have no referent and no index back to a real object or being. In contemporary theoretical terms, this feature of her work passes without argument (figure 1). Here, as in any conventional photograph, if we accept the proposition of the photograph’s complex commerce with truth, the idea that we have been distanced from a reassuringly stable actuality, fails to astound. Burson’s images force us to question our intuitive, and often erroneous, presupposition of photographic reliability, but so too, does the work of others using conventional photographic technique. For example, John Pfahl’s work of the 1970s and 80s, his deadpan, often witty interrupted landscapes, subvert notions of absolute photographic space. Robert Cumming’s false documentary scenes call into question the often uncontested use of the photograph as an evidentiary tool. Sherrie Levine’s notorious photographs of photographs, often remarked upon for their interrogation of notions of authorship, also produce a dizzying ‘mirror in the mirror effect’, telescoping the distance between photographic referent and image to the point, perhaps, of breaking Bazin’s confidently declared tether to the pre-photographic subject. There are many other examples of contemporary artists using conventional techniques exploring the medium’s relationship to fact, including the efforts of Sarah Charlseworth, Christopher Williams, and Vic Muniz. While the example of the digitally altered photograph does much to complete the argument for photography’s suspect status as an arbiter of truth, such qualities are hardly unique to photography’s digital incarnation and contribute little to establishing the wider importance of electronic imaging.

A Taxonomy of the Digital Image

If the supposed epochal effect of digital imaging on photography can not be found in the realm of the ‘truth value’ of the image, what then are the factors inherent in the new technology poised to transform photography’s material and conceptual framework? For the convinced—critics and practitioners alike—who embrace this notion, it becomes necessary to identify the essential, distinguishing characteristics of the digitally altered photograph. Such arguments issue from a critical point of view that most values artworks’

medium-specific attributes. The foundation for these commentators is the art historical notion that all new media begin by imitating some earlier established form, and then proceed to differentiate themselves by exploring and charting their own unique ontological and epistemological terrain. A.D. Coleman's remarks epitomize this thinking when he writes that 'some new and very medium-specific forms are going to emerge…I think you'll see self-referential stuff…that will be very computer specific.… It is just a matter of time'. Proponents of the idea that the computer mediated image represents a fundamental revision of our understanding of the photograph, suggest several characteristics that distinguish electronic picture making from its analogue predecessor. The digital photograph, we are told, is unique by virtue of its easy malleability. The electronic picture, at least in principal, is always unfinished. An image file, thought of one way, exists in a nearly Heisenburgian state of pure possibility. When we situate the digital image in the process of construction, display and observation, its effervescent electronic status is temporarily arrested. However, the source file remains intangible, always open to further duplication and alteration. Taking this idea to the logical extreme, one could argue that the digitization of photography leads to the dematerialization of the photographic object. Can one speak of a finished product, when the essence of the image-as-computer-file is its transient screen presence or an ever-mutating series of versions?

Upon accepting the characteristic of alterability, two sub-types of digital pictures immediately assert themselves—the 'seamlessly manipulated photo-like' image, and what can be termed, the 'collage aesthetic' photograph. The ability to revise an image using digital technology is unprecedented. William Mitchell notes the digital photograph has 'none of the fragility and recalcitrance of the photograph's emulsion-coated surface…The essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer'. According to Mitchell, the chief activities of the digital artist revolve around gestures of 'appropriation, transformation, reprocessing, and recombination; we have entered', he claims, 'the age of electrobricollage'.

Two examples illustrate the extreme points on a continuum of digital photo-collage, ranging from a cut-and-paste painting technique to a wholesale immersion in the sensibility of assemblage. The work of Martina Lopez creates a relatively realistic impression of pictorial space, although the illusion is purposefully imperfect (figure 2). While scale and placement is fairly rational, the viewer easily recognizes an artistic invention. The pictures are peopled by paper doll-like cut-out figures; sharp edges, lighting and shadow mismatches, colour cast discontinuities and a host of other obvious, and not-so-obvious, features cue the viewer to the fiction. Such images are coherent, to a point, but as with paintings, we are never unaware of their conventionalized status.

Figure 2. Martina Lopez, ‘Bearing in Mind 1’ 1998.

In contrast, the electronically collaged image by Sarah Shepherd refuses any sense of the Euclidian spatial rationality we associate with conventional photographic representations (figure 3). While deliberately structured, this picture is dominated by fragmentation and discontinuity. The nature of this image is certainly far from any notion of the photographic frame as a transparent ‘window on the world’. The constituent elements of this image began as photographs, and within any passage or sub-unit, it has the rigid spatial and descriptive continuity of the traditional image. Globally, however, the space is emphatically interrupted, abstracted and expressionistic.

Figure 3. Sarah Shepherd, Untitled 1996.

The work of Lopez and Sheppard is carefully wrought, skilfully crafted and sustains a notable level of serious attention and consideration. The vast majority of similar images produced by contemporary digital artists, though, fails to compel; there is a vague 'already-been-done' sensibility about most digital assemblage. To address the ennui such pictures provoke, we need to acknowledge that collage as a structural synthetic technique is, after about ninety years of exploration, a thoroughly familiar visual strategy in other two-dimensional media. The digital photo-collage pieces presently produced give the mannered impression one might imagine on hypothetically encountering a contemporary poem presented as a sonnet. It is not that doing either would not take an admirable level of technical and imaginative skill; it is just that both the collage and the sonnet are thoroughly rooted in the concerns of historically remote aesthetic movements. Today, it would be almost impossible not to experience these forms in a manner that is either inflected by nostalgia, or perhaps in some postmodern context, ironic distance. The use of collage by a great many present day digital artists operates not in the context of some subtly signalled postmodern quotation or appropriation; the technique is employed with a slightly disconcerting, naïve sincerity.

For those advocating a medium specific path for digital photographic exploration, we reach an interesting—perhaps intractable—problem. One of the defining characteristics of digital photography is its capacity for easy combination and reassembly of images. The problem is, discounting a few historical appearances, while assemblage may be new to photography, it is distinctly 'old news' elsewhere. If one's task as a digital artist is, as suggested by Coleman and others, to investigate, employ and foreground those characteristics most properly digital, many electronically collaged images are bound to disappoint. This is because something critical is lacking. An aesthetics based on medium specificity stresses those essential characteristics unique to a given art form. Mutability may be a central quality of the digital photograph, but it is by no means a specific characteristic. Paintings, drawings, and prints all share this capacity of synthetic open-endedness.

Seamless Digital Photography

If the 'collage' represents one boundary of digital photography's trajectory, then what one might term the 'seamless' image figures as its opposite. The seamlessly manipulated digital photograph, unlike its collage counterpart, attempts to efface all obvious evidence of revision and alteration. The seamless virtual photograph may be extensively worked, reconfigured and modified, but, crucially, the image bears no visible trace of revision. No contextual cues forthcoming, the virtual photograph could be mistaken for a conventionally executed image. Of the seamless variety of digital pictures, two subcategories may be designated: the 'virtual photograph' and the 'plausibly fantastical' image.

The well-known work of Pedro Meyer falls into the virtual photograph category. The image, 'Biblical Times', appears on Meyer's Truth and Fictions CD-ROM (figure 4). The picture depicts a scene of a New York City sidewalk. The content here is fairly prosaic—pedestrians, aloof and grim faced, are arrested in mid-stride by the compressed temporality common to all conventionally made photographs. Much of the composition is dominated by the figure of a gaunt, bible wielding street preacher who occupies the picture's left foreground. The image is lent an extra note of drama by the steam that erupts through sidewalk vents viewable in the central area of the frame. Given the combination of these elements, a 'fire-and-brimstone' connotation serves as the motivation for the street cleric's electronic inclusion within the piece.

Figure 4. Pedro Meyer, ‘Biblical Times’ 1995.

Critic Jonathan Green states that digital pictures of this variety ‘remain essentially photographic. They draw their strength from a direct relationship to ‘photographic reality’, that surface world of reflected light that the camera has so precisely described throughout its history’. Viewed as a traditionally wrought image, we are predisposed to understand Meyer’s picture as accidentally ironic in the manner that fortuitously captured photographs often achieve. The image maker captures for us a situation provided both by his or her organization of the frame and the external world that imposes its own stamp on the picture—the vagaries of circumstance and chance encounter. In the traditional documentary shot, meaning acquires an extra weight, because we understand that it is both planned and the result of chance, structured and to some degree accidental.

Knowing the preacher has been layered into Meyer’s picture, we are primed to seek directly after the artist’s intent. The effect is to move us from an impression of lucky irony, tinged by melancholy, to the different valence of arch commentary. The nuance of the virtual photograph is that a full understanding of its meaning and effect depends on our awareness of its digitally contrived origin, despite the invisible modifying techniques employed in its synthesis. Since, by definition, we can’t know this through the picture, we rely on explanatory text or a ‘before and after’ comparison to foreground the level of computer intervention used to create the image. Such, for instance, is the case with Matthias Wähner’s ‘Man without Qualities’ series (figure 5). Here, it is only through our prior acquaintance with the canonical originals that we recognize the artist’s Zelig-like appearance throughout. The series’ rhetorical point—the assertion that photographs and historical narratives are constructs of equivalent contingency—flounders without a clear awareness of WÃ¤hner’s fairly skilled gesture of forgery.

Figure 5. Matthias Wïhner, Untitled 1996.

All conventional photographs are charged with a bereft, empty sadness, as the subject and moment represented is forever beyond spatial and temporal recovery. Some modicum of solace might be offered, in principal at least, by the possibility that we could revisit the subject, assuming that it, he, or she is living or extant. The digital 'virtual image' offer us no such hope. Aware of its synthesized status, we long after a perfectly described, yet unattainably tantalizing hallucination, made seemingly real. Our critical spirit may refuse the credibility lent the image by its compelling resemblance to an indexical image, but intuitively, we are nonetheless swayed.

Another form of digital artwork also takes advantage of the capacity of the computer to seamlessly alter the photograph—the 'plausibly fantastical' image. Disintegration #8, by Eva Sutton illustrates this category (figure 6). The image requires careful viewing. At first glance, the subject of the photograph appears to be medical research apparatus. A human hand hangs suspended from an unidentified electrical armature; the antiquated industrial design of the stand and support structure, and the sepia colour tone, suggest that this is an old photograph. The whole assembly is bluntly described, much in the manner of a simple documentary record. Are we examining the result of an anonymous nineteenth century dissection, its original investigatory purpose now unknowable and ominous?

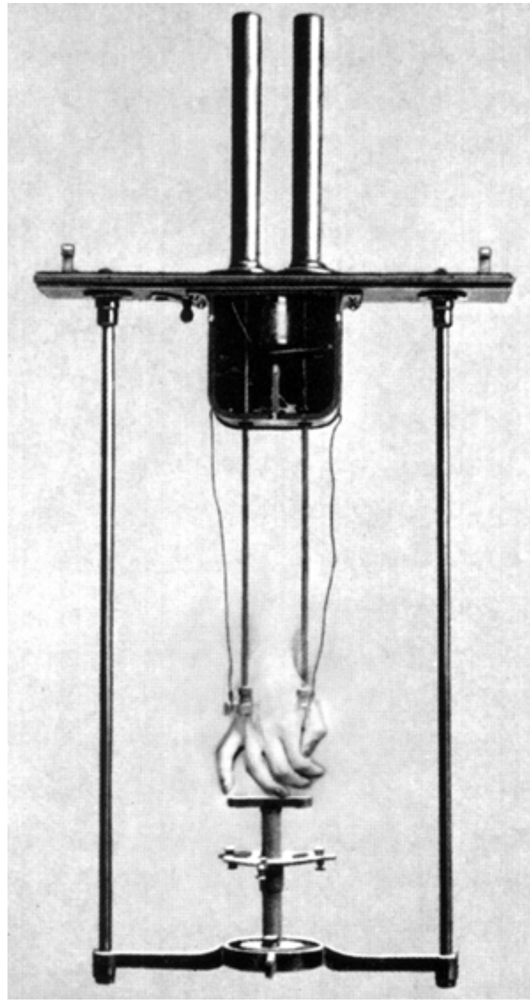

Figure 6. Eva Sutton, 'Disintegration #8' 1996.

On closer examination, we realize this is an impossible picture. The hand is not skewered onto the central poles descending from the top of the frame. Instead it blends imperceptibly into them, creating confusion between negative and positive space. The effect is similar to that of an Escher print, and immediately, perceptually, we understand an abstract idea. Projecting three-dimensional objects onto two-dimensional surfaces, forces an abstraction that normally goes unnoticed. Sutton's image exposes the spatial trickery of the 2-D representation. Such gestures, to the extent that they force one to question the image on such a rudimentary perceptual level, also prompt a sceptical attitude towards the content and meaning of illusionistic pictures.

Beyond the perceptual play, Sutton is using a time honoured surrealist tactic—the chance, irrational collision of familiar objects, producing a reaction of simultaneous fascination and revulsion. We move beyond the literal topographical veracity of the photograph, contacting instead normally forbidden areas of the mind. The quality which gives such images the capacity to astonish and shock is the ability to join normally unremarkable, unrelated objects with a unexpected, seamless inevitability. The psychic equivalent would be the dream (or subconscious mind) that creates its own irrational synthesis of reality fragments. The effect is that the fundamentally illogical begins to make a revealing, and often upsetting, sense. Coupled to the digital photograph's false 'reality effect' these perverse impossibilities are rendered disturbingly lucid—achieving the status of a waking nightmare.

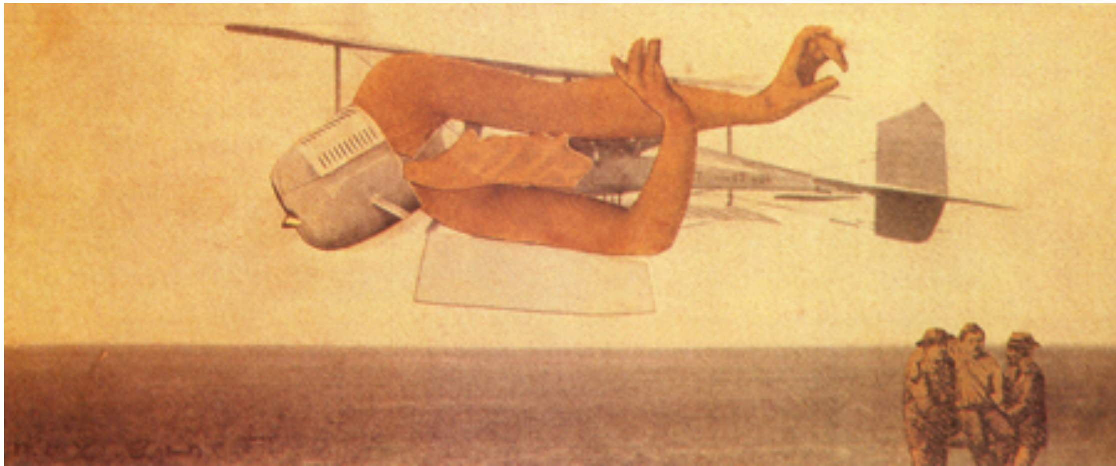

Figure 6. Max Ernst, ‘Murdering Aeoroplane’ 1919.

It is instructive to compare Sutton’s work with examples of well-known Dada pieces, such as Max Ernst’s collage ‘Murdering Aeroplane’ of 1920 (figure 9). The ‘plausibly fantastical’ photograph shares many of the same goals and methods of Dada and Surrealism. The fantastical, photo-realistic image is the ideal Surrealist’s tool, invented about seventy years too late, but what Ernst would have used had it been available. This is the inescapable problem. ‘The problem with much…computer imagery is that it attempts to duplicate the visual tropes of painting and photography. There are swooping landscapes formed from fractal equations, and there are surrealistic conjunctions of incongruous elements. But none of this is truly revolutionary’.

The Primacy of the Photographic Image

The seamless digital picture—in both its ‘virtual’ and ‘plausibly fantastical’ incarnations—deliberately, even strategically, exploits a resemblance to the traditional photograph. This is not just a matter of a new medium borrowing creative distinction and art world legitimacy from an immediately preceding form. These types of digital images depend on a level of photographically inspired believability to create the effects described, and in so doing, continue the formal imperatives, interpretive codes and historical traditions of the conventional image. The digital picture productively mimics the indexical photograph, in an unanticipated manner, ensuring the latter’s continued primacy as a vital aesthetic form.

Some critics mistakenly predict a renewed interest in pictorial synthesis, given the electronic photograph’s capacity for easy revision. A number of historical precedents of this form are offered. Henry Peach Robinson’s synthesized images of the 1860s anticipate what here has been termed the ‘virtual’ photograph. Moholy-Nagy’s use of assemblage and mixed media suggests the digitally collaged image. Jerry Uelsmann’s experimentations with solarization, masking and composite printing presage the ‘plausibly fantastical’ image. Certainly the comparisons are suggestive, but the real relationship between these past and present aesthetic strategies is not one of analogy, but of identity.

It his 1989 essay, ‘Photography in the Age of Electronic Simulation’, Andy Grundberg laments the overall ‘banality’ of most computer-altered photography. Now, over a decade later, little has been produced that would contradict his initial gloomy assessment. Perhaps one reason that digital artists have thus far produced so little of enduring interest is that much of their work engages in a recapitulation of ideas from the history of art, concerns that have been disinterred, electronically reanimated, and given a peculiar posthumous existence. We might profitably compare these digital practices to the efforts of contemporary photographic antiquarians whose images also reference archaic visual styles. While it may be true that artists such as Adam Fuss, James Fee, and Jayne Hinds Bidaut employ photograms, elaborate toning techniques, and non-silver processes, the conceptual underpinnings of their work are of a decidedly contemporary character. Fuss’ use of abstract photograms, for example, functions rather similarly to Sheri Levine’s neo abstract paintings of the 1980s. Levine’s and Fuss’ images do not further the traditions in which, at first glance, they appear to participate. Instead, they draw attention to a moribund academism. By

exploiting the visual forms that once connoted its relevance and vitality, there is no better means to proclaim the end of a movement than to quote it ironically. 'Thus re-deployed, the now emptied style stands as a kind of cultural grave-marker, a subversion of the very intellectual and creative projects that originally produced it'. Most current digital work, however, lacks such metalogical perspective, inclining instead towards mere nostalgia.

Medium specific arguments cite the tenuous relationship of the digital image to the physical print as one of its signal features. Writing as early as 1983, A.D. Coleman, asserts that the digitally formatted image may eventually 'help move us awayâ€¦from our addiction to the photograph as a precious object. The new technology de-emphasizes the photograph as object and re-emphasizes it as image and idea'. Considered generously, the notion that the work of art may dematerialize, promises the liberation of the image from the sullied concerns of commerce. The picture serves purely as a prompt for intellectual enlightenment, a catalyst for emotional reverie, or a goad to political action. Noble motivations all, but given the historical capacity of the market to enfold and digest even the most radically attenuated, anti-aesthetic art gestures and objects, such a goal is hopelessly naïve. In the effort to absent themselves from the inevitable wages of commodification, these attempts 'spawn a kind of cynical conservatism'. Even the elusive digital image that refuses its own fixity in paper and silver is vulnerable to the predations of capital.

In addition to the dismantling the photograph as object, current commentary on the digital image is characterized by a pervasive tone of uncritical futurist zeal. Such rhetoric speaks to the Platonic longing deep in Western culture that seeks to transcend physicality. Fantasies like this one are the product of a host of failed utopian visions. People take pleasure in the appreciation and display of well wrought things. Minimalism and Conceptual Art may exert considerable influence on contemporary art practices, but their anti-object or anti-commodity missions never achieved general acceptance for a reason: objects continue to compel our interest. The argument declaring the end of the tangible photograph-as-art-object is unconvincing.

Summary and Conclusions

This discussion has considered the impact of electronic image manipulation on our perception of the photograph's truth value, surveyed several distinct categories of digital picture making, and addressed some of the aesthetic problems posed by emerging computer based technologies. In addition, the digital image's effect on photography's primacy as one of our era's dominant visual forms has been explored. While at first glance digital intervention in and revision of the photographic image appears to fundamentally call into question its truth bearing function, on closer inspection this issue proves to be something of a canard. In some cases (recall our discussions of the varieties of 'collage aesthetic' pictures), the digitally altered image is stylised to the point of instantly proclaiming its own artifice. While the 'plausibly fantastical' picture employs a startling photo-like realism, its rational impossibility inevitably summons up a reaction of scepticism. Finally, while the 'seamless' picture may have the potential to deceive, because we presently inhabit a critical environment of considerable epistemological doubt, we come to the image primed to question even the most seemingly 'neutral' photographic representations.

As sketched out above, a crucial feature of the computer mediated image is that it rests upon ontologically unstable ground. An investigation of the digital photograph leads one to conclude that the 'uniqueness' of the electronic picture is, paradoxically, that it lacks a distinct material or conceptual essence. Technically, a digital photograph can look like anything. Given the range of output technologies, it can appear as a conventional photograph (dye sublimation print), a lithograph (Iris print), a painting (inkjet on canvas), or a television image (CRT display). Stylistically, as we have seen, the translation of photographs into the digital domain has encouraged image makers to re-deploy their source material within the well-established boundaries of prior art historical concerns. The 'novelty' of digital photography, then, resides in its conventional reiteration of older categories of visual practice.

The predisposition of the computer-altered image to imitate the look of antecedent traditions has profound implications for the possibility of asserting a coherent digital photographic aesthetic. Despite ongoing efforts to the contrary, it has thus far proven impossible to develop a visual sensibility rooted in medium specific values. No firm foundation for evaluative criteria is possible because in classical terms, digital photography is not a medium at all, but rather any number of simultaneously possible media. To end on the

issue of primacy, scholar Geoffrey Batchen has persuasively argued that photography should be understood not simply as a material technology, but rather a complex cultural formation. In other words, we should regard the medium not as a mechanical process, but as a nexus of ideas about how we might describe and understand the world. From this point of view, the photograph's fortunes remain ascendant so long as the constellation of soci-cultural conditions that summon up our need for such a system of representation remain in place. To be sure, for practitioners, digital technologies may hold considerable instrumental advantages over those image making systems based in the chemistry of silver salts. Electronic photographs can be made more quickly and manipulated much more easily than their conventional counterparts. In the broader sense, however, whether the image is in encoded in pixels or fixed in grains of silver is of secondary importance. At least for the time being, photography's peculiar representational effect continues to sustain the medium's centrality as our culture's most pervasive and important visual form.

Endnotes

[1] As I use the term 'conceptualism' throughout, it should be understood that I am not simply referring to that specific art movement current from the late sixties to the early seventies, but an entire constellation of work and critical/theoretical positions dominant from the mid seventies until the mid nineties. These practices, in the pursuit of their various agendas, tended to assign value to artworks based on the elegance and ethics of the ideas informing their fabrication. This is opposed to more conventional art praxes that locate aesthetic virtues in objects and artifacts themselves.

[2] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, 'Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime,' in Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 42.

[3] Richard Sennett, 'Recovery—The Photography of Thomas Struth,'Thomas Struth—Strangers and Friends (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 91.

[4] Gregory Crewdson, Gregory Crewdson—Dream of Life, (Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca), 21-22.

[5] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), x.

[6] Peter Schjeldahl, 'Notes on Beauty' in Uncontrollable Beauty—Toward a New Aesthetics, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1984), 54.

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