

New Turnings of a Networked Age:
Reconsidering Photographic Actions in Light of Curatorial Practice

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Abstract

We are approaching the end of an age dominated by the lens—that is, by ways of knowing informed by the lens—and entering a new age informed by distributed network architectures. A result of this transition is the culture-wide shift away from the certainties of our past seven or eight centuries, and a movement toward more fluid and immanent ways of knowing and acting. One characteristic of this change is the gradual disappearance of the ossified single-point perspective and its replacement by a more multi-dimensional and immersive point of view, which is marked by participation and real-time talk-back, among other things. Photographic practice is evolving in response to these changes. In fact, the word *photography* no longer means what it once did. To put it more strongly, looked at historically, the notion of photography that we all grew up with is proving so ephemeral that we might argue that photography itself never really existed; rather, as a set of culturally determined actions, it marked a fuzzy slide through the final two centuries of one way of knowing (dominated by the lens), and a turning toward a far older way of knowing (dominated by networks of human relations). This paper considers these redefinitions of photography in the light of curatorial practice, a way of knowing and making that has deep cultural affinities with traditional notions of photographic practice.

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What is the relationship of photography to curating? From my perspective as a photographer and occasional curator, the question is timely; today, nearly every self-respecting art museum houses a photography collection, curators are routinely celebrated as among the art world's brightest stars, and Google returns nearly two million hits on "photographer and curator." Clearly each practice is integrated into art, visual culture, and commerce. And especially in the age of digital networks, each is widely understood as a necessary literacy—the first thing you do on Facebook is make a profile picture; the second, start collecting friends. More philosophically, further reflection reveals that both practices share similar attitudes about the world. For example, photographers and curators know that their practices are made up of two interwoven modes of working: on the one hand, study and solitude, and on the other, a probing exploration of the world. In fact, both of these aspects of practice recursively influence the other—an act of production requires an act of reflective interpretation, which feeds into the next act of production, and so on. Indeed, in light of this mirroring, curating and photography appear as two interdependent parts of an integrated practice—that is, each implies, accentuates, and clarifies the other.

Does this mean that the act of curating is more strongly connected to the act of photography than it is to the act of painting, or sculpting, or for that matter, movie-making, music-making, or dancing? And if we conclude that they do share a unique connection, what does that mean for how photographers and curators work today? For example, photographers suspect that the easy ubiquity of today's apps is eroding the value of their

unique skills. After all, if everyone is a photographer, does the practice, or even the word itself, meaning anything today? Curators worry about the same thing; since the advent of Pinterest, the value of curating as an expertise has diminished, because everyone's a curator, too.

Positioning photographic and curatorial practice in relation to digital networks broadens the terms of our initial inquiry. That is, have the changes that digital networks bring to visual culture changed photography and curating? From the curatorial side of the equation, curators Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook insist that they have. In their analysis, new media network protocols require a total rethink of curatorial practice. The networked age requires a similar rethink of photographic practice, too, because it leads us to question the social and cultural biases at the core of photographic expertise. Ordinarily, when I say *photography* you think *camera*, whether or not Susan Sontag's *On Photography* is at the top or bottom of your favorite books list. But this narrow focus on particular tools no longer makes sense. When Graham and Cook say *curating*, the conversation turns immediately to history, politics, and philosophy, because curators don't rely on specific tool sets or technologies. Rather, they explore culture and practice as a frame of mind—as a kind of politics, or political action—with any tools necessary. Following their lead, looking at photography through the lens of curating means that we have to ask about the philosophy and politics of the technologies we use; in fact, unraveling these interconnections reveals new ways of thinking about photography and prompts us to re-evaluate our responsibilities as photographic artists.

To curate: the word itself has roots in the notion of care, to care for. The Oxford English Dictionary establishes its modern foundations in the 14th Century Church's idea of

caring for the soul—an idea that has evolved these past seven hundred years to become central to today's curatorial practice of selecting and caring for the souls of objects. Prior to that, stretching back to the Romans, more ancient meanings refer to someone appointed to oversee the affairs of those who could not take care of themselves, such as unaccompanied minors, or the insane. Does this archeology of meaning matter to photographers? Or, more precisely, how do these ancient meanings resurface in current practices? For instance, we might be following a path that our ancestors would recognize; on the other hand, we might be at the threshold of some new and unprecedented way of knowing and working.

The obvious response is: Everything is different today—we're on the precipice! In the age of the networked spectacle every photograph finds a place in the vast cloud of pictures that cloaks us like a second skin. The foundations of photography are changing. And since photographs affect our sense of self, the coming redefinitions herald new relationships and new cultural sensibilities. Clearly, these are momentous times.

But before leaping breathlessly into the everything-is-different mosh pit, let's remember that we've stood here before. In 1857 Oliver Wendell Holmes worried that the material world teetered on the verge of irrelevance because everything worth remembering would soon be collected in vast photographic libraries; he fretted—with wonder and anxiety—that the very nature of human experience would be irrevocably altered as a consequence. Generations later, Susan Sontag focused on photography as a peculiar social activity that decreased participation even as it produced evidence of presence; awareness of that contradiction, she argued, fundamentally separated the late 20th Century from the age of Holmes. In 1977 Sontag concluded *In Plato's Cave* with the

prediction that, soon enough, books would be irrelevant because modern visual culture had decreed that everything was destined to become a photograph.

Ironically both Holmes and Sontag worried about the same thing—that photographs would replace authentic human experience, including the reading of books. And with deeper irony, neither could see what was happening beyond their own frames of reference. For example, in the mid-19th Century, Holmes critiqued the stereograph and its radically new visual technology without realizing that visual culture itself was on the cusp of an even more revolutionary technology—namely, the cheap reproductions of photographs in ink, a development that led to the wide and efficient distribution of photographs, and, as Richard Benson has argued, saved photography from cultural irrelevance. Similarly, in the 1970s, Sontag discussed the ways in which society had been affected by photographic practices, including by the cheap photographic reproductions that Holmes didn't see coming, but she failed to see that in less than a generation the computer and the Internet would fundamentally uproot the core meanings she was describing. Today, when we ask about the boundaries between photographic and curatorial practices, we need to keep Holmes's and Sontag's myopias in mind in order to side step our own blind spots.

One such blind spot results from the tendency to separate production from reflection so that each appears completely distinct from the other. This effectively removes producers from the possibility of a reflective practice, perhaps helping to drive our modern economies in the process—e.g., assembly lines leave no room for thinking. But this dichotomy exists in visual culture too. For instance, we see the artist as someone who responds to the world by making (the picture-maker, the sculpture-maker): this is the artist as producer. Similarly, the curator responds to the world by collecting pictures and

artifacts, and then putting them into new relationships: the exhibition-maker. This suggests that each practice responds to the world in a similar way. We can borrow the language of philosopher John Searle to identify this commonality and to see what is being missed. That is, when we assert the productivity of the artist and curator, we see their work as directed at *making* a world, but we minimize an equally essential part of their practice, the part that's directed at *describing* a world. Importantly, photographers and curators think about, interpret, and reflect on the world, as they are making it anew. These ways of working—making and describing—are interwoven and in fact emerge from the same place; that is, both artist and curator respond to and seek to make sense of a *system* of the world. This presumes, in fact, that the world is, at root, *sensible*: literally, able to be sensed. Which begs the question—and highlights our blind spot—sensed by whom, or what?

This question illuminates an ideology that both practices share: a way of knowing and doing called positivism—the notion that truth is discrete and discoverable, and separate from the one who discovers it. This way of thinking became prominent during the Enlightenment, found its most famous expression in Cartesian dualism, and underlies the machinery of Industrialism's past three century's of progress. But the thought that two of our most cherished practices—photography and curating—are rooted in the ideas that gave us contemporary society's hyper-mechanized way of life strikes a sour note. Today we focus on relational and democratic modes of cultural emancipation, and, thus enlightened, we sometimes presume that we have left (or are leaving) the brutalities of Descartes's mind-body split behind us. But these old divisions remain relevant to any number of contemporary practices. And frankly, without the assumption of an empirical reality—a

shared world—there simply wouldn't be anything to point a camera at, to collect, or to reflect upon.

We can describe this productive-reflective dynamic more plainly by simply looking at what photographers and curators actually do. For example, the photographer positions herself and her camera in the world to capture images from it, as Lauren Greenfield does with youth culture in Southern California and elsewhere, or as Lisa Robinson does with her photographs of snow drifts and distant winter shorelines. Each pays close attention to the world and then responds with the click of her shutter. Then each retreats to her studio to reflect on what she has learned, to study her contact sheets (or digital catalogs), and to decide which images to publish. Even the photographer who self-consciously directs his lens at a contraption of his own making, or at himself—for example, Thomas Demand or Samuel Fosso—points at a world, or objects from a world, and then selects from among the pictures he has made. Similarly, as curator Emily Zilber reminds us, exhibition-makers pay special attention to their experience of objects, events, and histories, and draw from their impressions of those experiences that reflect, narrate, or interpret the world. This back-and-forth movement, from experience to reflection, creates a friction between producing and interpreting that is crucial to both the photographer's and the curator's imaginative practices.

Yet another way to describe this dynamic is as a turning outward juxtaposed against a turning inward. This is how photographic and curatorial practice mirror each other: each practitioner looks at the world and then at her impressions of the world, and then looks back again at the world in order to test those impressions. Photographs and exhibitions emerge as a consequence of this recursion, informed by each turning and each response to

that turning. The work continues in this way, and there is no resolution, no still point to this spiraled dialectic, unless both production and reflection cease.

For photographers, this is the first way in which know ourselves as curators: when we point our lenses at what we love, we make objects that we care for. As we work, new pictures fold into our practice, informing yet more new pictures, and our ability to care more deeply and to be more aware of that caring, increases. We achieve this ratcheting acceleration of awareness by adjusting and balancing the technical requirements of our tools (shutter speeds, apertures, camera positions) against the significance of our experience in the world (*why* we've chosen to stand where we've stood). In this way, meaning accrues as we connect ourselves to a narrative built from our experience of the back-and-forth turnings inherent in our interactions with the world. That is, by standing at the intersection of a pragmatic, outwardly directed mode of working (the photographer in the world), and a reflective, inwardly directed mode of working (the photographer in the studio), photographers recognize that their independent ability to work *as* photographers is compromised by the interdependencies of their practice itself. That is, photographs, as objects, do not come into being without both the outward turning *and* the inward turning.

The second way in which we know ourselves as curators comes from tradition, but not from the usually depicted tradition of Baudelaire's flaneur—that unaligned, unapologetic wanderer who regards the world from the safety of the middle distance. That image does not correspond to our experience of photography. This is because connecting inward and outward turning requires passion and commitment. Atget, as a curator, combed the streets and alleys of Paris collecting fragments from the passing world that he dearly loved. And Talbot, as a curator, collected views of his beloved Lacock Abby by pointing a

rudimentary lens-box at the furniture and marble busts from his family's history. In our own time, closer to us politically and culturally, Susan Meiselas's *Kurdistan*, Tacita Dean's *Floh*, and Elinor Carucci's *Closer* resonate as examples that come from the friction of inward and outward turnings. Each of these artists are motivated by connections to the shared world, collect objects directly from their experience, study them, and then present them in a new context. The salient characteristic of these practices, and of thousands of others that we might examine, is attachment, and the desire to be attached—not the isolation of the wanderer.

But here we need to remember that our point of view, embedded in our own contingent time and place, might be limited. Continuities in practice might link contemporary photography to tradition, but then again, the balance might be changing. In fact, maybe the question itself—whether and how photography is connected to curating—might illuminate those changes and speak to the differences between our generation and those of Sontag and Holmes. Maybe the question is not whether photography retains the turning that connects to curating, but whether photography today, as an idea, is relevant as a practice at all.

Patrick Maynard defines photography as a technology for making marks on surfaces, in particular by amplifying the effects of light on photosensitive materials. But the making of pictures is just one among many applications of that technology (others include, for example, the manufacture of micro chips). Obviously, with regard to photographs, i.e., *pictures* made with photography, a global culture of practice has emerged that touches art, industry, analysis, politics, and torture. Today, nearly two centuries since the chemical-optical foundations of photographic picture-making were systematized, photographic

practice has become central to an ongoing critique of the social costs and benefits of empiricism and positivism (as seen in the writing of Roland Barthes, John Burger, and Deborah Bright, and in the photography of Hank Willis Thomas and Trevor Paglen, among many others). This is due in part to the way photography reifies the connection of vision to experience. In other words, although enlightened practitioners pretend to understand that photographic realism is merely a convention of visual culture, we continue to act as if photographic pictures were irreducible facts from the shared world. This is simply to state the obvious, of course—photographs, and pictures that look like photographs, prove our existence.

Not so obvious, not as often acknowledged, is that the core of the photographic practice has less to do with the chemistry announced in 1839 than with the optics introduced (or re-introduced) in the 13th Century. As A.D. Coleman has argued, lens technology changed the world; in fact, lenses *made* the world. That is, as lens technology amplified human vision, unlocking cell interiors and mapping the circulation of the planets, it launched the Enlightenment, brought catastrophe to the Roman Catholic Church, and fundamentally shaped European history. Along the way, as David Hockney has observed, lenses brought a new kind of picture into being, one based on the single point perspective of Brunelleschi and the chiaroscuro of Caravaggio. In a recursive process of amplification, these new pictures visualized and thus reified the empirical, positivist world that we still live in today. In fact, in terms of the technologies that have exerted the most influence on the course of the past eight centuries, Coleman's arguments and Hockney's observations imply that photographic practices have been just a blip, or a bubble, in the vastly more complex sweep of lens-based practices and their effects.

This interrogation of history is important because too often photography is uncritically anchored to a simplistic association with chemical photography, even today in the digital age. For example, standard histories still maintain that photography was invented in 1839, and most devote only a few pages, if that, to the spread of ink reproduction technologies. But that historical gloss minimizes and elides the inconvenient subtleties that define our practice, burying the hope of elevating our awareness, effectiveness, and love for what we do. In this case, focusing on the lens, an otherwise invisible technology, enables us to trace the ideology of positivism across the broader history of picture-making. In fact, as we come to terms with the ways in which the history of our culture is derived from the history of lenses, for better *and* for worse, we recognize that photography itself, as an independent practice, never really existed.

Anthropologists describe the transformations that pre-literate, oral societies have endured as they have morphed into cultures of the book, prompting us to recognize that we are living through another great restructuring of human consciousness. That is, from the talk circles of kindergarten to the literate rows of desks in grade school, the shape of knowing is transitioning again, this time to the hybrid remix of the network, or the mesh. Of the many challenges emerging from this new cultural arrangement, most of which are not yet visible or even imaginable, one thing is clear: the single point perspective of the lens, and the implications of a privileged viewer who occupies a vantage point removed from the world, disconnected and aloof, is vanishing. In its place a new kind of picture, a new kind of cultural artifact, is appearing, one that privileges multiple points of view, immersion, and a robust participation that goes beyond collaboration. The vanguard of these new forms can be found, of course, in the ubiquitous social networks of our digital age, crowd-sourcing,

multi-player gaming, 3D rapid prototyping, and in the ceaseless commentary and vibrant talk-back that our newly renewed DIY culture presumes to be its birthright.

How does this (r)evolution affect photography? As artists, how do we make a place for ourselves in this rapidly changing landscape?

First, we should recognize that we might have been misled. Photography was not a radical break in visual culture. When Sontag put the mysteries of photography into the trauma of the cave we might have been persuaded to see our practice as a break with tradition. But it wasn't. Hannah Arendt names Plato's allegory as one of the most radical turnings in ancient philosophy, a reconceptualization that upended the Greek's sense of humanity's relationship to the world. But photography was not that kind of disruption. Instead, seen from the vantage point of history, photography was a continuation of certain ideologies—positivism—that had evolved organically out of technologies and practices that had begun to emerge many centuries before—the making of lens pictures. Perhaps photography accelerated the spread of those ideologies, but it certainly did not overturn them.

Second, we should remember that the *distribution* of pictures has historically been as important to visual culture as the chemical-optical, or electronic-optical, fabrication of photographs, if not more so. That is, today we recognize that the effective differences between Goya's viscerally horrifying etchings from the Spanish Civil War of 1808, and Robert Capa's or Eddie Adams's photographs from their own wars more than six generations later, was not in the mark-making technologies used to create them, but rather in the scale of distribution that each artist was able to tap into. Similarly, the main difference between contemporary photographers and the legions of wannabes with cell

phones is that digital networks have amplified distribution potential in a way that is unprecedented.

The full effects of this amplification have yet to be adequately theorized, but a preliminary observation can be made: the practice of turning outward and then inward that once opened a space for reflection can be easily neutralized by the speed of the network, leading to a radical revision in the practice and meaning of photography. For example, since pictures can be published the instant the shutter is released, there is no longer any imperative to pour over contact sheets or download files into a computer to be edited, sorted, or printed. In the absence of the recursive turnings that once defined the practice of photography, can the billion cell phone snapshots flying above us and through us truly be called photographs? Which begs the question—what do we mean by: to be a photographer. With trillions of pictures flooding the planet, is anyone actually making anything? When no one looks through a lens, when a machine triggers a shutter, can the resulting pictures be seen as conscious efforts to share a world?

These questions might feel uncharitable and even reactionary, but upon consideration, the answer must be no. Not because of technical objections—the light and lens remain the same, after all—but rather because the ancient pattern of outward turnings juxtaposed against inward turnings has been disrupted to the point of disappearance. Consequently there is no human consciousness behind these artifacts. And lacking that, these objects cannot be contextualized within the traditions and practices that constitute the values of our culture. They must be rejected as aberrations, or perversions, as something other than photographs, something as yet without a name.

But technology in itself does not automatically or necessarily predict this rejection. An example from the pre-digital age illustrates a similar break down in practice, for a similar reason. In fact, recognizing photography as a practice with a long tradition of integrating outward turnings with inward turnings helps explain why the celebration of Garry Winogrand's hundred thousand negatives—left undeveloped when he died—was so misguided. The problem is that Winogrand never turned inward to reflect on his exposures, and perhaps he never had the intention to do so, either. But without the turning inward that the production of photographs requires, those artifacts lose their grip on culture and on the shared world. That is, there can be no proof, despite the evidence of that undeveloped film, that Winogrand ever turned outward. After all, simply activating a shutter release does not indicate awareness.

A far more important and horrifying example of this break down is the Abu Ghraib prison snapshots, which were created in 2003 and partially released to the public in 2004. Curator Brian Wallis wrote that the Abu Ghraib pictures broke with photographic tradition because they abandoned their responsibility to unveil the evils of war. On the other hand, the images stayed true to the tradition of propaganda, and to the desire to commit racial and cultural terrorism, which Sontag illustrated with the example of lynching postcards in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. But while establishing these antecedents and cultural breaks is important, recognition and analysis of the role of distribution in the creation and use of the pictures is missing from both Wallis's and Sontag's reactions to Abu Ghraib. That is, from the point of view of the digital network, the distribution potential of these images directly enhanced and perhaps even created their value as weapons.

Prior to our networked age, the time constraints of turning inward (processing, editing, printing) insured that lynching photographs, as horrible as they were, couldn't directly threaten the victims—at least, not in nearly the same proportion as the lynching itself. Simply, victims knew that danger did not come from the man holding the camera, but rather from the mob holding the ropes. By 2003, even before the advent of Facebook, the relationship of image to distribution had turned this equation upside down. At Abu Ghraib the knowledge that the pictures would be distributed on the Internet, and that the entire experience had been orchestrated to accelerate that distribution, means that the victims were tortured by the act of photography itself. That is, victims knew that even if they escaped injury from the physical humiliations happening inside the prison, they could not possibly escape injury from the reprisals that would occur outside the prison as a result of those photographs. In fact, this sense of the power to inflict injury by merely pointing a lens must have pervaded the prison, affecting both the prisoners and the guards. Judging by what we know about how the perception of power affects both the powerful and the powerless (think especially of the Stanford Prison Experiment), the military policemen and women must have felt like they were holding killer ray guns. In 1977 Sontag called the camera a weapon, but she spoke at the level of metaphor. In the age of digital networks, that metaphor has become actualized. In the years following Abu Ghraib, tragically, as we've seen repeatedly—recently and notoriously in the Rutgers bullying case—the weaponization of lens-pictures continues to evolve beyond our ability to understand much less control it.

Triangulating these re-evaluations of photography with curating is an important task. To revise our original question we might ask about the *responsibility* of the

photographer towards care taking and our shared visual culture. This is where we glimpse a unique connection between photography and curating anchored in the recursive turnings of practice. For example, in the 20th Century, while painters and writers turned inward, toward essentialized abstraction (for example, Mark Rothko and D.H. Lawrence), photographers kept turning outward, reflecting their inner impressions by pointing to objects from the shared world. We see this in Stieglitz's *Equivalences*, and then later in Szarkowski's rustic country studies. As paradigm cases, these two artists (among Modernism's most influential curator-photographers) externalize their private metaphors by pointing their lenses at objects in the shared world. Following their lead, and the lead of countless other lens-artists, prompts us to ask about our own efforts to render internal metaphors in the light of day. That is, given the history of our practice, and our position on the front lines of the changes in visual culture—i.e., as experts in the ways that lens-pictures reify the ideology of our shared world—do we, as individual photographers, bear any responsibility for *creating* that world?

In response we might speculate that since the emerging logic of the network is different from, if not opposed to, the logic of lenses, the time for outward turning juxtaposed against inward turning has passed, and with it our responsibility to act. Now is the time for new forms to emerge and for old forms to disappear. After all, the *me* of the networked age is unlike any previous *individual* in human history; today the performance of a relational *we* takes center stage in our theories of social action.

But to answer this way would be to reject our recursive and relational practices altogether, to renounce making *and* describing, and to give up the idea of a shared world. And yet, that might be a good thing. After all, doesn't this insistence on a shared world bind

us to positivism and lock us in cycles of solipsism and selfish individualism? These are difficult and complex interconnections. For one thing, even though the many-to-many logic inherent to digital networks upturns the one-to-many organization of lens cultures, the network is no panacea for the ills of positivism. After all, the danger and the promise of networks originate from the same place; the nodes that must be open for the network to function can be corrupted, exploited, and turned against themselves because of that openness. This is what we saw at Abu Ghraib and Rutgers. For photographers, especially because of our dual roles as producers and curators, network dynamics speed up the shared world and make it newly contradictory, both more receptive to what we are making, and less conducive to the process of making it. This undoubtedly changes our notions of ourselves and our ability to act as independent agents. But we can't pretend that we know what to make of it.

The ideology that will govern these new relationships is being written now. A new ethos of human consciousness might be emerging, but such speculation might be premature, or even Pollyannaish. On the other hand, as the density of the network increases, the relationship of each individual to each other individual must evolve, because in the mesh I can sense the twitching of your limbs as if they were my own. That image doesn't come from a lens, yet it relies on the intersection of outwardly directed and inwardly directed turns of thought, the same kind of turning that used to inform both photography and curating.

Perhaps photography will continue, though perhaps by another name, because pointing one's awareness at the world can still connote an act of care and devotion. But there is work to be done to retrieve and to rehabilitate those notions from the increasing

mechanization of attention. I find hope and pleasure in thinking that such work is still worth doing; and that reframing the world can help us share it. Curators Graham and Cook suggest that curating has changed because new media art and digital networks abhor pragmatic and philosophical laziness, because categories and practices are still in flux, and because there's suddenly so much more to learn. The same is true for us—the artists formerly known as photographers.

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