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THE NEW REAL

PHOTOIDS

An exhibition at the Met invites reflection on truth in photography, now under siege on many fronts.

BY PETER PLAGENS

THE WALL LABEL at the entrance to the recent exhibition "Photography on Photography: Reflections on the Medium since 1960," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said that photography has been "breaking down boundaries not only between mediums but between art and life itself." The label might have added that one boundary between art and life—defended by painters and sculptors who, no matter how realistic their work, can always simply make everything up—is inherently broken down by the medium of photography itself. Which is to say that, pre-digitalization, there was in force a bedrock assumption that what appeared in a photograph once materially existed in front of the lens of the camera that took the picture. In theory, the images in photographs existed before they were taken: if the subject, the lighting conditions, the kind of lens and its position, and the type of film were known beforehand, the image in the photograph could have been accurately predicted. That's why we've almost always said that we "take" a photograph: we pluck it from a universe of already-existing images, rather than make it new from raw material. Photography, then, was the perfect window-onto-nature medium. It disappeared, allowing a direct connection between viewer and subject, much as the discovery of supremely blendable and slow-drying oil paint enabled a heightened level of pictorial naturalism in 15th-century Flanders.

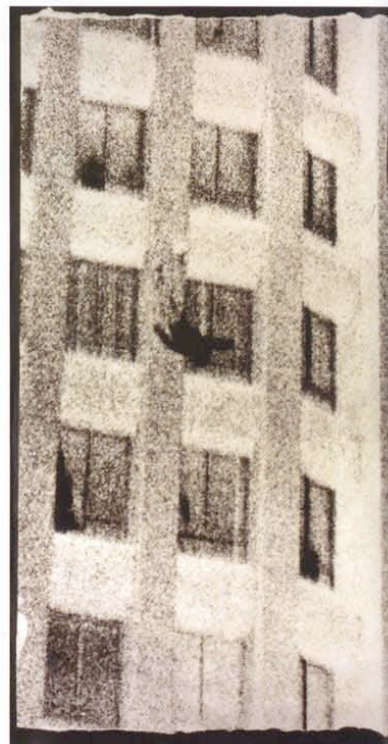
From the invention of photography (more accurately, the invention of reasonably permanent photographic images on paper) in the late 1830s until the middle of the 20th century, this realism—"truth," if you will—was generally assumed to be the chief virtue of photography. Within the photography world, the difference between mere reportage or photojournalism



and photography intended as "art" lay in the art photographer's more poetic and/or insightful selection of subject, better cropping and composition, and richer and more elegant printing. But just as painters from the 16th century onward (Titian, Rembrandt, Fragonard,

Thomas Ruff: *Portrait (A. Siekmann)*, 1987, chromogenic print, 82 1/4 by 64 1/4 inches. Photo courtesy David Zwirner, New York. All works this article, unless otherwise noted, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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Turner, Cézanne and de Kooning, to name a few) began to foreground their medium and make it almost as much a subject of their pictures as what the paintings nominally represented, photographers, over the course of the last 50 years—as sampled in the Met's exhibition, the second in a series showcasing works from the permanent collection, presented in the museum's new gallery for contemporary photography—have been doing the same. Curator Douglas Eklund gathered works by 17 photographers, including such big names as Robert Heineken, Robert Mapplethorpe and Hiroshi Sugimoto, along with lesser known photographers such as Janice Guy and Christopher Williams, to demonstrate that the vicissitudes and paradoxes of the medium itself are the subjects of much recent photography.

Although photographers and figurative painters share a major interest in the content of their pictures (the horrors of war, the nobility in a human face, etc.), they differ in their attitude toward their respective mediums. The difference between medium

self-consciousness in photographers and in painters is that photographers recently seem to be less interested in the visual glories yielded by darkroom procedures (or digital ones—we'll get to that below) than they are in pursuing the conceptual paradoxes the medium offers. In Thomas Ruff's *Portrait (A. Siekmann)*, 1987, for instance, shot in color with a large-format view camera and printed over 7 feet high, such clinical details as skin pores vault into an unnerving hyperreality. Allan McCollum's *Perpetual Photo, #209* (1989), on the other hand, takes a small detail of a pseudo work of art made for the set of a television soap opera and blows it up into an enigmatic abstraction.

The photographers in the Met exhibition, of course, aren't pulling off a shocking exposé. We've always known—in spite of our desire to believe otherwise—that photography could never be entirely realistic because no map can ever equal the territory it charts. The material world is three-dimensional while photographs are flat. Photographs

are cropped in their very taking, if not subsequently when they're printed. Often, they're black and white, whereas the real material world has color. That world also has sound, smell, touch and motion, none of which—with the exception of movement codified as blur—appear in a photograph. Sometimes photographs meant to substantiate unlikely claims are revealed as outright fakes (pictures of UFOs or the Loch Ness monster) or probable restagings (Robert Capa's revered image of a falling soldier in the Spanish Civil War, for instance).

Those photographs are, however, the proverbial exceptions that proved the rule, which remained in effect until seamless digital manipulation became so easy and commonplace. That rule was that photographs possess enough veracity to, upon occasion, help find people criminally guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and send them to prison. The "truth" that a photograph represents (i.e., re-presents, presents again), its direct physical relationship to something

SOCIAL PORNOGRAPHY— THAT IS, IMAGES OF THINGS MOST OF US FEEL WE SHOULDN'T BE LOOKING AT—IS STILL MOSTLY THE DOMAIN OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

Far left, Karin Sander: *Olivier Renaud-Clement, 1:10*, 1999-2000, ABS plastic from 3-D scan, applied color, 17 1/4 inches high. © Sander Studio.

Left, Sarah Charlesworth: *Thomas Brook Simmons, Bunker Hill Tower, Los Angeles, California*, 1980, gelatin silver print, 79 by 42 inches.

Below, Lutz Bacher: *Jackie & Me* (detail), 1989, seven gelatin silver prints, 24 by 20 inches each, Collection Marian and James Cohen, New York.

Below right, Sherrie Levine: *After Walker Evans: 4*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 5 1/4 by 3 1/4 inches.

that actually existed, can still make me weak in the knees. I tear up at certain 19th-century photographs. My god, I think, those people picnicking at that lake, looking like living, breathing souls, walked the earth a century and a half ago. And then, today, there are photographs of ice on Mars. I get breathless looking at them. There's a little of that feeling—albeit colder, more cerebral—in Karin Sander's work in "Photography on Photography." *Gordon Tapper, 1:10* (1999) and *Olivier Renaud-Clement, 1:10* (1999-2000) are full-color, three-dimensional human figures, each about 17 inches high, made by a computer-run sculptural process that transforms the information in digital photographs taken of Tapper and Renaud-Clement from 16 different angles into—literally—photorealist figurines made of something called ABS plastic (an acrylic modeling material).

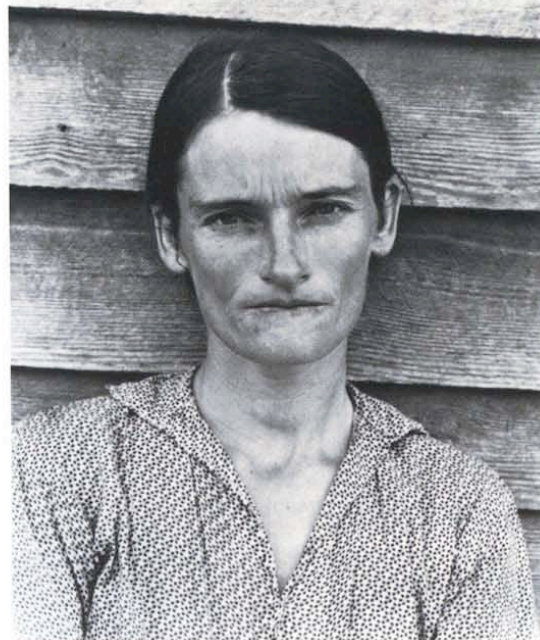
Whatever its diminished or enhanced realism, photography—which is to say the camera—can still go where older artistic mediums cannot. Sexual pornography is one example. Whose eyebrows rise anymore at, say, a *drawing* of an orgy? Social pornography—by

which I mean an image of something most of us have a feeling we really shouldn't be looking at—is another. Sarah Charlesworth's contribution to the Met exhibition was *Thomas Brook Simmons, Bunker Hill Tower, Los Angeles, California* (1980), an enlarged appropriation of a newswire photograph of a suicide's body hurtling downward past the windows of a residential skyscraper. The grainy blur of Charlesworth's photograph gives it a news-bulletin sensationalism and a presumed exculpation for the tastelessness of including the victim's full name in the title.

Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* (1981) questions the very possibility of whether a photograph can be an "original" work of art. After all, if Walker Evans's Depression-era Alabama woman did indeed exist in that place on that day, and if all that Evans did, essentially, was to "take" the picture, isn't any print from that negative or any print from the negative of a photograph of that print equally a work of art—or *not* a work of art? Lutz Bacher's *Jackie & Me* (1989), on the other hand, merely cutesifies the issue of photography as voyeurism



Jackie Kennedy Onassis, the most desirable woman in the world wanted to be chased by me. Ron Galella, the paparazzo. I knew even then that there could be no stopping, no turning back.



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Vik Muniz: *Brooklyn (Spiral Jetty After Smithson)*, 1997, gelatin silver print, 26 by 39 inches.

by reprinting infamous stalker-cum-paparazzo Ron Gallela's images of JFK's widow in New York.

In the end, "Photography on Photography" told only half the story of the medium's perch between purveyor of reality and conduit for an artist's subjectivity. As of now, photography is still able to have it both ways: it's both visual truth captured in a visceral encounter with the material world, and artistic imagination made manifest on paper. But if, since 1960, photography has been nudged closer to the latter by the artists in "Photography on Photography," in 1982 the medium received an ultimately bigger push from another direction. That's the year *National Geographic* magazine slightly and seamlessly moved an Egyptian pyramid, by means of digital manipulation, in order to better fit the publication's format for cover images. The world of photography hasn't been the same since.

The digital camera—with the aid of a computer and some software—has become an art-making machine that produces images as marvel-

ously fictive as the most carefully detailed, academically "realistic" paintings. The surface of the art that the machine produces can be printed so precisely that there's no trace of retouching. It's Salvador Dalí's Surrealist "hand-painted dream photograph" technologically perfected. Nowadays, it's not just possible, but increasingly standard operating procedure, for some photographs to be majorly fictive while maintaining their customary insinuations of reportorial truth. In fact, the lion's share of art-world attention is not going to deconstructionist works like those in "Photography on Photography," but rather to big, bright computerized hybrids by the likes of Aziz + Cucher, Loretta Lux, and the Andreases Gefeller, Gursky and Müller-Pohle.

I've written before about the possible morphing-by-digitalization of photography into a particularly bland kind of academically realist/surrealist painting and have been pilloried for it. (Photographers are a sensitive lot.) Some photographers argue that because they themselves are

FICTIVE PICTURES LIKE VIK MUNIZ'S OF AN IMAGE RENDERED IN DIRT AREN'T QUITE "PHOTOGRAPHS," BUT THEY AREN'T QUITE PAINTINGS EITHER.

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still dragging their cumbersome view cameras into national parks and taking pictures, on good old-fashioned film, of mountain peaks at sunset that will be things of beauty and joys forever, the prevailing practice of digitalization won't affect the credibility of their work. Others believe that because we'll always have brave people with cameras who will boldly go where the timid won't and bring back socially beneficial visual documentation of war, crime, poverty, oppression, etc., digitalization won't affect the credibility of their work. Still others say "Aw, pshaw" to fretting over the fictionalization of photography; they remind us that photographs have always been jazzed up a little to make them more attractive or convincing—as if digitalization weren't such a megaquantum leap in that direction that it changes the game entirely. And a lot of photographers blithely welcome digitalization as just another tool to expand photography's creative possibilities, as if that weren't the equivalent of welcoming armored personnel carriers into a game of paint-ball.

None of them seem to think it

particularly bothersome that photographers are now able to sit at their computers and fake photographs of summits at dusk, or abused children in slums, or practically anything—even Victorian picnickers or frozen interplanetary landscapes. Absent some sort of accompanying Franklin Mint-like certificate of authenticity or sworn-on-a-Bible caption, viewers won't be able to tell the difference between a photograph taken and printed with little or no digital enhancement and a totally fictive one. Such fictive pictures aren't quite "photographs" anymore, but they don't quite seem like paintings—where we understand by the very nature of the medium that (documentation notwithstanding) Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* could well be a completely made-up person. So in the spirit of Norman Mailer's term "factoid"—coined in 1973 to indicate an alleged fact that has no existence previous to its publication—I propose that we call such works of art "photoids." The current exhibition in the Met's series—"Reality Check: Truth and Illusion in Contemporary Photography"—includes a range of

photographs by the likes of Gregory Crewdson, who stages his scenes like movie shoots; Vik Muniz, who actually rendered the images in some of his early photos in chocolate and dirt; and David Levinthal, who manipulates toy soldiers and the like. Perhaps a show further down the line could tackle head-on the problem of digitalization's overthrow of practically everything we've heretofore held dear about photography. ○

"Photography on Photography: Reflections on the Medium Since 1960" was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Apr. 8-Oct. 19, 2008. "Reality Check: Truth and Illusion in Contemporary Photography" remains on view until Mar. 22.

PETER PLAGENS is a painter and critic who lives in New York.



David Levinthal: *Untitled*, 1975, gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 by 11 1/4 inches.