Is it real?
What do I remember?
How can you tell a story?
Can lying be OK?
What goes where?
Why is it famous?
What makes it problematic?
Who do you think you are?
Stealing or borrowing?
Public or private?

These ten questions launch a thought-provoking investigation into what is really going on when you look at a photograph. Peeling back the layers of everything from the earliest daguerreotypes to your latest selfie, you will discover where to find meaning in an image, and the ways in which the photographer, our current culture, and you yourself all collaborate in the creation of that meaning. This book gives you the tools you need to understand photography in all its forms.

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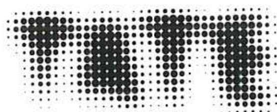
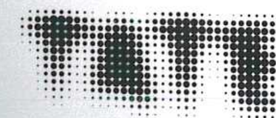


Photography Decoded

Susan Bright and Hedy van Erp



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Introduction

This book aims to guide viewers through the myriad issues concerning photography today. Although photography can appear to be the most accessible form of art and communication – what you see is what you get, in theory – the subjects discussed here show that this is far from the case.

On the one hand, this book will make photographs even more accessible, by suggesting the kinds of clues and approaches we can use to discern their meanings; on the other hand, it will also reveal them to be more complex than we might naturally assume. The ubiquity of photography as a form of note-taking – as it is often experienced via our phones today – means that images may often be seen, but perhaps not really looked at and thought about. Our familiarity with photographs, as a form, makes them approachable, but that familiarity is what often frustrates critical thinking and analytical reflection. In addition, as meanings shift over time, a changed context can throw a photograph into new relief, and new research can unearth stories that may not have been known in the past. How to consider photography – as a means of communication, as art, as advertising, as snapshots – can be unclear.

There are recurring questions pertinent to all types of photography that persist throughout its histories, theories and debates. Here, we identify ten of them. This book asks questions and encourages readers to do the same in order to think about photographs differently and a little more thoroughly, and perhaps to ask 'Why?' whenever a phone is brought out at a meal between friends, or a family photograph is shared online, or a picture disappears from Snapchat. This book does not set out to provide definitive answers, but it can be considered as a toolkit for referring to when sharing, looking at or thinking about photographs. Critical thinking about photography can be approached from a range of positions, such as how an image pertains to reality, privacy, memory or ethics. What following any of these lines of enquiry will do is show that there are no certainties when it comes to considering images. Looking at photographs is a subjective process (both personally and socially), and the different viewpoints are in their own ways each limited. They prescribe directions that are appropriate for different times, applicable to specific pictures and helpful in certain circumstances. There are no single 'correct' meanings or interpretations in art, and the joy of looking often comes from perhaps not liking and understanding it all at once.

Take for example this photograph (right) by the German artist Thomas Ruff (born 1958). What it shows is a young man looking directly into the camera. But what does it tell us? Who is he? And why should we want to examine it? If it is a passport picture, then it has significance to the subject's identity in a very real and relatively straightforward way. If, however, it is an art piece, it becomes more complicated. With an artwork like this, it's okay if we don't 'get it' immediately. We can explore it as one would a piece of music or a poem that might at first seem difficult. Doubt can be a useful position. We explore artworks by asking questions. Answers might not be forthcoming, but the act of asking questions can nevertheless make for a rich experience.

Looking at this photograph, it could be doubted that it took any great skill, and it is unclear who the man might he be. The braces he wears have social connotations: some might think of 1970-era skinhead subcultures (the style of his shirt also suggests this, but his hair does not), while for others, braces are a throwback to gentlemen dressing in three-piece suits. This man does not seem to fit either archetype. Often, we read portraits in the same way we do people – quickly assessing what they are wearing for clues to

Thomas Ruff, *Portrait (Stoya)* (1986)

Benjamin Brecknell Turner,
Bredicot, Worcestershire (c.1852–4)

what 'group' they might belong to, what their profession might be or any other affiliation with street styles. These are simplistic assessments, but important ones that help us make quick assumptions about identity. The way we skim these superficial details will be based on our experiences, grounded in our gender, background and other factors that affect how and what we see. This approach can easily lead to erroneous thought and indulgence of prejudices, but we all do it anyway because we need to establish a baseline in order to proceed and process what we are experiencing.

In fact, this portrait is from a series of similar ones that all have the same deadpan style and are printed large for the gallery space (the one shown is 1.6 metres, or 5.2 feet, tall). They give us very little to go on in terms of knowing who the person is, despite being so realistic. The fact that the work may not deliver anything in regard to the questions above is in some respects, the point. Ruff illustrates that any representation of somebody tells us very little about their real identity or character.

Photography is a descriptive medium, a trait that has bothered many since its invention. The 19th-century French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire failed to see its possibilities in terms of seeing past the supposed reality it expresses. He claimed, 'It is useless and tedious to represent what exists, because nothing that exists satisfies me. I prefer the monsters of my fantasy to what is positively trivial.' But just as memoirs communicate the experiences of a real person and history describes real events, their closer relation to objective reality does not make them any less strange and wonderful than fiction. Sometimes the opposite can be said to be true. After all, it is not a camera that takes a picture but a human being, and so the medium is only a tool of expression. A photograph should not be understood merely as a 'trace of real life', as it is commonly understood, but instead as a point of view, a witness or an interpretation. Photography can reveal, communicate, challenge and engage.

The idea of photography as a trace of real life has run parallel to the medium since its invention. When looking at early documentary photography of the 19th century, and comparing the images with the painting of the contemporaneous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, for example, it is easy to see where such notions came from. Those narrative-dense paintings, rich in symbolism and code, seem infinitely more complex than this photograph (left) by Benjamin Brecknell Turner (1815–94), for example. However, this does not mean to say there are not stories, desires, mysteries and puzzles to be gleaned from the latter. Firstly, one must remember that photography at this time was largely a passion for the very few who could afford to practise it. It was laborious, time consuming, cumbersome, relatively unknown and very exciting. What joy it must have brought when it actually worked.

With this in mind, this picture becomes something more precious. It is nostalgic and rather melancholy, and part of a long human tradition of looking to the past through rose-tinted glasses, a habit that can be seen in much of the painting of Turner's time, and indeed of contemporary society today. It's hard to imagine that around this time the Industrial Revolution was in full swing and the Great Exhibition was showcasing all that was new of the modern world. Turner's photographs suggest none of this; instead, his Britain appears as if locked in a dream, lyrical and potent with rural tradition. However, he was using the most modern of artistic mediums, creating scenes as rich in texture and shape as a Cézanne painting. The verticals of the fence and the solid geometric lines of the building contrast richly with the diagonals of the cart and wood-cutting device to give life and dynamism to an otherwise still and silent scene.

Photographs from this era can seem so wholly removed from the medium as we understand it today – photographs are made by default in colour, they can be easily made and created, sometimes they are not even meant to last, but disappear after a certain period of time. For this reason, work from the 19th century can seem hard to interpret, difficult to relate to and unconnected to who we are as people. However, its connections and contrasts to photography today and the different ways we can interpret it according to what we know of history can give it a richness that goes beyond simply documenting 'real life'. We can make parallels with experiments in photography today, as artists return to traditional darkroom techniques in order to explore the potentials of the medium away from the screen. Artists such as Vera Lutter, Meghann Riepenhoff and Adam Fuss breathe contemporary air into practices and sensibilities that might be deemed obsolete, but can in fact still be relevant and vital to our understanding of photography.

The history of photography has been rich in terms of its thinkers, writers and practitioners. With photography changing so quickly, it is time to take stock and consider its identity and presence through the years. Past periods of extensive critical activity include the avant-garde photography practices of the 1920s and 1930s and the experimental period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These movements resonated not only with exciting innovations that opened up new technical possibilities, but also with debates about photography's status as art – which go back to its inception – changing the terms in which the medium

was thought about. Out of these investigations grew the discipline of photo theory. In the 1970s, a major school of thought about photography involved making comparisons with cinema – instead of painting, which had dominated critical writing and thinking about photography previously. A question much considered at this time was, 'Could there be a theory of photographic spectatorship in the same way that there might be a theory of cinematic spectatorship?' Gaining its own identity away from fine art and also cinema (but also in connection with each) allowed photography to be considered on its own terms, at last.

Photography has since developed to a point that is best summarised by Fred Ritchin in his 2009 book *After Photography*: 'The multitudes of photographers now intensely staring not at the surrounding world, nor at their loved ones being wed or graduating, but at their camera backs or cellphones searching for an image on the small screens, or summoning the past as an archival image on these same screens, is symptomatic of the image's primacy over the existence it is supposed to depict.'

Something that makes photography different from many other mediums is that it appears in multiple forms. What, for example, is the difference between looking at a photograph in a magazine, in a themed exhibition in an art gallery, or on an image-sharing site stripped of all contexts? Does it make a difference in which context it appeared first, and how, why and when it was reproduced in another?

Aside from tracing reality, another traditional function of photography has long been to 'capture a moment'. But how to understand what this 'captured moment' is, now that a photograph's role is often performative, intended to be immediately shared far and wide online; and since images can be manipulated to an unprecedented extent? Our ways of understanding and interpreting photographs need to be as mobile and as fluid as photography itself.

This book is for those who are interested in thinking about photography in all its possible forms, and for those who will be participating in its future.

The ten chapters within encourage flexible and engaged ways of thinking. The first chapter, 'Is it real?', demonstrates that photography, as a representative medium, is limited and subjective, and how this apparent contradiction makes it more akin to writing than perhaps one might first think. As mentioned, the reality factor is a stumbling block for many when considering the medium, which is why we address this question first. Writing aims to be precise and realistic, just as photography can be. Photography requires attention to detail equal to that required for an effective use of words, and it covers the same ground as literature, in which genres are not considered static forms but rather as 'open, constantly changing in accordance with the needs and fancies of the community in which they are used to having meaning', as David Bate noted in *Photography: The Key Concepts* (2009). '[I]t is surprising that genre has not been taken up by photography like it has in film theory or the study of literature', he added. A comparison with the genres of literature – be those autobiography, biography, natural or social history, documentary or fiction – may help our understanding of photography, especially in terms of its connection with reality.

From the turn of the 21st century, there has been a rise in what is sometimes referred to as 'post-internet art'. This considers the repurposing and reuse of images from the web in new ways, such as collage, and continues long-held debates in art around the subject of appropriation. In 'Stealing or borrowing?', theories and problems around appropriation are investigated. What is important to consider here is not just the mechanics of using other people's images, but also why such reuse has currency and popularity at certain historical moments. Work by Hannah Höch and John Heartfield was made in turbulent times, when turning contemporary imagery into art was a particular way of making sense of the world. Can the same be said for the plethora of photographers and artists today who use collage in their image-making? The lack of politics in contemporary work is stark, so what does the popularity of this technique say about the state of photography today? Why are so many artists attracted to it? One answer might be that it is an attempt to comment on the very quantity of images out there.

With social networking becoming one of the main ways of experiencing photography, moments captured from private life frequently become uploaded and made public on various platforms. There is a strangeness to seeing colleagues and friends in situations that would traditionally remain private – be those drunken parties or reporting a death with accompanying pictures of the person who has died. This breach of public and private space has more sinister overtones when thinking of the posting of 'revenge' imagery, and what can happen when photographs are out of your ownership and responsibility. Like most of the subjects here, what is considered private and public shifts and changes and depends on context in terms of age or religion, for instance. The chapter 'Public or private?' explores these issues, as well as photographs that have carefully balanced or deliberately conflated the two in order to reveal something to the world that was previously hidden away.

One of the main repositories for photography had traditionally been that of the magazine – now of course much of that has been replaced by the web. Storytelling is vital to how we understand photography. Although it may be a 'realistic' medium, it is also an elliptical one, and narrative either has to be packed into one image or unfolded over many. There are many ways that photography is used to communicate. 'How can you tell a story?' investigates the role of storytelling and photography and how different sites and certain subjects require different methods. For some, a detailed and thorough handling is necessary, which often calls for the multiplicity, open-endedness and fragmentation that the strategy of serialising can afford. In other examples, static images alone are not enough, and words and film have to be brought in to fill in the gaps. Other approaches include cramming an entire story's worth of information into one image, which the viewer must then carefully unpack. The rise of the photobook has encouraged photographers and artists to tell stories again, shifting the proclivity that dominated the art world in the 1990s and 2000s for one-off art gallery 'masterpieces' to more lyrical sequencing, where the viewer has to trust the rhythm and editing of the photographer.

In contrast to the ideas mentioned above, photography has always championed the one famous image. An image might gain notoriety either thanks to its ubiquity, as in the case of Che Guevara's famous portrait, or because of its rareness, as can be seen from Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche* (1926), which sold for €2.6m in November 2017. 'Why is it famous?' examines issues of iconography, popularity and reproduction. From the earliest days of photography, Baudelaire was complaining of its ubiquity. This is a trait that is reflected in the way it is talked about today: the 'river of images', the 'avalanche of pictures', 'bombardment', and similar disaster metaphors all follow a long tradition of distrust. So how, in this world of images, do certain photographs gain a status of individuality and uniqueness? There is, of course, the fact that photography is so often tied to real events and therefore documents those. As with film, moments of social and cultural importance are recorded and remembered by images – be they still or moving. However, with the increase in 'citizen journalism', where anyone can hope to have a photograph or film section reproduced and replayed constantly on Twitter or 24-hour news channels, is it possible any longer to create a truly iconic photograph?

Wrapped up in much of what has been discussed so far is the issue of memory. It seems to cut to the very heart of the medium. 'What do I remember?' considers the different ways in which memory resonates through photographs. The French philosopher and critic Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, first published in 1979, is an idiosyncratic investigation into the potency of a photograph that continues to fascinate scholars and persists in being one of the most influential attempts in articulating what a photograph actually is, what it means and why it matters. The relevance here comes in the second half of Barthes's book, which focuses on a photograph of the author's deceased mother in order to fully investigate photography's links with remembrance and death. Barthes writes, 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me [...] a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze'. With the photograph not reproduced in the book, what remains for the reader is her lingering presence – the memory of her embedded in the identity of her son.

The influence and continued theoretical probing of *Camera Lucida* led photography theorist David Green to state in 2006 that 'the cloying melancholia of a post-Barthes era of photographic theory now haunts not just *Camera Lucida* but critical approaches to "all photography"'. The chapter 'Who do you think you are?' considers ideas that photography is shifting from a medium of memory to one of experience. Image-sharing sites and social networking can be read as encouraging mini autobiographies, in which the role of photography is very much located in the present. The fact that many platforms allow photographs to disappear, and/or to be commented and remarked on, makes photography 'live' and shifts it to a form of communication similar to conversation, rather than one dealing with static, silent objects. Key to photography's new role is the idea of identity, and how this may be explored. By looking in historical terms at how identity has been investigated through photography, one is better placed to understand the fascination with modes of photographic self-identification, such as the selfie.

'Can lying be OK?' and 'What goes where?' explore more issues of manipulation and editing. It can be said that there are three main elements to taking a picture: the taking, the editing and the printing (or sharing). These two chapters show how pictures have always been manipulated to suit the purpose of the publisher or photographer, and the particular stories they want to tell. 'What goes where?' looks at how different editing strategies can conceal or reveal stories that can be open or didactic. In addition, the extreme example of deep fake news – in which computer-generated representations of politicians or celebrities masquerade as reality – may be a hot topic now, but again, by looking back, it can be seen that manipulation has always been a vital component of the medium. When the world was photographed in black and white, was that manipulation? Like the square or rectangular shape of the frame, this was

purely a technical restraint, but it bears considering. One can ask where does manipulation start, and where should it stop?

This leads onto more ethical questions, which are discussed in 'What makes it problematic?'. In a climate of renewed conservative values, debates around free speech, live beheadings on Facebook and a proliferation of pornographic imagery, questions about what is acceptable, to whom, where, and why are more relevant than ever. What are the strategies around sensitive material and what is the responsibility of the publisher of such images? The waters are muddy and forever shifting. The camera excels in taking the photographer (and the viewer) into places which are not known – it is one of its very great strengths. The more salacious, forbidden and shocking, the more it can stimulate and encourage the voyeur in us. Who can easily forget a photograph they know they should not have seen? Considering bigger institutional decisions on decency and ethics, this chapter charts a range of images and issues surrounding the role of photography, spectatorship and publication.

Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires (opposite) by Mickalene Thomas (born 1971) finely illustrates some of the issues this book tackles. Drawing on art history, figurative painting and commercial photography, Thomas layers her photographs with symbolic meaning and classical references. Not only is Édouard Manet's iconic painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, depicting two fully clothed men picnicking with a naked woman (with another woman dressed in a shift behind them), cited in the title as well as the composition of the scene, but the picture also references Greek mythology – in particular the Judgement of Paris, in which an apple presented to the 'fairest one' was claimed by three goddesses, Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. Thomas replaces the food of Manet's picnic with flowers – a stereotypical symbol of femininity – but the three women with their unflinching gazes, staring fiercely at the viewer, challenge assumptions about beauty and gender.

By knowingly drawing on the traditions of art history and myth, as well as more recent history, including blaxploitation movies and fashion iconography, Thomas's image plays with photography's capacity to mix up fact and authenticity with fiction and artifice. In particular, she uses the medium to shine a light on the way art has treated women, particularly women of colour, throughout history. The photograph serves as a homage, fantasy, and corrective; it challenges who gets represented, and how and why. It does not detract that it is a construct rather than an image of candid reality; in being so Thomas makes a specific point not only about the lives of women of colour, but also about the role the visual arts, including classical painting and advertising, as well as traditional photography, play in the telling of their stories, and how they may be disseminated and understood.

In the same way that *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* transcends genres, there are many photographs in this book that could be discussed in more than one chapter. This only illustrates the richness of photography, it underlines the pertinence of the subjects discussed and the connectedness of the questions this book raises, as now, more than ever before, what constitutes a photograph is put into question. 'Photography' is an umbrella term that covers historical material and artworks sold for millions, as well as family albums, fashion spreads and the thousands of snaps held on phones and uploaded and shared over social networking and image sharing sites. How does one compare a Man Ray photograph sold at auction for millions with a picture of a dog wearing glasses found on Facebook? How can they possibly be the same thing? In this book, we take photography in its most expanded form. This can include video, installation pieces, found objects elevated to the status of fine art, and digital works that may not look like photographs at all. It is important to consider photography in its widest terms and not to panic if it all doesn't look like what we expect. A digital image on your phone is as much as a photograph as a one-off daguerreotype made in the 1840s, and with the advent of filters, they may even resemble each other, even if the means of their making bears no similarity.

The medium is nebulous, its results varied, but we hope that the examples given here will give you new ways and tools to consider photography, by encouraging close reading and taking time to ask questions – not only in regard to what you see and what is represented, but about the nature of the medium itself, the culture that surrounds it, and the people who use it.

Mickalene Thomas, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010)