

from:

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'Well, what is Photography'

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# Well, What Is Photography?

A lecture on photography on the occasion of the  
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Fotomuseum Winterthur Scalo





## Well, What Is Photography?

**A museum for photography.** When we inaugurated Fotomuseum Winterthur on January 29, 1993, we were confronted with a variety of reactions. The first critical voices disapproved of calling the institution “Fotomuseum.” They thought that it sounded outdated and old-fashioned and suggested a dusty place where you could mainly study various instruments, machines, and photographic procedures. Others, yearning for reassurance, asked whether we would show color photography, with an undertone suggesting that we certainly wouldn’t, would we? This remark is reminiscent of the reaction that the 1976 exhibition by William Eggleston at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, provoked. It was met with violent rejection as color photography was deemed unfit for a museum because at the time it was mainly used in advertising.

We opened Fotomuseum Winterthur with the exhibition *New Europe* by Paul Graham. When a group of commercial and advertising photographers from Zurich visited the show, we had to worry about the photographs as they were so annoyed by them. They complained that they were not in focus and the colors were off, and hence the work as a whole, including any of its content, was rejected. And vice-versa we were often asked: “Why are you opening a Fotomuseum, when so many art museums have started to show photography?” Or that I should please shift the emphasis from realist long-term documentaries to concept-based photography. And: “Why didn’t you open up a media museum?”

**The expectations photography has to meet.** This variety of reactions surprised us. They showed how disparate the expectations and the understanding of photography still were in the early 1990s. But the answer to the question “What is photography?” is actually quite simple at first sight.

*Robert Frank, Ticker Tape, New York, 1951. On permanent loan from Volkart Foundation*



Photography is a device to record light, invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (according to current research), that allows us to fix the perspective perception of the world in the manner construed since the Renaissance. Optics and chemistry go hand in hand to create a very efficient means of perception.

Despite the apparent simplicity of this first definition, there are very few comparable cases in which a seemingly clearly and easily delimited field – here's the viewer, there's the world; here's the instrument, there's the image of the world – has created so much confusion. Obviously there are many different concepts of photography, all of them presented with great emphasis. Without hesitation, people take a deep breath and announce in a booming voice: "This is photography!" "No, this is photography!" "This isn't photography anymore!" "You are wrong, this is photography!" The more forceful the claim, the more likely it is that someone is standing nearby ready to declare the same three words just as emphatically but with a different meaning in mind. But this proclamation, even today, can actually mean quite a number of things, containing hidden statements like, "This is photography because everything is in focus." "This is photography because it is perfectly printed and comes in the predetermined trade-mark colors – Kodak red or Fuji green." "This is photography because it shows narrative scenes from real life, easy to recognize and read." "This is photography because it is politically committed." "This is photography because it captures the world's beauty." "This is photography because it fits into the art world's current discourse." And so on. And all of these remarks encompass the exclusion of their opposite – the out-of-focus, the off colors, the naked or the clothed – in short, of everything that is not the one and only true and proper photography according to this particular personal view. The absolute character of these proclamations is evidence of their intention to determine at once what photography *is* and what it *should* be. The resolute tone of the exclusion, however, suggests that obviously quite a few things are at stake – things that may not immediately and exclusively be connected with photography.

**This is photography!** The claim "This is photography!" conceals the question "Well, what is photography?" The first answer, concise as it is, should

have precluded any misunderstandings. But whereas we are often in agreement with regard to general definitions – preambles of constitutions are a prime example – our opinions on their practical application often widely and irreconcilably diverge. Hence, I want to supplement this first concise definition of photography with several other definitions revolving around the existence and effects of this light-recording instrument:

*Spatially speaking*, photographs are little segments of the world, abstractions onto a plane surface, square or rectangular, construed according to the rules of one-eyed central perspective, which recorded in close-up does not correspond to our actual vision, but appears stunningly similar beyond a certain distance.

*Temporally speaking*, they are the fixed traces of the light and the shadow of a thing that was in front of the camera at a certain point in time, whether the photograph was taken somewhere out in the world or whether it was produced in a studio. The shutter clicks and the clock jumps to the past. The future is excluded from this medium.

*Semiotically speaking*, photographs are only slightly coded images. In contrast to language, which combines letters in complex structures with a comparatively exact meaning by means of rules – and yet, even in this field, misunderstandings are not the exception, but rather the rule, as we know – photography functions as a kind of subtraction from the world, which itself is an only slightly coded structure. Consequently, a photograph rarely comes alone. Not only reporters but also amateur and family photographers love series as the single photograph is similar to an obstinate, mute, enigmatic child.

*Speaking in terms of the theory of perception and of epistemology*, photographs function as a reinforcement of vision. In photography, we begin to retreat from the world. We orientate ourselves less towards the tactile, olfactory, audible and experiential world and more towards optical signals and visual data, sometimes without making a precise distinction whether our gaze is resting on immediate reality or on worlds mediated by images. When we are standing on the beach and comment on the sunset with the words, "This is almost as kitschy as a postcard," this is a good example of the confusion of our experiential worlds. We believe we are



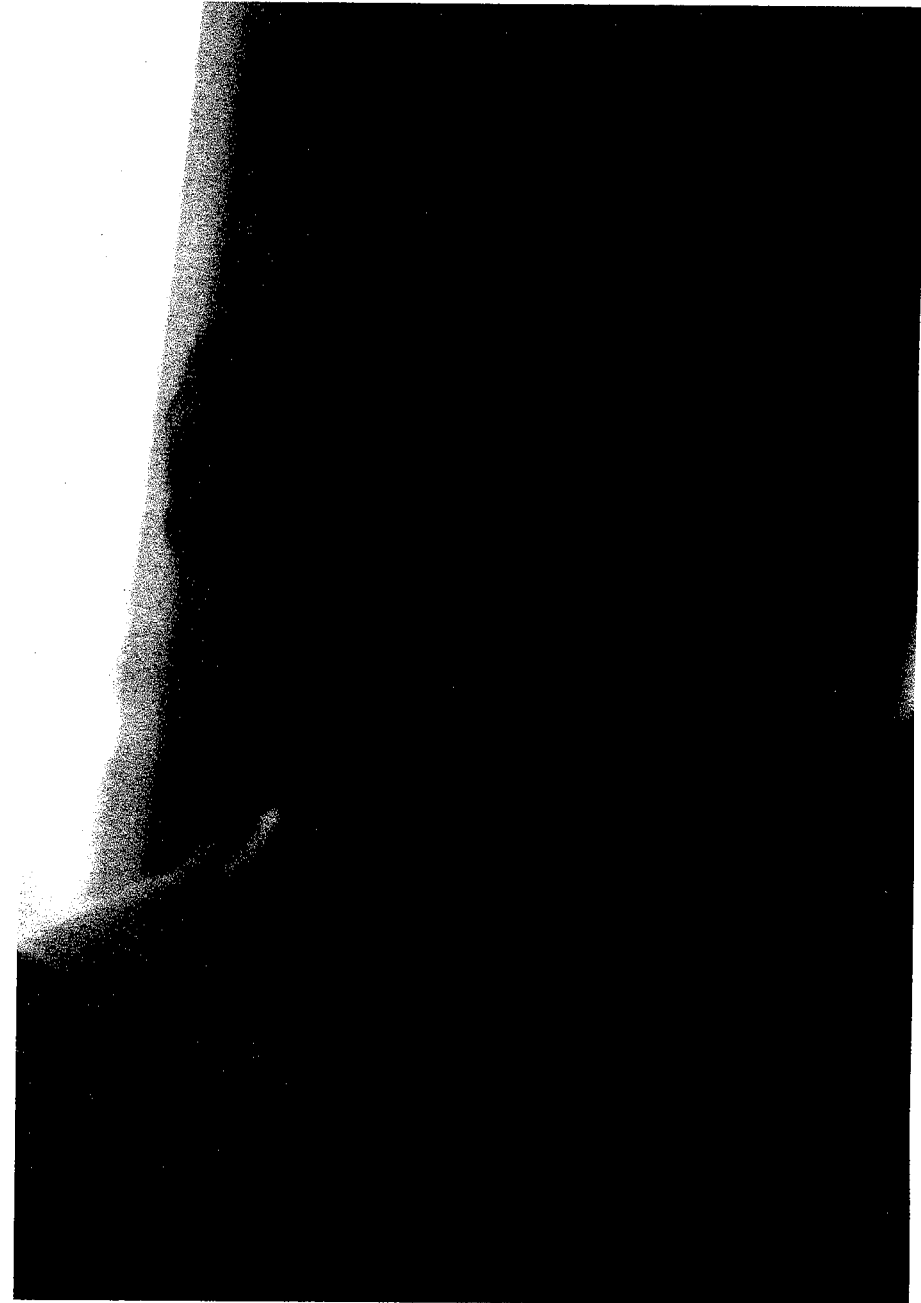
coming closer to the world, and yet we are simultaneously withdrawing from it. Photography accompanies vision's triumphal march and helps to pave the way for abstractions of the concrete world.

And finally – *speaking in terms of world view* – photographs advance a positivist approach to the world. They are a visual confirmation of the turn to the worldly and the superficial. The world's surface is optically scanned and photographically examined in the belief that we can say something about that which is behind the surface by means of surface signs. We could call it “photographic research based on circumstantial evidence,” alluding to the types of research based on circumstantial evidence that emerged parallel to photography during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: surface data are collected, combined and interpreted in order to discover truth in the sum of the single parts – of a painting in art history, of a crime in criminology, of the psyche in Freud, of the world in photography.

And finally, it is important to emphasize – *speaking in terms of media theory* – that photography not only documents events and incidents; it not only creatively represents them but actually engenders them. In a media-tized world, only what is “talked” about and displayed matters. Anything else does not exist; it is simply not there. Photography is creating the world that we want to and will remember by means of its images.

**Photography as an instrument for showing things.** Most of all, photography is probably an instrument for showing things, a device for displaying them. As soon as its principle was discovered and its technology invented, things were photographed in order to show them: photographs were taken abroad in order to show them at home, to present them to one's own social class. Right from the beginning, it encompassed a great degree of social distinction. The first photographs (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) showed the world calmly and in its entirety, from an appropriate distance. The use of smaller cameras, of roll film, of flash lights (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) disturbed this calm and violated the figure's intactness. Photography now “discovered” the

*Paul Graham, Untitled #15, 1998. From “End of an Age.” Gift Volkart Foundation*







sunken and the hidden; it discovered the snapshot showing the unexpected: a beggar on the street, kissing lovers, a drop of milk on impact, a woman climbing stairs, a body revealing itself in contortions. New film stock, new telephoto lenses, electronic nightviewers soon disrupted the intimacy of film stars as well as the integrity of space (Hubble). Through electronic devices, public display arrives at an all-encompassing totality. Simultaneously, it becomes clearly obvious for the first time that the research and discovery of things and their relations, virtues nobly attributed to photography, are merely the lesser and duller side of the medal; its shiny side are revelation and public display: "Here, here, look at what I have to show you, what we have to offer you!" It was always like that. But, step by step, we have diminished the appropriate and "courteous" distance to the world and to the Other, down to a shameless and acerbic closeness that alienates us even from ourselves.

The history of photo, video and digital technology is just one aspect of this rapacious swirl from distance to closeness, of dragging the private into the public, of privatizing the public sphere. But it is the visible index of the increasingly pornographic nature of society. Yesterday, Stan and Ollie threw pies in each other's faces; today, close-up genitalia are smacking against the screens. None of the calm, integrity, and distance of the photographic gaze of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The pornographic gaze transgresses all limits; it dissects everything in a fast, hectic movement, constantly exalting itself. The gesture of total revelation always and already offers an infinite abundance of signs and meanings, like a gigantic smorgasbord that is always here for us, morning, evening and night, constantly replenished and newly set. But it also means tiring redundancy.

**Photography draws its representational power from its paradoxically dual nature.** On the one hand, the realism of photographs is so convincing that they appear to be spatial and temporal facts, and we begin to believe that we can grasp the world through them. As if we were standing on a

*William Eggleston, Woman Sitting on a Red Cushion, 1973*





slightly elevated point of view, the position of a military strategist, where we can visually participate in the world without any immediate consequences, without actually having to be a part of it – out of reach and reaching out to it at one and the same time. We could speak of the colonization of the world by the photographic gaze because it makes us believe that we can know and own the world without ever having been in it. We become mere connoisseurs and traders of the images of the world. On the other hand, photography is open for any kind of projection on the viewer's part as it is only slightly coded and discontinuous, a mere segment taken out of the world's spatial and temporal continuity. It is a kind of mute tale that starts and stops, suggests and offers, only to fall silent again, leaving the results open. It is at once clear and opaque. This amalgamation of understanding and wondering – at once illustrative information and open visual field, testimony and surprise packet – adds up to an unusual power and endows photography with modern-day magical properties. This attractive and powerful combination of document and image is the source of many misunderstandings regarding photography. Research has repeatedly shown that ten people will give ten very different readings of one and the same photograph, in particular if it is a single image and has no caption, or if it is not part of a reportage, a narrative, or structured according to intelligible rules, i.e. partaking in a "legible" visual language.

**And the question of photography's truth.** As a photograph is always simultaneously an autonomous image as well as the representation of something, we are forced, time and again, to talk about the things it represents. Two things manifest themselves in a representation: the view of subject taking the photograph and the motif itself, the world in front of the lens. In the first case, I as another subject feel qualified to talk about it as we are all accustomed to look at the world. In the case of the latter, we are inevitably confronted with other fields of knowledge – about landscapes, cityscapes, urbanism, and urban organization for example. Talking about photography always forces us to talk about many different worlds. Consequently, it is a kind of destabilizing discourse with a generalizing claim.

I am actually pointing out a fundamental problem: the question of what photographic truth consists of, or what truth in photography is. I am talking about the perpetual confusion of "that it was" and "how it was." A traditional analogous photograph is the trace of an actual event. Something happened at a certain point in time in front of the camera. It was there, as Roland Barthes said. And this thing that was there caused an optical-chemical imprint that we can now look at in a photograph. A trace of Napoleon III is present in an old photograph of Napoleon III. Napoleon III was there (intentional forgeries excluded). This trace of time or of existence contains a truth, i.e. something happened, but it does not tell us – or only very imprecisely and with a bias, from a singular and furthermore one-eyed perspective – how, where, and in what context something happened. Photography talks about pure, almost meaningless factuality: that something was there, that something happened. This is in the nature of photography, the medium itself. Everything else is not the pure, almost automatic imprint of reality on film, but the result of the photographer's or the artist's relation to the world. It corresponds to the context he moved in. The image is expression of this relation, which is never neutral, never static, never complete, never democratic, never truthful in any absolute sense. It emerges from a dynamic, performative process, a larger spatial-temporal context, and from the construction of the world as an image world.

