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Are photographs pictures or objects?

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A photograph can be collected in many ways, in physical form in albums, as pictures in our minds, or in more recent times as part of a collection on an electronic device; which of these constitute being an object or a picture and how does its journey effect that determination?

The *false* object.

From potential falsehood, to reality and back again; how the photograph journeys from the mind to the material.

For some, the photograph itself is not the focus of the image but the object contained within it, does this form of analysis suspend the need for physical existence of an object or perhaps create one? As Stephen Bull quotes "*Analysing photographs as material objects also extends their indexicality. Considered as objects, photographs relate to other senses that connect them even more closely to the real, physical world.*" (Bull, 2009), artists and photographers can create work that has an intentional and direct representation of the objects they contain; Peter Fischli & David Weiss^(fig1) offer examples of photography where sculptures contain everyday items created purely to be photographed, however they still clearly retain the indexical quality of each individual item within. The act of the sculpture questions the viewer regarding their everyday representation and narrative but not the items themselves; "*we may not automatically give them credence as visual subjects within art's lexicon. These photographs retain the thingness what they describe, but their subjects are altered conceptually because of the way they have been represented.*" (Cotton, 2014) In relation to altered concepts of objects within art, Thomas Richard Williams (away from his commercial business) photographed still life and Vanitas^(fig2) much in the same way as artists such as the Dutch master Willelm Kalf's^(fig3) painted works. Each item within the Vanitas offered meaning, giving recognition and connection to the viewer whilst still incorporating an indexical nature for each object.

This recreation of a classic painting style shows that no matter the medium, objects recorded can still offer context or representation intended by artist or viewer. On the opposite side of recording the indexical nature of an object, Edward Weston and his series of still life containing vegetables including Pepper #30 (1930^{fig4}) brought lighting from above the subject and framing previously used in his nude work, creating a distinct difference to many other still life works at the time, the subjects took on an almost human form with rich dark tones and close cropping making the viewer question which object or being they are engaging with, showing objects can become something different from their original form or shape within a work of art. The Becher's^(fig5) work was almost solely based on photographing objects, but as opposed to those previously mentioned, in a far more correctly indexical manner; water towers, oil pumps and other industrial architecture were photographed in a typographic style, from the same angle and height recording the existence of the object standing before them, but does the recording of an object no matter if it is indexical or not transform the object from a recording to reality?

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed; It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge---and, therefore, like power." (Sontag, 2008:174)

Sontag writes that seeing a photograph of an object, regardless of if it is in clear form such as the Becher's, or the vaguer of Weston gives the viewer ownership, however it *feels* like knowledge, but that is a pretence of ownership. It is the *emotional feeling* associated with the object in the photograph that is viewed that gives us the sense of ownership and not the actual object. In reality the photographed subject no longer exists; Weston's Pepper has surely rotted, Williams' flowers have died and the Becher's oil pump may have rusted away.

This paradox of viewing a *false* object suggests Roland Barthes semiotic reasoning may have come into play; including "Studium and Punctum" discussed in Camera Lucida (Barthes, 1980), this process of thinking makes way for the viewer to disregard the actual photograph and connect to the subject within, an education into the operator; actions, gestures and details that draw a viewer in. However this does not actually create the object, but only duplicates emotional responses to which it represents; despite connection, recognition or remembrance this belief applies to the picture itself and not the actual physical

object, therefore the object is represented and not real; in this case it is a picture that is viewed. It is a fantasy; it could be considered that it is like Freud's 'psychic object' where he believes memories brought from childhood, into adulthood create deep behavioural traits, akin to finding those memories in a photograph. Roland Barthes exhibits this very behaviour in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980) as he obsesses over a photograph of his mother and the injustice of his aunt's life. He views pictures from his family archive, in fact, he assumes the role of protector and guard of his dead family's legacy/reputation spurred on by viewing the *false* subjects within.

The photograph has a unique quality in the way it represents the apparent truth, the social field rarely considers the photograph itself but the actual subject contained within, it is only when you delve deeper that you realise 'this is not a matchbox, but a *photograph* of a matchbox' for example. The medium allows for instant connection by the viewer and allows them to fall into the well of photography with very little effort at all, even suspend belief and fool us into thinking we are looking directly at a physical object or person, when we are in fact looking at a picture.

The photograph as object.

The photograph can move however, from imaginary object to a tactile 3d form; at its inception, the act of creation relied on chemicals, glass and film to form the basic building block the artist would then mould to create a photographic print. Since then they have been placed on any number of surfaces and mediums utilising different processes, crafting an object as defined in the Oxford dictionary (2017) as a 'material thing that can be seen and touched'.

"The photographic object - be that the Book or print - is a thing to be treasured looked at, cared for or even fetishized. Think how precious our family snaps are, how we collect postcards or carry images of loved ones in our wallets..." (Bright, 2006) As Bright states the photographic object for example a paper print, is a tactile three-dimensional item which can be touched, seen and damaged by wear or purposeful reasons, original negatives can also become damaged, fade or lost (firmly placing the photographic object into Barthes's and Freud's fictional reality alongside its representation of the original subject).

Man Ray experimented with combining photographs and other items to create physical work beyond paper; *Object to be destroyed* (1932 ^{fig5}) saw a photograph of an eye attached to the swinging arm of a metronome by paperclip, it was apparently built to aid his painting; *"A painter needs an audience, so I also clipped a photo of an eye to the metronome's swinging arm to create the illusion of being watched as I painted."* (Schwarz) This device crosses borders between the symbolised and the actual object, the eye is representational of Man Ray's audience, it is printed onto a physical medium and clipped to a moving device which measures time and pace. His need for the eye only adding validity to Barthes theory of connection to the photograph itself, as he feels he is being watched even though he himself photographed and placed it there, demonstrating he in some ways fell for his own illusion. However what breaches boundaries of the artificial and reality, is the fact that it has now become a judgmental object by the addition of the metronome with its movement and sound forming a complete piece; transitioning from the represented and into the real world via physicality; not only do we have the 'psychic object' but now we have introduced the physical objects also.

Jeff Wall gives recognition to artistic history which has influenced him akin to Willelm/Kalf with his 'cinemagraphic' work (^{fig6}); mounted on large light boxes, it gives the pictures a sense of scale and reality when on display, or Ola Lanko with work such as *All Year round* (2014-^{fig7}); where she photographed from her window for 365 days, the resulting collection can be found as an interactive piece online and as a spacial installation hung on swinging media, creating an object that is both beautiful and strange much like Weston's still life, but very much tactile. Let us not forget earlier photography such as Daguerreotypes (^{fig9}) which saw glass plate photographs enclosed in cases, often with a lock of hair from the subject, these processes and means of display create very physical objects to admire, cherish or to stand in front of and consider, whilst still containing or displaying a picture.

From the psychic object, to reality and its return to non-form.

"To collect photographs is to collect the world. Movies and television programs light up walls, flicker and go out; but with still photographs the image is also an object, light weight, cheap to produce and easy to carry about, accumulate and store..." (Sontag, 1977)

When written in 1977 Sontag's statement regarding the photograph as an object was certainly true; However, is it still relevant today in a digital era? The transition from analogue into digital has seen photography change as it moves from the imagined object, to physical, and then into data, almost as if the physical photograph has become the psychic object it can portray. *"In an apparent reaction to the decreasing production of physical photographs and their replacement by digital images, during the early 21st century a significant number of writers turned their attention to the photograph as an object."* (Bull, 2009)

Bull quotes Nina Lager Vestberg, Professor of Visual Culture in the Department of Art and Media Studies at NTNU as stating "postmodern critics concentrated on 'thinking' photography rarely acknowledging the physical properties of photographs" (Vestberg, 2008) implying that the analysis of context, subject, narrative, and symbols may be unnecessary when considering actual physical existence and a picture is an object regardless of if it is on physical media or not.

If this is correct and Barthes process of viewing applies to a photograph no matter what it is displayed upon, the same may be said for the photograph in data form; it is light projected to a surface which has the same viewing qualities as paper, the device or the file itself can be physically damaged, corrupted, or deleted similar to the negative. Excluding television or projection (which of course can now be paused), the only thing that has changed in the move to electronic media is the viewing medium. It could be considered that a photograph can still be a physical object on a device which displays a picture upon or within; it could even be described as 'digital paper'. The viewing behaviour noted by Barthes and the image creation technique is also the same at its base level, one could argue that when viewing a picture digitally we are holding an object in our hands displaying a picture, the same as other materials such as paper. It can still be lovingly touched, receive disdain or cried upon, this manner of display is still physical and still has the same weaknesses as analogue; Paper, wood, metal or monitor, they are all performing the same role in containing a picture within an object.

Photography has transitioned alongside other technologies and rather than standing still it has managed to reinvent itself digitally whilst keeping in mind its analogue heritage, *"The World Wide Web is more than technology, more than modems, bandwidth and computers. It is a thing made of language and of history; a web of metaphors"*. (Brad Seawell, 2004), it has become part of Seawall's view of 'a thing of language and history' whilst maintaining its own identity. A photograph does not recreate the object itself, but it can offer representation at a level like no other, the photograph has the power to recreate an object by recording a picture with as much connection to the viewer as the real thing, always keeping in mind the foundations Barthes and Sontag discuss. The photograph can become object by means of display, therefore indicating that it is, and can be both an object and a picture depending on interpretation. It is reaching more viewers and becoming accessible to more people than ever before whilst still creating both real and non-real objects; on a physical level the process of capturing light is still the same, therefore at some point the means of destination and display medium combined with process of analysis must determine the answer to the question, is a photograph a picture or an object.

Reference

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Citations, Quotes & Annotations

Bright, S. (2006) *Art photography now*. London: Thames & Hudson.

(Bright, 2006:107)

"The photographic object - be that the Book or print - is a thing to be treasured looked at, cared for or even fetishized. Think how precious our family snaps are, how we collect postcards or carry images of loved ones in our wallets..." (Bright, 2006:107)

Bull, S. (2009) *Photography*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

(Bull, 2009:23)

"Analysing photographs as material objects also extends their indexicality. Considered as objects, photographs relate to other senses that connect them even more closely to the real, physical world." (Bull, 2009:23)

"In an apparent reaction to the decreasing production of physical photographs and their replacement by digital images, during the early 21st century a significant number of writers turned their attention to the photograph as an object." (Bull, 2009:23)

(Bull, 2009:23–25)

Cotton, C. (2014) *The photograph as contemporary art*. (03rd ed.) London, United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson.

(Cotton, 2014:230)

"But because we may ordinarily pass these objects by, or keep them at the periphery of our vision, we may not automatically give them credence as visual subjects within art's lexicon. These photographs retain the thingness what they describe, but their subjects are altered conceptually because of the way they have been represented. Through photography, quotidian matter is given a visual charge and imaginative possibility beyond its everyday function."

(Cotton, 2014:230)

(Cotton, 2014:234)

Seawell, B. (2004) *Rethinking media change: The aesthetics of transition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Seawell, 2004:19)

"The World Wide Web is more than technology, more than modems, bandwidth, computers. It is a thing made of language and of history, a Web of Metaphor." (Seawell, 2004)

Sontag, S. (2008) *On photography*. London: Penguin Classics.

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(Sontag, 2008:174)

Roland Barthes

"the recognition of interests, likes or dislikes, of a person", "pierces" and "wounds"

(Roland Barthes, 1980)

References from online sources

"A painter needs an audience, so I also clipped a photo of an eye to the metronome's swinging arm to create the illusion of being watched as I painted." (Schwarz, p.206.)

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/man-ray-indestructible-object-t07614>

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"A painter needs an audience, so I also clipped a photo of an eye to the metronome's swinging arm to create the illusion of being watched as I painted." (Schwarz, p.206.)

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'A material thing that can be seen and touched'. Oxford dictionary online (2017)

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Image Credits



Figure 1

Peter Fischli David Weiss: A quiet afternoon (1985)

http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/exhibitions/2007-04-27_peter-fischli-david-weiss/

Accessed Nov 2016



Figure 2

Thomas Richard Williams (1825-1871)
The Sands Of Time (1850-1852)
Stereo-Daguerreotype

https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/gm_06421801-web.jpg
Accessed Nov 2016



Figure 3

WILLEM KALF (1622-1693)
'Still Life with Drinking Horn', 1653 (oil on canvas)

http://www.artvfactory.com/art_appreciation/still_life/willem_kalf.htm
Accessed Nov 2016



Figure 4

Edward Weston, *Pepper No. 30*, 1930

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/man-ray-indestructible-object-t07614>
Accessed Nov 2016

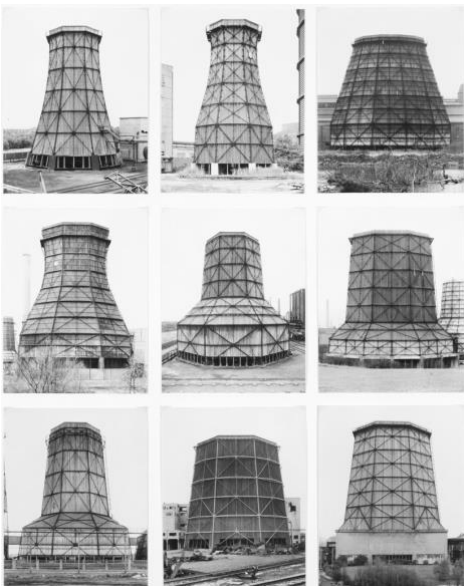


Figure 5

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Towers Wood-Steel*, 1959-77

<https://imageobjecttext.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/bechers-cooling-towers-wood-steel-1959-771.jpg>
Accessed Nov 2016

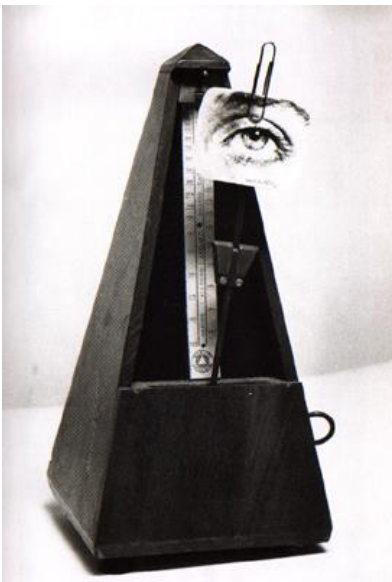


Figure 6

Man Ray, Indestructible Object 1923/1963

http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/T/T07/T07614_10.jpg
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Figure 7

Jeff Wall

A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai) 1993

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wall-a-sudden-gust-of-wind-after-hokusai-t06951>
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Figure 8

Ola Lanko All Year Round 2014

<http://www.olalanko.com/#/projects/all-year-round>
Accessed Nov 2016



Figure 6

Photographer Unknown

http://www.phototree.com/id_dag.htm
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