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The Tyranny of Fascination.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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at Massey University Wellington, New Zealand.

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2012.



Declaration Confirming Content of Digital Version of Thesis

I confirm that the content of the digital version of this thesis

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The tyranny of fascination.

In this exegesis I will discuss the photographic works that I have constructed during my research into the photograph as a reproducible object, I will also be discussing the ability that photographic reproducibility has to unlimber assigned or received meaning whilst also questioning and mediating the assigned meaning of the original artefact that it depicts.

This questioning happens in part because of the ability that the photograph has to stand in for the object that it is derived from; and in part because of the ability that the re-produced photograph has to speak with comparable authority to the original photograph.

I believe that the reproducibility of the photograph allows the photographic object to move out into the world allowing an image to be presented in many places simultaneously, and that this allows its meaning to be contested intertextually in as much as the image is able to exist plurally, to interact with many different scenarios, to be used for many different functions, and to exist in scenarios which an original or unique object could not.

For the sake of simplicity and brevity I often use the terms photographic, photography and camera in this essay; When I use the term photographic, I intend it to mean any form of photographic production, this could be a traditional black and white photograph, or it could be a silkscreen print, I am not attempting to categorise or classify these things. My intent with this is to be inclusive of technologies, methods, and images – not exclusive.

The photograph, as I use the term herein can be taken to mean ‘an image which is produced photographically’ – In this I am speaking to images that are photographic objects, unless noted I am not speaking to a particular photograph.

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Fig. 1

Merely strange or demonstrably weird?

In “On Photography” Susan Sontag commented that the camera “...makes familiar things small, abstract, strange, much further away.” Sontag (1973. Pg.167). There is a particular validity in foregrounding the strangeness of the object that is the photograph, however, Many people even conflate the photograph of the object with the object itself (Barthes. (1981) Pg.5).

At a certain level however, mere strangeness isn't quite a suitable description of how photography operates as a medium. The photograph is certainly a strange beast, despite it's capacity to reflect that which it depicts, the received meaning of a photograph is never entirely predictable, nor fully under control - even when the image maker manages to nail the meaning they want down rather smartly - the physical object that is the photograph can still be removed from the scenario under which it was made. Richard Prince's re-photographing of a *'Marlboro man'* advertisement is a good example of a scenario where a photograph can gain 'fine-art' status after recontextualisation.

It is my contention that the photograph, and by extension photography itself is more 'weird' than simply 'strange'. I choose this word deliberately both as a reference to the odd, the uncanny, and the arcane, but also as a reference to the concept of the 'wyrd'. This is an old English version of the name of one of the three norns in Norse mythology. These are essentially what the witches in Shakespeare's *'Macbeth'* were modeled upon - 'that which has come to pass', 'that which is in the process of happening', and 'that which has yet to happen'. The word is most commonly taken to mean fate or destiny.

The arcane is obvious, perhaps more obvious to non-photographers than those who partake - Traditionally a photographer went into a dark room and performed ritualistic actions in a pre-defined order, thus an image 'appeared', the latent (1) made visible. Even these days in digital photography the camera captures light and turns it into an explanation - it describes how to recreate the scene it sees in a digital file. If anything the arcane and the ritualistic in photography have only increased with the advent of digital technology. Even if the technology has changed, the fundamental capabilities of the photograph have not (Green, Lowry. 2003 Pg.47).

Workflow, actions, and process are at least as much a part of digital photography as they ever were in analog photography, indeed, Many of the terms that are used in the processing of digital photographs are derived, or even taken from traditional analog photography - Terms such as Dodging, burning, un-sharp masking and Gaussian blur come directly from traditional darkroom work, even common working terms such as 'stopping down' come from anachronistic photographic devices (in this case, Waterhouse stops). Altogether this lends a strange pseudo-historicism to many photographic methods, and creates an interesting sense of lineage through often-disparate technologies.

(1). Middle English, from Latin latent-, latens, from present participle of latere 'to lie hidden'.

The uncanny is only a little more complex – simply put, the camera has an inhuman gaze, and it sees the world in a different way to how a person does. Gary Winograd with his comment (2) “I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs” aptly describes this. Things do look different in photographs - this is the act of ‘making strange’, which I have just described. Photography has the capacity to inject something into the depiction of an object – this capacity to add something of my intent to the resulting image is the reason why I favor the medium. Being both an icon and a symbol, the photograph mediates that which it depicts (Sebeok. 2001. Pg.10-11).

The wyrd (or fate) is where things become denser, and still more fascinating. I recently heard Geoffrey Batchen say, “...A photograph is a death sentence...” (Batchen, 2011). This is something that makes perfect sense to me in as much as a photograph of a person is a photograph of a being that will, nay must, die. If we look back through photo history we see countless people depicted now as they were then, and this with the knowledge that many if not most of these people are merely dust at this point - the photograph is ‘out of time’ ‘in a way that shows us very clearly how we are ‘in time’’. The photograph prefigures mortality (Barthes. (1981) Pg.96).

This sense of ‘mortality’ comes from how rooted in time the photograph is, obviously there is the amount of time it takes to make the photograph, it’s been quipped that your average professional photographer’s portfolio represents a couple of seconds at best, but the photograph also excises it’s subject ‘from time’ (Barthes. (1981) Pg.85). When I was briefly working as a photo archivist during the 90’s we often looked at clothing and other incidental details in unlabelled photographs so as we could work out when it was likely to have been taken - the time in which a photograph is taken can often become more obvious as time passes.

In terms of the oddness of photography; the thing that I notice both as a practitioner, and as a viewer (after all, who isn’t), is how these ‘weird elements’ begin to collide and manifest as new and often unexpected forms and subjects – this especially happens when we begin to discuss our reactions to individual photographic images.

When a person is exposed to a photograph they usually engage with it as some sort of truthful observation of the thing which it depicts, weirdness is already at play in as much as the truth simply isn’t there, all a photograph depicts is a selected moment, of a particular age, with a selected angle, and a selected subject, presented in a selected way, and possibly in a random location - In short, a total dislocation from what and when it was when the shutter tripped – it’s largely subjective at this level. There is truth in photographs, but truth is not the same thing as veracity. The camera does not view the world in the manner that many people expect it to - as the camera has no capacity to filter meaning, only light.

(2). I have been unable to discover the original source of this comment, it seems that he said it in a range of contexts and situations; the phrase is however, incontestably his.

Even when we allow for this, each person will see and interpret from a photograph depending upon what they have seen in the past, what they have experienced, and of course because of the environment in which the photograph is displayed, Meaning (3) itself ultimately becomes little more than an individual opinion in studying photographs.

Conversations with dead poets

Throughout this year I've been having something of a conversation with a range of people, but particularly Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes - in several ways they are both sympathetic to the ideas that I'm looking at.

Both Barthes and Benjamin have written about photography, if in differing terms In Benjamin's case - questioning personal authenticity and value when played against the idea of reproduction and mass production (Benjamin, 1999). With Barthes speaking more to the ideas around photography as an aide de memoir – questioning the photographs relation to memory and proposing the idea that a photograph prefigures mortality (Barthes. 1981).

But they've also another thing in common that I find intriguing - their most known essays on the topic, and arguably their most important contributions to the field of photo art theory can easily be read to be about far more than simply photography.

Benjamin's essay '*The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*' (Benjamin, 1999) could as easily be taken as a questioning of the value of individuality, of uniqueness in what was not only the age of mass production, but also in anticipation of the totalitarian regimes which led to the second world war - an age when people were forced into line with ideological viewpoints which devalued individual production in favor of the benefit of the state, Benjamin was after all a dedicated Marxist; The second word of this essay is Marx's name, if nothing else, this should at least suggest that Benjamin was thinking of Marx when he began the essay.

Barthes '*Camera Lucida*' (1981) on the other hand reads to me at least as an eulogy, it's a quiet, meditative, if long essay on mortality and remembrance - the last work of any great length published during his lifetime, it has the feel, not of railing against the gathering darkness but of a quiet acceptance of mortality - He wrote it after his mothers death, having lived with her for some 60 years - his whole life at that point - and yet of all of the photographs he published in that text, none were of her.

(3). When I refer to meaning I am referring to the received meaning that the viewer assigns to the image, A photograph is both an index and a symbol, but these rely upon an interpreter to assign (personal) meaning to the image that they engage with – Meaning is not an embedded and intrinsic part of the image itself, but nor is it purely extrinsic. Rather, 'meaning' is a product of the friction between the content of the image, and the experience and education of the viewer interacting with and interpreting the image.

These ‘conversations’ haven’t been a purely intellectual exercise for me; instead they have been starting points from which I have been making work. I feel that the best argument (or validation) for theory about photography lies in the form of a photograph that responds to that theory.

In my practice this year, I’ve been making photographs about an idea, albeit an ephemeral one, rather than of a subject - the things that I’m photographing are somehow satisfyingly appropriate, but they are exemplars of an idea rather than some sort of typological description of a subject.

An essential part of this idea is that ‘meaning’ is something that the viewer brings to the work; this is why there is no text within the environment of the work itself (apart from a sign asking people not to take away the photos). The work has the title ‘The Tyranny of Fascination’. However this name has been consciously selected to be ambiguous in terms of why I have selected the individual images. Naming is almost unavoidable for a photographer, as ‘Untitled’ is very definitely a title, I have avoided titling the individual images (though in this document it is formally unavoidable). I have consciously tried to ask a question rather than make a statement about what people will experience.



Fig. 2

The photographic object.

Central to this idea of assigned meaning is the fact that a photograph is an object; In this I am not reading the individual photographs for meaning, and I’m certainly not trying to imply that they should be read in a particular way (except the obvious fact that presented in a gallery context they will be taken to be art) - the ‘meanings’ of the individual images aren’t of any particular interest to me, beyond how other people interpret them. Instead I’m looking at photographs as physical objects, which are also photographs, by this I am not arguing that the ‘image’ cannot be duplicated, it can. However, the duplicated photographic image is a new photographic object, even as it replicates the image.

I see a re-production of a photograph is not merely a mimic, certainly not a duplication, but rather as a new object - with its own history, its own location, and future - creation to destruction the photograph occupies it's own space - just as any object does. The photograph can be iterative, but it cannot occupy two points in space at the same time. The image that is described by the photographic object, on the other hand can certainly occupy two photographs simultaneously, at this level, it is fair to say that the computer screen, in displaying photographs, can at times function as a photographic object itself.

Barthes speaks to the objectness of photographs in a peripheral fashion when he describes his finding the photograph of his mother and her brother, at ages 5 and 7 - the '*winter garden photograph*' (Barthes. 1981). In this, he describes the Scene, and then the photograph.

“There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking at the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it

The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded and the picture just managed to show two children...” (Barthes. 1981. Pg.67).

Objectness was not a central issue to Benjamin either, and yet he spoke around it a great deal in his essay 'art in the age of technological reproduction'. In his discussions on 'aura' he ascribed this 'unique' trait to the 'original' artifact, and described the loss of aura, as that original was re-produced.

“Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of it's likeness. It's reproduction. (Benjamin. 1999. Pg.217).

To my mind, what sets a photographic object apart from the image by manual, as opposed to technological, production is not so much the mechanical mediation, nor the lack of hand usually present in it's making, but rather a point of function (4), a photograph is used - at this level perhaps a photograph straddles the line between art and craft – The point where the end product, the subsequent object has a function and is not simply an end in itself.

(4). Throughout Sontag's 'On photography' she consistently speaks about what the photograph does, it's function, and how it is used. While I am profoundly uncomfortable about the tone (ibid Pg.14) of her writing in places, and her tendency to generalize (ibid Pg. 63), she certainly did have some interesting and prescient ideas.

I'd hesitate to call photography a 'useful' art (5), but it certainly has been co-opted to a range of uses. In the photographs scale, portability (the photograph does after all have a historical tendency to smallness), and ubiquity it has developed a weird ability to mediate and represent that which it depicts - much in the same way that taxidermy and model making do - but both of these things are dependent upon evolving matrices.

This idea of the matrix is something that sets photographic reproduction apart from most of the other arts, in reproducing a photograph with a photograph the matrix (the physical structure) of the final object is functionally the same. Very few other art forms share this trait – the most common being castings (Price. 1994. Pg. 77). With a casting, say in bronze, a negative is made by dint of encapsulating the original object in order to gain an impression (in negative space), which is then filled with the material of the new artifact.



Fig. 3

Both of these art forms use an intermediary (negative) form taken from the original in order to re-create the original, where the photograph uses light, the casting uses volume to define itself – a favorite example of mine is Rachel Whiteread's 'Ghost', a work which especially appeals to me with its poignant, yet empty threat of re-production.

By evolving matrices, I am implying that model making and taxidermy, for instance, change significantly the form of that which they are re-presenting. Of course a photograph of a non-photographic object does this, but this photograph can then be re-reproduced as much as need be without the matrix changing in any substantial way – a taxidermy morpork on the other hand cannot be replicated without the construction of a new matrix.

(5). I am endlessly amused by the inscription on the walls of the Wellington City Art Gallery which lists a range of fields; "Commerce, Fine Arts, History... and Useful Arts"

Photographic re-production as a means of evolution.

It's easy to see why some people talk of photographs as being endlessly replicable, and while there is an element of truth to this, it doesn't allow for the assigned meaning – the supposed subject evolving plurally, and in a far more rapid manner than the forms of other arts allow - photographic production, and especially re-production is somewhat like a semiotic breeding chamber - where received non-linguistic meaning rather than physical traits evolve at plague speeds.



Fig. 4

The exponential growth of the presence of photographs in daily life over the past eighteen decades has allowed people to view a world which they will not necessarily have experienced in the first hand. As photographs have proliferated, so have people's readings of them.

One of the things that allow this plurality of received meaning is the very reproducibility of the photograph itself. If a photographic object is reproduced a thousand times then that image on the face of the photograph now has the ability to be present in a thousand places.

While a photograph is an object, it is not a unique object in the same sense that a painting or a sculpture is. A painting for instance occupies a particular space in time, it cannot, in its true form, present the same face in multiple places at once, it is unique, a one-off. The photograph on the other hand can present the same image in an indistinguishable fashion in multiple places at any given time.

The photograph on the other hand is a reflection of “...what has been” (Barthes. 1981. Pg.85). When we look at a photograph, we know that the image is an inscription of a thing that existed at one point (even if the thing depicted is manipulated and constructed, it was still there). As such, even the ‘original photograph’ is a copy after, the thing that it depicts. This is still true in the case of a manipulated or unique photograph in as much as it was taken of a thing, even when it is hand printed, dodged, burned, overprinted, or suchlike, it is still an inscription of an original thing, or things.



Fig. 5

Meaning does change in original artworks, Picasso’s ‘*Guernica*’ for instance is undoubtedly perceived somewhat differently to how it was at the time that it was produced, but it still lies near to where Picasso cast it. The conscious irony with this example is that the vast majority of people who are aware of the painting only know the original through photographic re-productions – however the image, as a photograph, largely has not been co-opted for purposes other than sharing, this in large part to Picasso’s estate being managed efficiently.

Edvard Munch’s ‘*Scream*’ on the other hand, has, in photographic re-production, been co-opted to a range of uses. Andy Warhol used photo-serigraphy deliberately, reportedly in order to ‘make it into a mass-reproducible object’. Munch’s 1895 lithographic version as well as a series of pastel and painted versions had arguably begun this process, but before the photographic reproduction these re-productions still, because of the artists hand, had the status of high art if not originality - It’s fair to say that Warhol’s intent has been subsequently achieved -the image is now very much a part of visual culture.

From there Munch's 'Scream' (originally called something closer to "*The shriek of nature*") has been re-used and reproduced in a range of contexts from cartoons such as Gary Larson's 'Farside' or 'The Simpsons' through to selling candy, among other uses (6), thus the assigned meaning of the original(s) has been destabilized to an extent that it would be unsurprising to find that some people are unaware of the painting itself.

This 'unlimbering' of the received meaning of the original is one of the things that make photography interesting to me. The photograph, in mediating that which it depicts, has the ability to not just re-contextualize, but to utterly speak over and for the thing it is re-presenting. This ability is by no means unique to photography, however, the photograph has a particular ability to present, and re-present images more rapidly and in greater numbers than other two dimensional processes.



Fig. 6

Photography is a deeply intertextual medium (Chandler. 2002. Pg.197), it builds upon, and references that which has come before and in turn has the potential to influence and manipulate images which are made subsequently - The interplays and relationships which lie around each image are one of the things that fascinate me about the medium. This is not a unique trait of photography, however, photography does it more quickly and with greater ubiquity than other media. The use of photography allows images to become present in places that they would never have existed otherwise. This in turn allows images to be present with other images in combinations that would not otherwise happen.

(6). The painting first came to popular notice in the United States when 'Time Magazine' used it for the cover for the March 31 1961 edition – with the words "Quilt and Anxiety" emblazoned across the top right of the image. M&M's used the image to promote a dark chocolate version when they announced a 2,000,000 M&M reward to the return of the painting which had been stolen in 2004, and the movie 'Scream' (1-?) used the imagery in the shape of the mask the killer wore.

This intertextuality; the perceived relationship between one object or text and a preceding work of object/text and, in turn, the effect that this has upon the perception of a following image or object. Put simply, a person's previous experience of images affects how they perceive new images, and photographs can in turn subsequently affect peoples understanding of events even if they experienced them first hand (Batchen. 2004. Pg, 15).

Any photograph, which we see, is influenced or colored, not only by previous photographs that we have seen, but also by any exposure which we have had to the thing depicted by the photograph and our responses to these earlier 'things' carries over to the new photograph or thing. De-piction is as much an act of excising original context, as it is an act of placement.



Fig. 7

This relationship is also reflexive (Chandler. 2002. Pg.207). Having previously viewed a photograph of an object will affect a persons perception of the object itself, this is more than mere desensitization, but rather it is an active re-presentation on the part of the photograph, the way that the photograph presents the object will affect how the person subsequently experiences the object which it depicts. There is a range of reasons for this, but the strongest is phenomenal. Past experience around that prior viewing of the photograph will strongly flavor the subsequent viewing of the object.

Given this reflexive relationship, if a person has seen the object before looking at a photograph of that object – their experience will owe much to the person having previously viewed the object. This invokes the time in which this happened, as well as a range of other phenomenal factors that will affect how the person perceives the photograph of the object they have already experienced in person.

Of course, having viewed a photograph of an object previously, and then subsequently viewing another photograph of the same depicted object will invoke a similar reaction between the perception of the images, but this is a different thing in a way in as much as the original (unique) object has not been viewed. In essence, this means that perception, and indeed an understanding of meaning that a person takes away from any situation is entirely personal, and as such unpredictable (Faigley et al. 2004. Pg.325).

Bestiaries, Reason, and post-modern classification.

These questions around how re-production allows perceived meaning to shift have been very central to my practice this year, however my current photographic practice digresses somewhat from my previous work in form if not intent. I had worked in a manner that could be defined as street photography and/or urban landscape. I was primarily interested in observation and seeking out things that caught my interest. In this previous work I spent a lot of time taking photographs, and was constantly refining my eye in terms of noticing events and situations that appeared.

I also spent a great deal of time editing the subsequent images down for quality, clarity, and coherency – this editing happened at multiple stages in my process. First taking the photographs, then in the printing of the individual images, and subsequently in the grouping and the construction of meta (as opposed to singular) narrative.

It is very rare indeed for me to present a photograph which I would argue presents a ‘truth’ about what was in front of the camera when I took the photograph. Of course there is an element of physics involved which dictates that I can only work with what is imprinted in the original object (be this negative, digital, or whichever (7). Rather these photographic images that I present are rather more a reflection of how I think it could have been, or even a deliberate manipulation, which makes ambiguous the metaphoric potential of the image.

When I earlier said that a photograph has truth, but not veracity, I meant that it has accuracy; the camera re-presents the situation that was presented to it. What is presented is in accordance with the reality of the situation from which it was imprinted. However I see the word veracity as too much of a value judgment. It implies honesty and integrity, and the opposite of falsehood – these are human values. The camera is not a ‘truth bearer,’ but rather, it is a witness. (Sontag. 1973. Pg. 6)

(7). I work with a range of media, to my mind a contact print from a negative is as much an act of photography as tripping the shutter on a camera – the receiving medium still simply inscribes what is presented to it.

In the street scenes that I have been creating prior to this past year, I have been seeking potentialities, and have been largely allowing imperfections and happy accidents to creep in. These ‘accidents’ are of course selected and manipulated into things that I desire, and unhappy accidents are discarded. I have been casting the net very wide, and then sorting, or editing these vast amounts of information down into discrete statements, or questions, as the case may be.

My practice this year has been more founded in the basic theoretical questions I have been asking – these centered mainly on investigating the incredible capacity that the photograph had to re-present, and to speak for, that which it depicts, even in the case of the re-production of existing photographs. I had noticed this in the scenes which I had photographed before now – in fact I’d go as far as to say that most, if not all of my most successful images were manipulated in such a manner as to depict the scene which I wanted to.

This year I instead have taken a more active role in constructing these manipulations, for a start I have been working primarily in the studio and constructing a large amount of the image base I am working with. I am very much taking control of the potentialities – I have also chosen the subject matter according to an organic principle.



Fig. 8

The structure I have chosen for the selection of the subjects is essentially a reflection of the intersemiotic (8) and intertextual traits that photography as a medium displays. I began this project seeking a subject matter that would reflect the theoretical concerns that I am interested in, and decided that a two dollar bag of plastic ‘African animals’ from a variety store was a suitable place to start on the grounds that they are re-presentations, re-productions, and also for the manner in which they mediate the original things (animals) that they depict. This gave me a range of animal templates to work with.

I deliberately chose the basest reproductions I could find, those of small plastic animal models/toys. The terrible quality of the reproductions is as important as what they are - they are in short, second hand descriptions of what these animals ‘should’ look like. In truth, the form, shape, scale, color (not to mention the awful painting) really don’t describe the animals even as well as the photographic forms they’re doubtless made from.

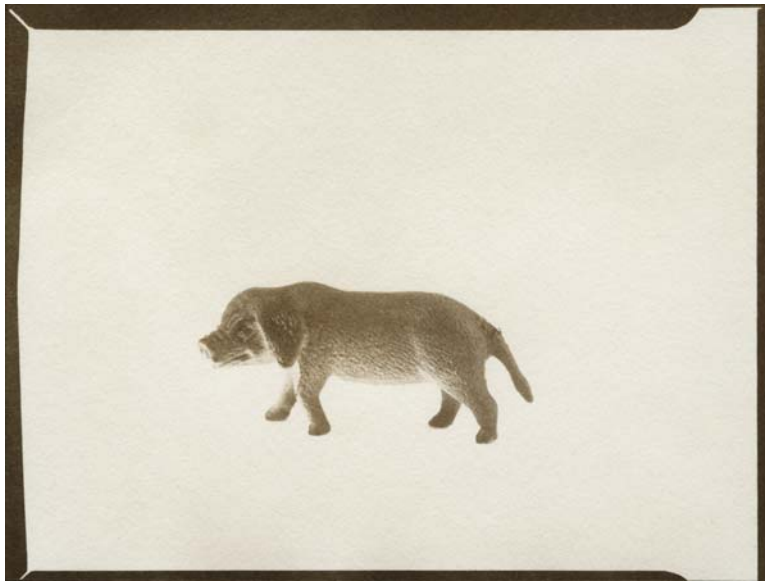


Fig. 9

These are truly a fine example of what Benjamin was speaking to in his essay; the aura of the original animals has been subsumed utterly by a particular plastic mediocrity. This makes them a perfect subject for investigating the structure of Benjamin’s claim. So I began to photograph these and to create photographic works depicting them.

(8) Intersemiotic in this case being the translation from one form to another, the translation from one form to another being key - as an example ‘reading the book or seeing the movie’. In this case I’m referring to the translation from a three dimensional copy to two dimensional copy of the same.

From there it was a small step to discovering that photographing the taxidermy animals in Te Papa gave me a series of double ups – I suddenly had pairs. This gathering process has gradually developed into a bestiary (9) of a sort with a classification system that is based upon prior and subsequent re-presentations, re-productions, and/or mediations, as well as inclusions of sets which came with them (photographing the zebra at Te Papa opens up the possibility of photographing their whole collection) – which in turn lead to further pairings. The selection has expanded to include plastic toy animals, plastic models/Marquette's, taxidermy animals, and lures, as well as zoo (live, and publicly presented) animals.

While this method of collecting perhaps hearkens more to a medieval than a post enlightenment mindset, it goes some way to illustrating how 'an' photograph operates as a semiotic object, the way that a person reads that photograph will depend entirely upon just what it is that they have been exposed to in their past – the response, and the reading if any photograph, indeed any image is an entirely individual, or even phenomenological experience



Fig. 10

This response is also predicated by what is in the environment at the time that they discover the image they are looking at – both their surroundings, and the presentation of the photographic images themselves, the size, frequency, scale, as well as a range of other factors will alter peoples perceptions of that which is in front of them.

(9). I use this term here as a reference to the medieval trait of gathering all the information on a topic to a tome – a book on horses for instance would have legends about Odin's horses, horse stew recipes, and the care of horses entered in a way that the post enlightenment mind finds indiscriminatory. There is logic there, but it's not one of taxonomy.

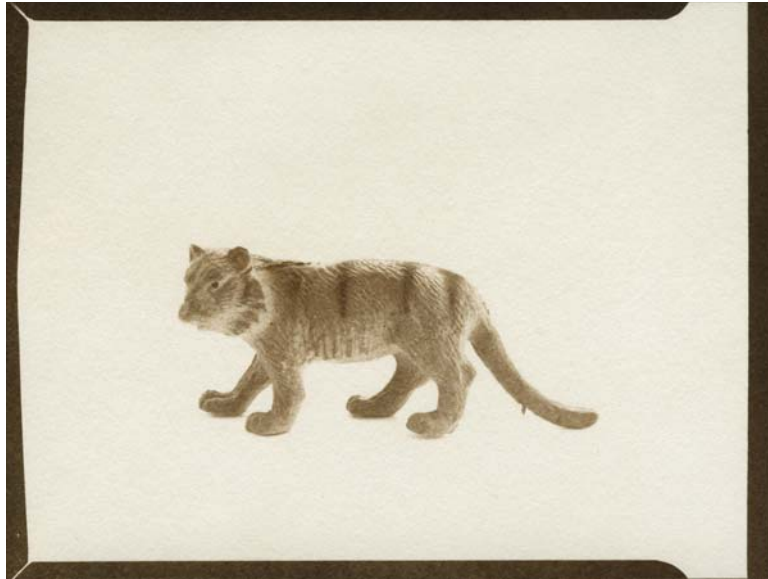


Fig. 11

As I made my way into photographing these forms, I made photographic totems to them, and something wonderful happened. The photographic objects developed a sense of preciousness. This is something that Benjamin seemingly didn't allow for - an aura, a sense of preciousness, of distance as he put it, a sense of 'thingness' becomes apparent in the image that I develop. And as I print, carefully, consciously, the sense of distance, of immediacy, and of preciousness only increases.

As I continue to photograph I have found that I can inject something like aura into the photographs of the things I am depicting, It is in no sense anything like the aura of the original unmediated things which the subjects were modeled after, rather it is a specifically photographic aura, a sense of preciousness and of ambiguity or distance which isn't a feature of the things I have been photographing.

This idea that a photograph has a specific aura is perhaps not a popular one (10), but it is logical – after all, if an original work of art has it's own particular essence that makes it unique, then any object must have some analog of this aura, and it must have some form of aura that is specifically it's own. If an original artifacts aura is lost in re-production, then logically something must take the place of that 'aura' – after all, nature abhors a vacuum.

Photographs are naturally resistant to rigid definition, in time their perceived meaning will shift, this is not only the natural decay that any object is subject to as it is weathered by time, but also, and more so, the photograph becomes semantically destabilized by other objects and images that exist around it, and even more so by people writing and speaking about it.

(10). Sontag did engage with this exact idea (Sontag. 1973. Pg. 140), with the explanation "The real difference between the aura of a painting and a photograph lies in the different relation to time."



Fig. 12

Tigerousity true?

Despite the photographs seeming transparency in as much as it stands for what it depicts, it does not hold a universal meaning, and further it cannot be said to stand in for the same set of experiences or beliefs across a range of viewers. If I present a photograph of a tiger to you with the bold claim, “This is a tiger” or, no more accurately, “This is what a tiger looks like” I am attempting to define what a tiger is to you.

In attempting to quantify what a tiger is by the use of a photograph, I am, to coin a phrase, attempting to quantify tigerousity (11). And yet in this attempt I am forced to make choices; do I hold up a roughly printed tiger? One that perhaps might remind a person of a badly printed sea monkey advertisement from a 1970’s *batman* comic, perhaps the photograph is black and white, brown, or even blue, at what scale should the tiger be presented. No decision will allow a viewer of a photograph of a tiger to understand what it means to experience tiger in real life.

The reason that I cannot define tigerousity with a photograph is because I cannot show you the tiger’s aura, the essence of tiger real (the complete experience of tiger). The only way that I can show you this is to introduce you to a real tiger – a scenario with certain associated negative potentialities. I could take you to a zoo perhaps, and then you could see a real tiger, however only then in a highly mediated environment.

(11). Which I shall use as a specific description of aura in the specific case of wild tigers. The reason that I am using this term is as a method of defining exactly what aura is in this particular case – Benjamin was quite resistant to nailing it down and even wrote two versions of “*The work of art...*” (Benjamin, 1999 Ver.1). (Benjamin, 2008 Ver.2). In which he made conflicting points (see chapter 7 of each)

Animals in even the best zoos are presented in such a way as to make the animal available for continuous observation, and also in such a way as to not generally challenge people's expectations of what they expect the animal should be like (12). This is the basis of my choice to include animals from the zoo into my bestiary.

After a fashion, the zoo, whilst being the closest to the reality of wild tiger that most people would ever hope to see, is still in a highly mediated environment, and this environment impinges the tiger's natural tigerousity. Still, this is as good as it probably gets - after all, experiencing a real wild tiger close up in it's natural environment could, given that they are an apex predator, potentially be a very unfortunate thing indeed, and even then there would be no guarantee of making their acquaintance (as opposed to being attacked from behind). While many people will encounter a tiger at a zoo at some point in their life, most people will never encounter one in the wild.



Fig. 13

Instead the photograph can only give a pale (if considerably less terminal) re-production of the phenomenological experience of tigerousity. Lets call this tigerity - which is the re-presentation in the third party of tigerousity true. Tigerity is a second hand description of tigerousity, but it does not encapsulate the entire experience, it is instead "...a narrowly selective transparency" (Sontag. 1973. Pg. 6).

Tigerity does, nevertheless, speak to tigerousity, and each in turn affects peoples perceptions of the other, thus the two are intimately linked – it is fair to say that tigerity re-presents tigerousity, and in fact has the capability to speak over and manipulate the phenomenological experience of tiger. I could proceed to discussing lions and bears at this point, but I feel that this would just be silly.

(12). I was intrigued to see meer cats catch, kill, squabble over, and eat (well... gnaw at) a sparrow during one of my zoo visits – reportedly this is not an uncommon occurrence.

Other than the photograph, a range of expressions of tigerity are of course available to us; paintings, taxidermy (stuffed) tigers, models, toys, statues, and the written word – of all of these the photograph is easily the most ubiquitous. Photographs have a presence in daily life that is so pervasive as to be almost totally invisible unless people actively look at them.

To be clear, in my practice I am not working at trying to define the aura of the original animals that the photographs (and toys) are modeled after. Instead I am working with the symbol that stands for the original, and I am seeking to destabilize what the images (the symbols) themselves mean by placing them in contact with other symbols, as I said earlier, these photographs are about photography rather than about the ‘things’ depicted by them.

While I have, in this document described a methodology of gathering, I do not wish to attempt to ascribe a meaning to this body of work, rather I am trying to invoke a situation where the viewer will impose their own interpretation, meaning, and even narrative to the work at large – thus far in experiments I have been reasonably successful at encouraging this, though this same lack of definition does seem to frustrate some people.

The photographs that I am displaying are not about animals; they are specifically about photographs, and about photography in general, the ways that photographs work, and the ways in which they manipulate meaning. The animals are something of a template in this case; they stand in for subjects in as much as they are specifically there to interact with each other and to detourne each other.

When I am creating multiple different versions of the tiger photographs, I’m consciously working with the idea that I can mediate what the word/image tiger (tigerity) means (as opposed to the aura of the original) to the viewer. These individual/personal meanings are of course out of my control in that they are rooted in the past of the viewer – I have no idea what associations the images will invoke in the viewer, however, that does not mean that I am unable to manipulate their perceptions and reactions.



Fig. 14

The smaller works that I have created are consciously intimate in scale. Intimacy of scale is one of the things that sets a photograph apart from most other art forms, historically the photograph does tend to smallness, and the format (quarter-plate) which I have printed these at is one which came originally from plate photographs which were intended to be kept, and displayed in hand held cases. I am fond of this format for its ability to present large negatives whilst also being just small enough to relate to the size of a person's hand.

These original (glass or silver plate) works were often unique works, and as such had a certain degree of inherent preciousness, they were essentially irreplaceable, and often difficult or impossible to copy. I haven't created small works in these original techniques, as they are very much historically loaded in terms of how they are presented, perceived, and responded to. Cased works in the modern day are a very conscious attempt to invoke uniqueness, and even a sort of 'unique aura' as Benjamin described it.

“In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from the early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty.” (Benjamin 2008 Pg.27).

Instead I have chosen to work mainly with paper due to its tactility and its unthreatening nature, there is a lightness, and informality, even a playfulness to cards that is in opposition to the gravitas of the cased image. I want people to touch them as they are displayed, this is always a point of tension in the gallery environment, and one that needs to be handled carefully, and I feel the tabletop presentation method to be a successful negotiation of this tension.

These small paper works are all created with hand made antiquarian (13) processes, which does go some way to arguing the point of technological mass production, but perhaps more importantly they are tactile in a way that most modern processes are not – they just look somehow different, which entices people to look with their hands as well as their eyes.

The form I am using is essentially that of the 19th century 'Cartes de visite' or perhaps, in view of the larger 3¼ x 4¼ inch format that I have used and the horizontal format they could be closer to cabinet prints (the successor of the Cartes de visite) – in truth my paper works match neither, but act to invoke both (14). The reason that I am using this form is because these cards are designed to be handled, they are not things that are to be protected from the hand.

(13). I use the term antiquarian very deliberately – while these are very much 'hand' processes, they are not truly 'antique' processes, I use whatever technology seems the most appropriate in their creation, and of course living in the 21st century I have access to materials and (more importantly) information which is far in excess of anything that a 19th century photographer could have imagined - I have used the very latest digital technologies in places, and I have used completely hand made processes and equipment in others – it all alludes to the era of the birth of photography, but really the only thing that I have in common with the photographic pioneers is an experimental mindset and a reliance upon my own labor.

(14). The Cartes de visite photograph was originally approximately mounted upon a 2½ x 4" card, and the cabinet card upon a 4¼ x 6½ inches card, I have not used either of these formats.

By encouraging people to handle the smaller works, I wish to prolong and expand their engagement with the photographs beyond what they would experience with a traditional gallery presentation of a photograph. In interacting with art photography as a physically manipulable object as well as a two dimensional 'surface' on a wall I am hoping not only to invoke a physical tactile response, but also to tempt people to pause long enough to consider their own interpretation of the possible meanings of the images.

As a counterpoint to these intimate works I have created a range of larger works to be shown as wall pieces, these are created digitally in a variety of sizes and using a variety of media and materials. They are derived from the smaller works, and yet they have a certain authority in that, being seen at a distance, they speak first to the viewer. I have not attempted to duplicate exactly the smaller works at a larger scale, rather these have been considered in their own right as images intended for a particular task, and in a particular medium, that of reflecting, and questioning the role and content of the smaller, intimate works.

I have also created the works on glass that are on the walls, these are intended as a linkage between the small intimate cards as objects, and the large wall mounted re-presentations, which are really a 'surface that depicts' them. The Glass works reflect, darkly, their environment, and by means of a dark reflection reproduce, yet again the large works that surround them. Yet they are presented in such a way that they are dependent upon their environment and the movement of the viewer to disclose these views.

In combining these forms, I intend to create an experience where the viewer will question their own responses to the images, as well as how they interact with the different iterations of the images. The glass works are cold, glossy, and in terms of the image they contain, sometimes hard to access. I have deliberately placed these with the larger works as they provide both an image that is intrinsic, but also, a reflection of another image with which the glass works share their environment. The sense of distance they have allows a kind of remote viewing of the subject matter, one that invokes a sense of photographic aura, this is a very different thing from the easy intimacy of the small photo cards, yet I feel that this gives the experience that I am seeking to create.



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

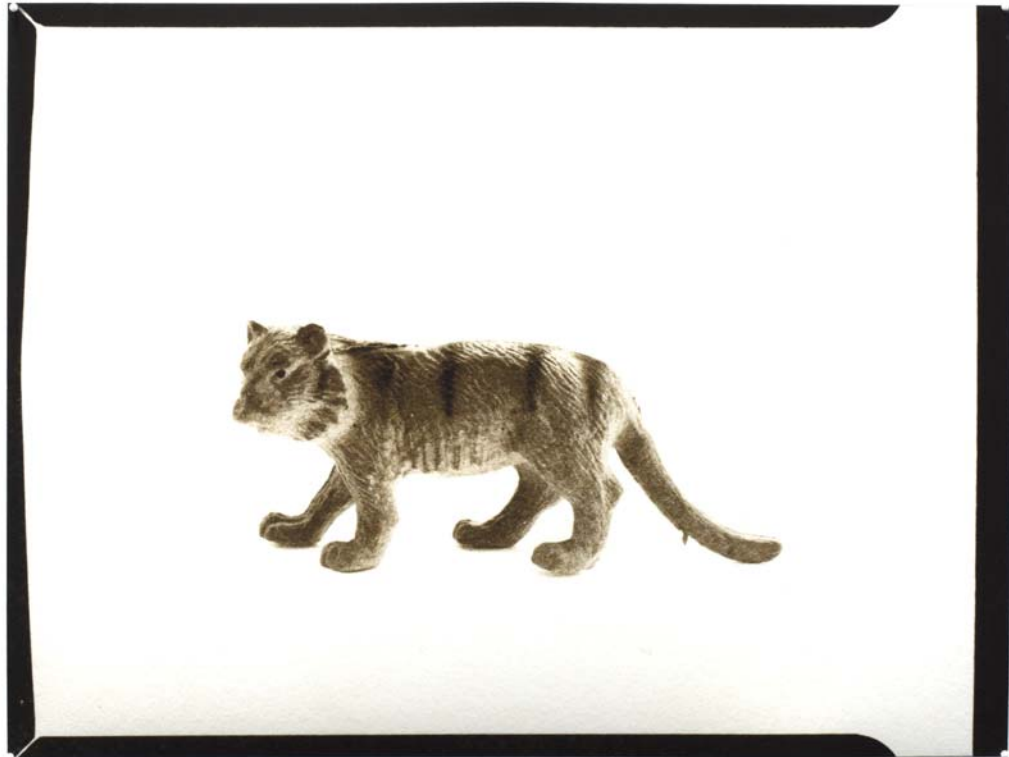


Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

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