

Finding a Future in Photography's Past: Antiquarian Processes in the Digital Age (Abridged Version)

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I. Introduction

The last two decades have seen film photography and darkroom processes increasingly marginalized by the widespread use of digital cameras and printing. Digital photography has been embraced with enthusiasm and excitement for the wealth of creative opportunities it provides, as well as for the convenience it affords.

However, as digital imaging replaces film photography, changing our understanding of what a photograph is, it is striking that several prominent artists and photographers are turning to historical processes that are more complex, time-consuming, and more constrained by the *physical*, by the materials used. They are making daguerreotypes, tintypes, and photograms, using pinhole cameras, paper negatives, and wet plate processes.

What has prompted this renewed interest in historical processes at the very moment that photographers are presented with fresh possibilities? Why would Chuck Close choose to work with daguerreotypes, Adam Fuss with photograms, and Sally Mann with collodion glass negatives, while most of their colleagues rush to embrace digital tools?

Even as far back as the 1960s one could find small groups of practitioners experimenting with nineteenth-century processes (as far back as the 1920s, in the case of photograms). In subsequent decades, this interest in historical processes and in the photograph as a physical object continued despite the growing dominance in the art world of work that emphasized the conceptual, narrative, aspects of photography over its material, formal aesthetic--a trend epitomized by artists such as Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman.

The emergence of digital image-making was well suited to the postmodern world in which photographs were reduced to their idea, or to their socio-cultural content. However, on a smaller scale, the emergence of the digital gave new impetus to the interest in historical processes, and this for many reasons. For some photographers, the displacement of film photography by digital has led to a desire to return to tactile, physical processes. They have sought out qualitatively distinct and sensuously complex objects in a world increasingly crowded with virtual images. Historical processes can allow photographers to get back in touch with the "body" of photography, with its physical presence. [example: Mark Kessell, *Unauthorized Presence II* (2000)]

Yet another important spur to this renewed interest in older processes might be the possibility of engendering a fruitful dialogue between the historic associations of these older media and their contemporary subject matter, or of creating a collision between two coexisting but conflicting ways of fixing the "time" of an image. [examples: Warren Niedich, *Aerial Reconnaissance Photographs, Battle of Chicamauga, circa 1863* (1987); Jerry Spagnoli, *Untitled* (September 11, 2001)]

A further reason for the revival of nineteenth-century processes might be a desire to preserve a sense of the documentary authority of photography in an age of malleable digital images. The ascendance of digital image-making has done much to puncture the aura of authority that surrounded traditional photography. By turning to processes and techniques that hearken back to a time when this documentary aura held sway, artists may attempt to salvage some of that aura for their contemporary work. But the images made by historical processes may do more than just nostalgically remind us of a time when we saw photographs differently; in some cases they may actually preserve that aura. A daguerreotype, even one made in the year 2000, may retain an air of documentary authority that a digital image cannot support.

II. Gains and Losses—“Body”

We have by now become familiar with the creative freedoms and the artistic control that digital imagery and printing allow. But each benefit, each new tool that digitization allows, comes with a corresponding cost.

Sally Mann indicates some of the ways in which digital images may cost us:

I believe the loss [in going digital] is impossible to calculate. Or rather, digital image making is a different activity altogether. The digital image is like ether, like vapor that never comes to ground. It simply circulates, bodiless. It has not material reality.

Mann describes the digital image as bodiless; it is not grounded in a particular emulsion, in a particular substance. It is a digital array that can be created, stored, and transmitted electronically. It has no specific material matrix.

This is important because working with plates, papers, emulsions, and equipment, handling delicate surfaces and experimenting with various printing techniques--all the give and take of process can be integral to the creative choices made in the formation of the image. Just as the brushstroke may become the building block for a painting, or the resistance of clay and the pressure of fingertips may become an important component in the evolution of a ceramic piece, the photographer's engagement with the materials of photography may influence and inspire the evolution of his or her work, and it can be an intimate part of the pleasure of that work.

It is in this vein that Sally Mann describes the “reverential” quality that attracted her to collodion:

...In the face of some extraordinary sight...you fashion an object, you do not just take a picture. It is ceremonial...there is an experience of communion in wet-plate photography. It is not a drive-by shooting. When you pour the plate, it goes cold in your

hand, and a wonderful frisson goes through you. And when you develop it, it is like primordial magic or alchemy. I still feel that, every time I make a new plate and the image appears. [example: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from the *Deep South Series* (1998)]

The importance of this intimacy with the materials is echoed by Mark Osterman, who emphasizes the subjectivity betrayed by historic processes.

When you look at an early process like collodion, you can see the photographer's fingerprint, so to speak—how the plate was held and the collodion poured onto it and swirled. Likewise, no two prints were ever exactly alike.

Whereas Mann and Osterman emphasize the photographer's engagement with the materials used to create a physical object, Chuck Close discusses the importance of the physicality of the photograph, in this case a daguerreotype, from the vantage point of the person viewing it. Close notes that the daguerreotype is not static. As any one who has tried to view one knows, one has to maneuver to get a clear image, trying different angles and distances of viewing, and throughout this process one is acutely aware of the image's reflective surface. In fact, part of the magic of the daguerreotype is the way it slides back and forth between a shiny reflective surface and a vividly three dimensional image, and the way that image can flip from positive to negative. Close notes:

We are used to reading photographs as icons...but that gives you no notion of the texture of the thing. When you read a novel, it is not just the narrative line that holds your interest. It is also the syntax, the way the words smash together. So when you look at a daguerreotype, your experience does not stop with the imagery but also involves the physicality of the process, its pictorial syntax. A dialogue develops with the object.

For Mann, Osterman, and Close, the photograph cannot be reduced to its disembodied image. It is a physical object with a richness of aesthetic information and an individuality lost in the conversion to digital.

III. Gains and Losses--Time

Another cost of "going digital" has to do with time, both the time of the physical process itself—the time it takes to make a photogram, a daguerreotype, or a collodion plate--as well as the time that the photographer finds himself or herself taking with the subject. Digital photography is usually associated with speed—speed in taking the image and in obtaining an immediate preview of the image, speed in altering, copying, printing and distributing the image. Speed, along with

ease, is one of the great “selling points” of digital, but we should not assume that speed is in all ways an advantage.

There is something that happens when you look at a potential picture and know it is going to cost you dearly in time and energy. You have to make decisions. Collodion especially requires this discipline, this thoughtfulness. It forces you out of the time of the thing you are looking at and into the time of the picture itself.

Sally Mann

Dozens of digital images can be made in the time it takes to make a collodion plate; hundreds of images can be stored on a disc, whereas only one is preserved on a glass negative. With collodion, with daguerreotypes, or tintypes, the photographer has to be more selective. He or she can't shoot hundreds of images and then select the best ones.

There is another sense in which collodion and other processes force the photographer to slow down, and choose deliberately. With digital images, many of the features can be altered and digitally corrected. If the shot isn't right, it can be fixed on the computer. Different versions of the image can be saved, and the photographer can move back and forth between them, comparing their relative virtues. Historical processes, on the other hand, do not allow for such easy fixes, or for such a wealth of post-exposure choices. The photographer is much more bound by the decisions made at the time of the shoot.

The ability to digitally “correct” lighting, composition, angle, even facial expression, may tempt photographers to take less time with each shot, since each is seen as endlessly revisable. The need to wait for the perfect light, or the “decisive moment” is done away with—but at the same time, the “feel” for the subject may be diminished by more fleeting interactions.

The time we take as *viewers* of images may also be affected. Chuck Close explains his affinity for the daguerreotype by describing the process of viewing and by describing the way the daguerreotype, with its wealth of detail, roots us in an ever more careful and intimate examination. [Example: Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait* (2000)]

Daguerreotypes require time to view. We can't rush through a daguerreotype exhibit and expect to see anything. We have to find the right angle to see the image; we have to tilt the image back and forth (or move ourselves back and forth). But once we've achieved a clear view of the image, the daguerreotype draws us in with its seemingly endless detail and its bewitching dimensionality that Close describes as almost like a hologram. We are held by the richness and depth of the image.

The daguerreotype may be the most obvious example, but even when we are looking at tintypes and ambrotypes, or as we puzzle out the forms of a photogram, we may be slowed by our engagement with the material, and our reading of the process.

IV. Gains and Losses--Chance

In the digital age, printing can be previewed and precisely controlled, or printing can be avoided altogether by electronic distribution. Lost, however, may be the revelations that come to the photographer as he or she coaxes the image to emerge through the processes of the darkroom.

Digital cameras allow us to see the image immediately, delete mistakes, and retake the image as necessary. However, we risk losing in a moment a “mistake” that on further contemplation might reveal a quirky strength. Sally Mann notes that when she shoots collodion, she embraces “the accidents, the serendipity of the process.”

Mistakes are not the end of the world, and perfection is not my goal. Proust writes about being visited by the Angel of Certainty.” I solicit visits from the Angel of Uncertainty.

Adam Fuss, also talks about the importance of chance in his work. In fact, he stumbled upon photograms by accident—at a time that he was working with pinhole cameras, an inadvertent exposure led to a photogram of a piece of dust and its shadow. He embraced what he saw as pure, lens-free photography.

Fuss discusses the continuing role of chance in his work:

I don't wait for [chance], I fight against it. But part of me knows that it is in [chance] that I can discover nourishment... Most of my pictures are situations that I have set up which are out of my control. Take water falling on water. I can get the paper in the right position. I can get the light in the right position. I can throw water on water. But I can't control whether that piece of water is going to land over there or over there...I make the picture but it's not my hand that has made the picture.
[Example: Adam Fuss, *Untitled* (1997)]

Fuss finds in photograms, in the absence of a lens, an objectivity, a documentary quality, absent from other modes of photography.

V. Gains and Losses—Documentary Aura

(By “documentary aura” I mean the sense that the photograph gives us evidence about the world. For instance, a photograph of a bird hitherto thought to be extinct is thought to give evidence of that bird's continued existence in a way that a drawing, no matter how finely detailed, does not.)

One of the most obvious creative benefits of digital photography is that the image is not limited by what the photographer can find “out there” in the world. Images can be crafted and altered to match the photographer's vision. For instance, the surreal visions of Jerry Uelsmann need no longer require the skilled

and painstaking labor of many hours; it can be achieved relatively quickly and easily through digital means.

But of course, this malleability comes with a cost. The ease with which we can manipulate digital images damages their credibility, it damages our ability to see the image as showing us a bit of the world. To the extent that this happens, the photograph becomes like any other man-made image, and there are important aesthetic consequences.

Consider Ansel Adams' *Moon and Half Dome*. The beauty of the composition only partly explains its power. The knowledge of its being a photograph, a document of the world, plays a great part in our appreciation of it, and the way we look at it. I am not suggesting that we look through the photograph to the scene portrayed as we might look at a travel postcard. Rather I am suggesting that our appreciation of the composition is not isolated, but informed by our knowledge that we are looking at a bit of our world. The strength of the image does of course depend on Adams' choice of filter, lens, exposure, etc., but what if his shaping of the image had extended beyond these choices? Imagine for a moment that the moon had been added from another negative, or that the profile of the cliff had been altered using Photo-shop. The composition would still be beautiful, but the type of interest we take in the image would change—it would be a delight in the creative composition of the artist, rather than a delight in the majesty of nature conveyed and interpreted through the camera.

Similarly, when we consider photographs which capture a “decisive moment,”

a fortuitous coming together of elements, our knowledge that the photograph records a bit of the world plays a large role in its fascination. Consider Cartier-Bresson's *Behind the Gare St. Lazare*, which shows a man leaping over a puddle, his form echoed by his reflection in the water and by the leaping dancers in the ballet posters behind him. Our delight in the image is not simply a delight in composition, for the same composition in a drawing might feel contrived. As a photograph, however, as a document of the world that reveals a coup of timing and records a chance juxtaposition, it gives a special delight.

What of photographs that seem to contradict this notion of documentary authority—those surreal or abstract images that are valued precisely because of the interesting ways in which they stray from conventional realism? Even in these cases, the special power and interest of the photographs rests on assumptions of documentary authority.

Bill Brandt's *East Sussex* (1957) and Frederic Sommer's *Smoke on Cellophane* (1961), are both images wrested from the world. The surprising perspective of Brandt's surreal coastal scene compels us in a way a drawing or collage does not. A surreal drawing is easily identified as the product of imagination or fantasy; a surreal photograph is not so easily understood. Such photographs are fascinating precisely because we think of them as recording the

appearances of our world, but in a way that makes it look unfamiliar and strange. Through photographs we seem to see *our* world transformed.

Similarly, one can imagine a drawing or painting duplicating the forms found in Sommer's abstract image, but the interest of the photograph, at least in part, is the way the abstract composition is tethered to bits of the world. In abstract photography, whether that of Minor White, Aaron Siskind, or Brett Weston, this grounding of the abstract pattern in the world of objects becomes a major focus of our interest...there is a joy in the way the camera creates compelling abstract composition *while at the same time* recording the world of everyday objects.

Once we lose the notion of the photograph as providing a record of our world, its aesthetic impact moves closer to that of painting. This may be the inevitable consequence of the digital revolution.

It may be objected that digital photography only brings to our awareness what has always been true. The potential for manipulation has always been around--even in the earliest days of photography images were retouched and altered. Digital photography only makes such processes easier, it does not represent a fundamental change.

However, I would argue digital manipulation *has* made a fundamental change in the way we think about photographs. The fact that digital tools put alteration at the fingertips of almost anyone with the appropriate software, that digital alteration can be virtually imperceptible, that we have no negative to document the authenticity of the image, all of this makes for a radical change. Thirty years ago, we tended to assume that we were dealing with straight photographs, unless we were given reason to think otherwise--by the impossibility of the scene or by the clumsiness of the alteration. Now photographs are much less likely to be taken at "face value," whether they are presented as evidence in court, as documentation for a news article, or as an object of artistic interest. The question "Was it altered?" hovers in the background.

Historical processes may help contemporary photographer's recapture a documentary aura in this time of digital malleability. Not only do these processes recall another time when photographs were viewed differently, but they may to some extent recapture that aura. This is especially true of photograms and daguerreotypes--both "direct" means of making an image, in that neither involves the use of a negative.

Fuss describes photograms as more "real" than photographs made by a camera:

I see the photogram as being much more truthful, and much more honest because it's just recording light. There is no manipulation of that light, in the way that a lens manipulates light...It's not the photograph of the shadow. It is the shadow. It's the shadow fixed. [Example: Sharine Sharif Gil, *Untitled*, (2001)]

Fuss's attraction to photograms is at least in part this idea that they are a direct trace of the object...a "fingerprint," if you will, and this directness supports the idea that the photogram provides a documentary record—albeit one that looks very different from what the eye sees. A similar directness can be attributed to daguerreotypes.

As mentioned earlier, daguerreotypes have a richness of detail and eerie presence that promotes confidence in their credibility—but this would not be enough in the digital age to achieve credibility. More important to this goal is that daguerreotypes are very easily recognized as daguerreotypes; they are not likely to be mistaken for products of digital processes. An understanding of how daguerreotypes are made, and an understanding of how difficult it would be to alter them in substantial ways, might allow us to see the daguerreotype as retaining a documentary aura.

I will close with some examples where the idea of recording the world comes to the forefront.

--Close's portraits and nudes show in minute detail every line and pore of his subjects. "My daguerreotypes are in-your-face intimacy with more than you want to know..."

--Sally Mann's *Eva Series*, presenting the remains of her deceased dog, has an unsettling impact that is directly tied to its documentary quality.

--Adam Fuss's *Untitled*, (1994) shows an image made by a baby resting in a shallow pan of water, the darkest blotches showing where the baby's body pressed against the paper. We have a vivid sense of this image as a fingerprint, a trace of a moment, yet one that is luminous and otherworldly.

--Susan Derges' *The River Taw, 29 July, 1997* (1997) is an "abstract" photogram, created by placing a large sheet of sensitized paper (66 x 24 inches) beneath the surface of the river at night. It can be admired as abstract pattern, yet its fascination lies in its also being a trace, a record, of light on water.

Conclusion

Digital photography is profoundly altering the way people make and think about photographs. The revival of historical processes represents in part an exploration of those aesthetic features and conventions of photography which the digital revolution threatens to leave behind.

References

Quotes by Sally Mann, Chuck Close, and Mark Osterman are from Lyle Rexer, *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Abrams, 2002).

Quotes by Adam Fuss are from an interview with John Paul Caponigro at johnpaulcaponigro.com/lib/artists/fuss.php