Contradictions in Photography
Within the Ira Wolff Collection

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Abstract

The prominence of photography has grown to its popular inescapable presence in modern society due to the exponential developments in technology and evolution of the culture in which it exists. However, through all the changes the medium has undertaken, several surrounding concepts have prevailed the test of time, if not expanded with age, and still remain relevant today posing questions about the juxtaposing ideas within photography. Contradictory ideas affiliated with the understanding of accompanying text, division of conformity versus individuality, transitions between the public and private realms, contrasts between original image intent and contemporary interpretation, and the troubling characteristics associated with memory have plagued photography from its origins and grown with its advancement. Despite their exceedingly influential impact on viewers’ evaluation of images, these topics typically linger stealthily in the general audiences’ subconscious and frequently pass unnoticed. Nevertheless, through the careful analysis of the University of Colorado’s Ira Wolff Collection, the remarkable significance of the contradictory concepts within photography is evident by their presence in every photograph and, therefore, should always be considered in the interpretation of every image.
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Introduction

In trying to decide what to write my thesis on, the only direction I knew to start from was photography. However, the more I thought about the complexity of it, the more I realized just how troublesome whittling down such a gargantuan topic could be.

Photography has become a preoccupation for me. The more I study it, the more complex it becomes. Looking at the history of the development of the medium, the available research is vast; however, there is a tendency for the focus to be drawn to the inventors of the more renowned methods, like Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot. Although their contributions to photography were very important, there are many more techniques that create the deep history of this medium. Long before the 1800’s optics were investigated for their use in many purposes The camera obscura was described as early as 1000 AD by Alhazen, an authority on optics in the middle ages.\(^1\) Aristotle also makes notes about pinhole cameras in 330 BC.\(^2\) Many more techniques also developed after the most renowned inventors announced their inventions. More detailed and stable negatives came around 1851 with Frederick Scoff Archer’s invention of wet plate negatives.\(^3\) Hamilton Smith patented tintypes, where a thin sheet of iron was used to

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2 Ibid.
provide a base for light-sensitive material, creating a positive image. The list of techniques seems almost infinite. As research expands into various methods and artists, defining “firsts” gets progressively more complicated. Starting with accounts of the camera obscura in the 4th and 5th centuries BC and the scientific observations of Aristotle, moving to the nineteenth century advancements from Joseph Nicephore Niepce and the use of the camera, to Louis Daguerre and the direct positive daguerreotype process and Henry Fox Talbot and the paper negative/postive process, then George Eastman’s Kodak film camera created in 1888, spanning to improvements still being created today, photography is a continuously evolving technology. Scholars find difficulty in trying to pinpoint exactly the creation of this process and who is responsible for it.

After attempting to break down and thoroughly analyze the history of photography, it became evident that its evolution is a very complex and ongoing process. Instead of defining one specific chain of development, photography’s progress has branched out in a more diffused and unconventional way. In contrasting to many technological developments, there is not just one individual who can claim ownership of the invention; instead, the title is divided amongst many individuals.


5 “History of Photography Timeline - Photo.net.” http://photo.net/learn/history/timeline.
different people. Artists and scientists are each responsible for furthering photography in monumental ways; however, no one person solely accountable for the technology.

I considered delving into the debate of photography’s categorization and the effect of its ability to “depict reality” on the discussion of its classification. Photography was at first widely seen as “truth”. People thought the images created could only be exact copies of reality. However, as the medium of photography has developed, the reliability of photos depicting truth has decreased in direct proportion. For example, Robert Capa’s famous 1936 “Falling Soldier” picture, originally published as an unquestioned document, recently has been debated as posed instead of natural. Today even the ordinary person is well aware of the technologies available to fabricate and manipulate images. Critics struggle and debate to categorize photographs with titles stretching from fictional high art to raw, unedited truthful journalism. Photography places its roots in early chemistry researching and developed to a form that can debatably be considered an entirely different art form. The complex timeline of this medium seems vague and ambiguous, enticing scholars to delve deeper in investigation of the true transformation to what it has expanded to in modern society thanks to the widespread conception that anyone and everyone can be a photographer. Defining the specifics of photography and plotting its major

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developments and landmarks is important to fully help understand this art form which has made such a significant impact on today’s culture. Studying the use various artists have made of the assorted historical and contemporary processes can aid in the exploration and discovery of new ideas, which can in turn lead to new methods of work.

Once the milestones along the development of techniques are identified, it also illustrates the difficulty in defining what clearly is, and is not, a photograph. After reviewing several cases and investigating different artists’ and their personal processes, the blurry and obscure nature of the definition of a “photograph” is evident. There are many works of art that are easily defined as a photograph, but on either side of these absolutely categorized pieces, questions arise. It is difficult to decide when something is simply a chemistry experiment or when it evolves into something more artistically focused. On the other hand, drawing the line between a photograph and an extensively edited “graphic design” work is also challenging. The investigation of these categories shows that dubbing works with these titles mostly comes down to personal opinion. Individuals establish their own categorization for the works they see based on their personal beliefs, ideas, and background personal experiences. Because each person has their own unique and individual aesthetic sense, there cannot be a set and perfectly defined list of requirements that can qualify or disqualify an image as a photograph. Therefore, because each person has a
unique view this establishes that no definite boundary for the qualification of “photograph” can be instituted.

I then thought of researching the relationship between images and the text that accompanies them. Claims propose that photographs allow for the representation of things that words cannot express. At the most basic level, this premise suggests that pictures do not need inscriptions or paired text. One could argue that the expression ironically deems words unnecessary; it paves way for the succession of the visual and thus the demise of the written language as the dominating form of communication. However, words still prevail. Many photographs remain dependant on the excerpts and passages that travel with them. In other words, there are also many things words can express that a photograph cannot. Nevertheless, the words’ effects constantly stand subject to reinterpretation. The understanding of an image in combination with its text may vary from viewer to viewer based on the time period, cultural customs, social status, race, personal history, and countless other details. The significance of the relationship is evident, but the relationship itself shifts endlessly.

With every studied topic, I inevitably arrived at this wishy-washy crossroads. I grew frustrated with my inability to find any sort of solid premise to stand on, and frankly debated giving up. Every “conclusion” (for lack of a better word) I came upon appeared to connect to another inescapable element that pulled me in the antithetical direction. Then, instantly, in a
miraculous Monty-Python-God-telling-you-to-seek-the-Holy-Grail type of message from above, I realized that was the one point that everything had in common. The meeting of the crossroads was the fact that every topic had crossroads. It seems that almost every aspect of photography contains a paradox or contradiction of sorts.

Thesis focus: acquired.

7 This specific reference is to the animated scene by Terry Gilliam, in which God appears in the clouds above to present the quest to seek the Holy Grail to King Arthur and his knights. It is a superb film that should be seen by all. Monty Python (Comedy troupe), Python (Monty) Pictures, and Voyager Company. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Videorecording. Voyager Company, 1992.
**Text & Image**

The common saying is that “a picture is worth a thousand words;” however, the literal words, or lack thereof, that accompany an image heavily impact viewers’ interpretation of the subject depicted. Text and photography come from two very different realms: verbal representation through language and visual representation through image. These two types of portrayal can work together to recreate a scene; however, the understanding of their combination depends on a vast number of details such as date, culture, individual, class, and many other factors.

In the second half of the 1800’s, travel and knowledge of foreign lands translated to a sign of sophistication and wealth. As Solomon-Godeau writes, “[P]hotography was understood to be the agent par excellence for listing, knowing, and possessing, as it were, the things of the world.” \(^8\) Popular culture developed a taste for distant sights. Though only wealthy individuals could afford lavish trips to other countries, this fascination did not emerge in the upper class alone. The middle and much later, even the lower classes turned to photography as an alternative way to feed their obsession with the exotic and appetites for travel and entertainment.

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The mass production and distribution of foreign imagery allowed the less affluent to ‘experience’ other countries. The intent was to provide the opportunity to gain refinement and sophistication through a more culturally aware perspective of the world. However, despite the efforts to spread an enlightened view of other cultures, the title and captions that frequently accompanied photographs actually promoted a narrow and close-minded view of others. Instead of offering insight into the customs, traditions, and practices native to the lands depicted, texts often illustrate overgeneralizations and stereotypes created by outsiders looking in.

Many stereographs of the 1870’s to the 1890’s illustrate how text can constrict the viewer’s perception of an image’s subject. One example is an albumen stereograph from the “Good’s Eastern Series,” photographed and published by Frank M. Good of London, entitled “No. 36. A Jerusalem Jew.”

(Image 1.1, 1.1b) The image shows an older man with a wiry beard dressed in formal attire. He acknowledges the photographer’s presence; he appears to stare stoically through the lens into the viewer’s eyes. The close portrait frames him from the chest up, sitting before a white background. Everything about this photograph—the direct eye contact, the close, sharp focus on his face, the non-distracting and blank backdrop, the 3D stereoscopic format—pushes the onlooker to form a personal connection with the subject; everything except

for the title boldly printed on the back of the card. The inscription reverses all individualizing
effects of the picture, transforming the man into a generic representation of a broader culture,
part number thirty-six of the representative series. He becomes an anonymous stereotype and
loses his personal identity.

Some titles and captions that followed the political and social norms of their time now
seem absurd and farcical. Contemporary viewers might find it preposterous that people earnestly
considered these images and texts as informative methods to acquire education and refinement.
And when the written information accompanying such historical photographs projects an air of
ignorance, as it does in the following example, sometimes the image depicted also becomes
questionable.

A 1898 photo-gravure souvenir book of Savannah, Georgia for example includes several
pages that call attention to the difference in time periods. (Image 1.2) The latter half of the small
paper book features a page that displays four photographs. Arranged in a scrapbook style format,
the four images sit arranged around decorative illustrated water lilies placed at the center. Each
precisely bordered picture corresponds with a printed caption. The titles and photos placed at the
top left and bottom right corners of the page draw the most attention to the antiquated nature of
the work. The first depicts two unkempt and decrepit structures. A shabby fence connects each
building’s derelict walls that feebly support the disintegrating roof from caving in. Above the
image, a decorative font lightheartedly displays “Old Negro Cabins.” To audiences of the late eighteenth hundreds, the title raises no apprehensive or impolitic notions. However, most contemporary viewers find it insolent and derogatory. The second photograph portrays a young African-American girl sorrowfully gazing at the camera as she picks cotton in a vast field. Behind her, two other African-American workers hunch over the lines of plants and depositing cotton in large sacks over their shoulders. Below the picture, plain bold text states “COTTON PICKING.” Modern culture collectively regards image content and associated titles such as these in a negative light as a document of racism. Although the three individuals working in the field do not necessarily bear the title of ‘slave,’ their despondent posture and expressions evince their oppressed lifestyles. Yet, nothing on the page indicates that there is anything problematic about the situation being depicted. Printed pairings such as these appear ignorant and insensitive in contemporary times, as opposed to their passé indifferent presence in the 1890’s.

As exemplified by the souvenir book discussed previously, photographic intent frequently derives from efforts to preserve a memory. Although photos primarily serve as an aid to visual recall, some images require text in order to help audiences understand and remember what the photograph depicts before it can remind the viewer of the actual event.\[^{10}\] Notes such as

the subjects’ names, location, date, event, or other assorted data provide a sort of starting point for the viewer’s recollection to begin with. Thus, the ‘memory reminders’ need reminders themselves in order to function properly.

The lack of text can also alter the understanding of a photograph. Historical images bereft of explanation or inscription can consequently lose significance. Because of the manageable medium and its capacity for easy transit, photographs frequently change hands and gain new owners. With each transfer of possession comes the risk of losing pertinent information. When an image unaccompanied by words loses touch with anyone who can identify its subject, it succumbs to ambiguity. The scene becomes anonymous and obscure, and thus loses importance. In order to retain significance, some photographs require words, the very medium they often intended to subvert, to preserve the meaning and content necessary for a deep connection with the viewer, regardless of their physical relation to the subject matter.

Even some photographs that do display accompanying text fall victim to loss of significance resulting from advancing anonymity. Through endless trading, even a meaningful inscription direct from one close family or friend to another may morph into empty sentences. Within the Irma & Margaret Korosi Stamford family archive many cases of lost significance present themselves. The collection includes hundreds of gelatin silver prints, dated from the 1920’s to 1940’s. Once loved and dutifully collected by those pictured in the images, they now
reside in the care of complete strangers due to travels through wills, family estates, and sales.

Though still prudently stored and archived by the photo collector, the sentimental connection dissipated long ago leaving only nonspecific snapshots and hollow inscriptions.

One such photograph shows a young man standing at the entrance of a building. (Image 1.3) The outer wooden door is propped open, but a screen door blocks the interior view. The subject wears a sharp, militaristic outfit with a button down shirt tucked in to tailored trousers, fastened tightly with a belt. His left hand tucked firmly in his pants pocket draws back the side of stylish leather shearling-lined bomber jacket while the other casually raises a pipe to his skewed smirk. Facing the camera, he strikes a smug, brawny pose, right leg kicked up in the door frame, left firmly rooted on the lowered wooden deck. Written on the print in blue ink directly beneath the man and over the floorboards, carefully inscribed cursive says “Your boy, Bob”. On the bottom edge of the white boarder another inscription in black ink reads “ROSWELL FEB-‘45”. Based on the subject’s body language and the message relative to the time period, the viewer gathers that the photograph was probably given to a girl by her significant other, Bob, assumedly the man pictured. Furthermore, his attire might suggest that the gift was given on an occasion of departure for military training or combat. Though once heartfelt, the message and photo now seem like a generic combination. Because the viewer has no connection or any form of context
other than “Feb-‘45”, it comes across as the quintessential ‘soldier boyfriend off at war’ photo, possibly so stereotyped that it seems surreal or artificial.

Text in relation to photography presents a complicated association. Its presence, meant to promote education and worldliness, can end up creating just the opposite experience. The addition of words to any image also introduces a contradictory issue in that photographs are typically created in order to be able to illustrate a scene in a way that verbal communication cannot; however, sometimes the pictures still require words in order to establish the memory that they mean to represent. The meaningfulness of inscriptions also stands subject to the alteration of time and even the most heartfelt messages can become empty, contrary to the creator’s original intentions. Furthermore, a lack of caption can hasten and possibly promote the loss of significance to impending anonymity. These problems demonstrate a few of the conflicting premises within the discussion of text and imagery.
IMAGES—Text & Image

IMAGE 1.1

IMAGE 1.1b

No. 36.
A JERUSALEM JEW.

Photographed and Published by FRANK M. GOOD, London.
Conformity vs. Individuality

Reflecting on Good’s “Jerusalem Jew” stereoscope discussed earlier, another question arises: who earns the right to be identified as an individual versus simply grouped namelessly within a larger category? Furthermore, what amount of social status, wealth, or power must one meet in order to achieve personal recognition?

Throughout the mid to late nineteenth century the carte de visite, albumen prints typically mounted on 2 ½ x 4 inch cards, served as a symbol of social status. Andre Adolphe Disderi, a photographer in Paris, patented the format in 1854; however, it was not widely popularized until five years later. “Card portraits, as everybody knows, have become the social currency, the 'green-backs' of civilization,” as Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1863. These small albumen photographs provided a method of showing social status even when an individual was not present. As Tagg discusses, once reserved for only the upper class and elite members of society, the mechanization of photographic processes lead to quicker initial creation and cheaper

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11 See image 1.1 and 1.1b from chapter one.


reproduction, thus enabling the rise of the middle to higher importance.\textsuperscript{14} Because the cards could be more easily and inexpensively printed, more copies could be more widely distributed between friends and families. The smaller and less fragile materials also allowed for manageable shipping because bulky protective casing required by Ambrotypes and Daguerreotypes was no longer necessary.\textsuperscript{15}

In a further inconsistent nature, a select group of cartes de visite highlight the abnormalities of the unusual character represented in the card, such as the selection of albumen cards from the 1860’s within the Wolff Collection. (Image 2.1, 2.1b) The compositions emphasize the qualities that make the individuals unique as opposed to following the ‘sophisticated’ standards set by society. These cards utilize a popularized medium in order to demonstrate peculiarity of character; in other words, they broke society’s norms through the unconventional manipulation of one of society’s norms. The mass produced medium contradicts the subject’s efforts to be identified as special and distinct. The result of the popularization of these ‘calling cards’, the rarity and value of single images declined. With greater reproduction


\textsuperscript{15} Daguerreotypes are photographs that are fragile and subject to easy damage and tarnishing and thus require special casing, tape, and attentive care. “The Daguerreian Society: Daguerreotype FAQ.” http://daguerre.org/dagfaq.php#12.
and spreading the prints, the medium simultaneously cost every image some of its worth and desirability. The person attempting to be identified as an individual contradicts the primary intention and is duplicated possibly hundreds of times over.\(^\text{16}\)

Another contradiction follows the currency of portrait images; once clear and distinct, they could now be utilized to falsely represent the subject’s social status and identity. Most images printed in the carte de visite format depict individuals dressed in their best clothes posing in a studio setting. Typically the subject represented fits in with society’s norms set within that time period and conform to the commonly produced middle class imagery. Frequently the sitter’s high status is illustrated by posing with books or in the act of reading. As John Peffer discusses, photographers also could suggest higher social class by adding backdrops, columns, drapes, and other scenery drawing from classic symbols from painted portrait traditions.\(^\text{17}\) These images attempt to elevate the subject into a higher class division of society while at the same time trying to assimilate through the very act of creating the cards.


Stereotypes also frequently appear perpetuated by photographic imagery in present culture and within historical archives. Often utilized in a method to create a more worldly perspective, photography offered those unable to travel and experience foreign cultures the opportunity to see other countries and other peoples. Albums featured images of individuals presented as a generic representative of a larger social group or category. Similar to the instance of Good’s “Jewish Jew,” the subject no longer retains a personal identity but instead becomes a nameless icon. The perpetuation of stereotypes in world tour photography and albums also raises the question as to who has the power to be identified as an individual. These personal collectors’ albums feature images that identify specific individuals by name; however, they also include photographs labeled with generic titles such as “aristocratic woman” or “bread maker”. Additionally, juxtaposing the social categorical classifications effects of perpetuating stereotypes, many carte de visite companies expressed the individual identity of the subjects featured proudly, especially within the realm of celebrity photography. Both of these types of identification appear in many forms within the Wolff archive.


19 See figure 1.1 and 1.1b from chapter one.
A personal Irish Carte de Visite album from 1865 illustrates the division and hierarchy between social classes and individual identification. (Image 2.2, 2.2b, 2.3, 2.3b) Near the middle of the album two double paged spreads follow one right after another showing contrasting classifications. Each spread houses eight windows, four on each page. Every generically sized window is cut to fit a carte de visite and encapsulate them with an ornately embossed frame gently rounded at each corner. The first set of cards, with the exception of the bottom two on the right page, shows formal portraits of well dressed, sophisticated individuals. (Image 2.2, 2.2b) They sport expensive coats, ties, and hats in addition to freshly trimmed hair and beards.

The image located at the bottom row on the far left of the spread in particular exemplifies the upper class standards of the carte de visite. (Image 2.2) The albumen print shows a well groomed gentleman with dark hair and features and a slight smirk gazing directly into the lens. His fine coat, perfectly cut pants, high collared shirt and vest, and patent leather shoes evince the wealth accumulated. He sits with stately posture in a lavishly carved, plush-seated chair, his arm casually resting on a matching elaborate desk holding assorted papers and work. In the background, the viewer sees decorated walls and expensive curtains draped by the window. “C. J. Kickham.” appears printed in bold capital letters below the image.

This carte de visite demonstrates the extra effort exerted for celebrity photography. C. J. Kickham’s fame resulted from both his association with the Irish Republican Brotherhood and
his literary accomplishments as a novelist, journalist, and poet.\textsuperscript{20} The photographer conveys Kickham’s high status and social achievements through the careful arrangement of the subject and background within the frame. Every aspect of the picture is intentionally present and suggests some further information about the individual. For example, the desk and papers to his right symbolize his education and literacy. Reading and writing required the funds to learn such skills, something not everyone could afford. Therefore, those who could spare the expense proudly displayed that through their personal calling cards.

In contrast to Kickham’s celebrity card, the carte de visite shown on the bottom row of the very right page in the next spread provides an example of photography of the lower classes. (Image 2.3b) Unlike the celebrity image, the bland setting shows no elaborate furniture or expensive draperies. In the bottom left of the frame a scrap of fabric appears to be mistakenly intruding in the frame. The subject stands solemnly slightly off center in the photo. He wears plain pants and a short, well worn frock. The shirt and casual cap are hand colored a matching pale blue. Instead of suave leather boots, he stands in soiled wooden clogs. The only remotely identifying portion of the photo is a small dead pig, draped casually around his shoulders symbolizes his trade as a butcher. Beyond the carcass, the photographer offers no insight as to

the personal identity of the man. Instead of noting his name in bold letters at the bottom, the card remains blank and suggestively generic. It implies to the viewer that instead of regarding this particular carte de visite as a unique calling card, one should read it as a standard depiction of a typical lower class butcher.

This collection of small photographs relates to the larger questions posed at the start of this chapter: who retains the power to be identified as an individual? What power is required in order to be pictured as a specific person instead of a generic, nameless representative of a larger group stereotype or category? Celebrity photographers seem to invest extra effort into creating an image that highlights the unique accomplishments and lifestyle of the subject. On the other hand, those photographing the less affluent peasants appear to focus on making the individual appear as plain and impersonal as possible.

Tagg discusses that Disderi’s widely popularized carte-de-visite photographs further attributed to the loss of uniqueness each image in itself.\textsuperscript{21} The craze for the small collectable image led to its own decline in value individually. A further example of the desire for images leading to its own destruction of influence arrived with the “Throwaway Era”. The invention of the illustrated paper and the spread of the utilization of the half tone ended the desire for trading

reproduction portraits; it was no longer remarkable to have a simple image of a celebrity.

Another major contradiction was the reversal of the political axis of representation. With the rise of police use of portrait photography, it became that it was no longer a privilege to be photographed, but a burden of a new class of criminals and surveilled individuals.\(^22\) This was one of the topics within the developing division between photography seen as scientific proof versus artistic property. This overarching separation, starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century but still prominent today, is defined by contradictory categories; in Tagg’s definition, the domain of art’s privilege as a function of its lack of power, while the scientifico-technical domain’s power as a function of its renunciation of privilege.\(^23\)

Over the centuries, photography has frequently been chosen as the medium to represent people; however, the way in which they are depicted varies vastly. Individuals can be represented in a unique fashion speaking towards their personal characteristics or alternatively as generic representatives of a larger group. People have also utilized the medium in order to falsely represent their class and status in order to gain leverage in the social hierarchy. The effects of portrait photography has also shifted with the development of reproductive technologies and


widespread distribution. Once only one of a kind, prints became normal and the once elevated desire dissipated into common encounters. These issues have prevailed through time and photography today still retains the contradictory aspects of individual representation.
IMAGES—Conformity vs. Individuality

IMAGE 2.1

IMAGE 2.1b
Public vs. Private

Throughout history and even progressing in to contemporary times, photography both separates and bridges the gap between the public and private sectors of society. The relationship between these branches waives back and forth in a complex and contradictory way. In modern culture millions of images circulate the internet daily. Celebrity photography accounts for an enormous percentage of photographs spread globally and has evolved into a vast enterprise of its own. Despite this business’s tremendous leaps in growth, it remains rooted in the same premise that popularized it in the first place so many years ago: the “ordinary” middle and lower class populations’ fascination with the famous celebrities’ activities and way of life. In other words, publicizing the private lives of certain individuals. The mass printed publications then make their way back into the private sector as they are collected within the domestic realm. Within the realm of these collected images, two contrasting subsections arise.

The first describes the photographs that depict the celebrities as ‘normal.’ The public appeal of these pictures results from their relatable nature. The middle class can identify with the celebrity class when the photograph depicts them doing average activities associated with normal, everyday life. Herm Nathan’s silverprint of Truman Capote typifies this concept.²⁴

(Image 3.1, 3.1b) At first glance, the image appears to be a simple frame of Capote preparing dinner in the kitchen, a seemingly domestic and highly relatable scene. Audiences identify with the celebrity as he performs an activity that they also carry out on a daily basis. It provides a feeling of hope and chance in attaining a social status similar to his. Capote no longer appears as a deity of sorts, but as an individual they could possibly someday be like. However, the division between celebrity and everyday person still clearly presents itself, though perhaps in a more subtle way. Though his attire might come across as relaxed and casual, its high cost remains evident by the custom monogramming of his shirt and the formal cut and material of his pants. Instead of preparing a typical, inexpensive and easy household meal, he works with fresh cut and perfectly proportioned ingredients while large lobsters sit nonchalantly in the background. Even the large tiled kitchen with marble tables, commercial appliances, and elegant silver dishes separate him from the standard home. Despite this photograph’s efforts to connect and identify with the middle and lower classes, it also conflictingly delineates the details, even present in everyday activities, which separate the common lifestyle from the affluent way of living.

Furthermore, the careful preservation and detail in cataloging of this single photograph also illustrates the division between the famous and the typical family. Printed then pasted to the bottom of the back, a detailed account carefully describes the scene saying, “Very fond of cooking, Capote is quite proud of his “chicken au chocolat” in which the chicken is prepared
with a filling of chestnuts, prunes, and chocolate, boiled and then baked with rice.”  (Image 3.1b)

Were this image taken in a typical household, odds suggest that such a detailed and well written inscription would rarely accompany it. In a domestic family album, a simple picture of a family member cooking to this would unceremoniously and anonymously reside alongside other similarly trivial photos. On the other hand, the Capote photograph proudly displays an official stamp from the Graphic House detailing the ownership and publication rights above the individual image number.

The second division of celebrity photography pertains to the images that depict the extravagant and surreal imagery that people dream of attaining. These photos show the seemingly unachievable lifestyle and permit viewers to fantasize about inserting themselves into the moment captured. Moments such as the ones depicted in a contact sheet from the New York City photographer “Popsie”. (Image 3.2, 3.2b) The twelve square Kodak frames show the singer, songwriter, and actor Bobby Darin on The Bob Crosby Show in 1958. The images are taken from a behind the scenes perspective, incorporating the cameras, lights, and other technical gear. The crew carries on with their jobs as the photographer shoots; cameramen film, sound technicians maneuver microphones, actors wait patiently in the wings. Each picture allows the

viewer to peek into the mysterious inner workings of the television studio. By providing a pass to the hidden backstage world, these photos go against the typical intentions of the scene depicted. Television draws public appeal by creating elaborate illusions; the scenes appearing on the screen seem to magically occur in the television itself. It allows viewers to feel as if they witness the event first hand. By revealing the efforts that go into creating the illusion, the magic dissolves. Consequently, one might expect the appeal for the disclosing photographs to plummet; however, the enthusiasm for such images soars. The public craves seeing the private side of celebrity work and broadcasting creation. The pictures facilitate a sense of being a part of the production and being part of the close ‘in’ group, against the underlying realism that suggests the improbability of actually attaining this lifestyle.

Though it maintains a subconscious presence, commodity culture and consumerism directly connects to the envy that drives celebrity obsession. Many individuals, whether publically or privately, feel the desire to attain the wide fame and excessively affluent superstar lifestyle. People have been actively collecting celebrity photography since the medium took off in the mid nineteenth century. An early example of personal photograph collections is evident in the family album of M. L. Balizarian, a prominent rug dealer from the 1920’s. (Image 3.3) The image depicts the corner of a room almost like a shrine. The walls have expensive looking wallpaper and molded baseboards. A sizeable fireplace with a large carved mantle runs of the
right edge of the frame. A decorative fabric with tassels is draped across the front while a molded brass border encircles the fire pit. A carved wooden table covered with an elaborately embroidered patterned tablecloth stands in the very corner of the room with a racket leaning against it. Photographs cover almost every surface of the room. Framed photographs and assorted matted photos and cards occupy most of the wall space. Two framed portraits are displayed in front of the fireplace as pictures of assorted sizes engulf the entirety of the top of the mantle and nearby table. Because of the cramped arrangement of the photographs, the viewer can ascertain that the photographer has gathered the images from around the house and arranged them proudly in a display for the camera. Instead of displaying only family photographs and heirlooms, their place is overrun by images of unknown individuals. They bring pictures from the public realm and display them in private collections.

Photography within the personal and family realm also presents contradictory concepts. The M. L. Balizarian family archive also illustrates several of the complicated issues that prevail in photographic collections from the private sector. The overwhelming number of posed portraits immediately jumps out at the viewer when flipping through the collection of gelatin silver prints. Photo after photo shows a single woman as the subject clearly posing for the camera in front of some picturesque setting. (Image Set 3.4) Though the background and details of each image varies, the content remains the same. The underlying concept that drives the repetitive creation of
such images draws from the celebrity fetish and desire to emulate the images that bombard popular culture. The ‘normal’ women pictured in the portraits wish to remember themselves as the unique person they are; yet, they attempt to capture their individuality in a way that ultimately derives from someone completely unrelated. They dress up in different outfits and pose in unnatural ways in an effort to represent their personal identity, despite the fact the character they assume is not really their own. These family images meant to help remember the family actually document the members in the way they wish to portray themselves. The photos are taken in an attempt to suggest to others an alternative lifestyle than the one they lead; however, these albums typically remain within the private sector. Therefore, the typical audience of these photographs is composed of the individuals that present in the images or know the true nature of the family. The albums seem as if they were created in an effort to alter the true memories and convince the family members to believe an idyllic past merely based on their own histories.

The contemporary treatment of historical family albums vastly differs from the traditional use and keeping of their time. When the photographer first captured the images they primarily intended the prints to stay within the private realms of the family. As seen in one page of a personal family Kodak album of vacation images from 1895, the photographs carefully arranged in scrapbooks preserved and seen only by friends and relatives show no sign of public destiny.
Nevertheless, over the years as family members have passed on and the albums are left to be sold or willed through various estates, museums and collectors have acquired and matriculated them into their archives and exhibits. As these collections transfer out of the family’s possession and into the public sphere, they seem to exist in a world almost completely opposite to their original homes. Instead of being casually passed around the living room with gawking relatives, the albums turn into fragile artifacts carefully stored in archival quality boxes inside temperature controlled rooms or cautiously displayed behind glass cases under professional museum lighting, similar to the setup seen in the storage of the Korosi Stamford family archive. (Image 3.6) Few people touch them, and those who do wear protective gloves and turn each page delicately as it rests in a special cradle. Cold cataloguing numbers and objective facts replace the warm memories each photo once served to recall. Private moments and events lose their personal significance in trade of historical significance to the wider public as references for research. Spectators regard the pictures in an objective third party view, with no close relation to the people or activities depicted. Their value comes from their importance as a historical document, not from sentimental connections.

Though the public and private sectors of photography are distinct, the images that cross between may create a conflicting relationship. The celebrity genre is a huge sector of photography and presents several issues. Middle class families with average lifestyles crave
imagery that they can both identify and dream with. Images of affluent stars carrying out seemingly everyday tasks allow average people to feel this status is attainable, despite the subtle differences that are present. However, they also enjoy depictions of fantasy lifestyles that seem unobtainable. The two categories also crossover in reference to where they are obtained, housed, and displayed. Celebrity photos transfer from the public realm into private collections and conversely private family albums transfer to the public realm as they pass through generations to museums and archives. All of these intertwined issues lead to the complex and contradictory nature of photography within the public and private realms.
IMAGES—Public vs. Private

IMAGE 3.1
Very fond of cooking, Capote is quite proud of his "chicken au chocolat" in which the chicken is prepared with a filling of chestnuts, prunes, and chocolate, boiled and then baked with rice.
IMAGE SET 3.4
IMAGE 3.6
Memory

The study of memory proves to be a very complex and challenging topic yet to be conquered, but its relationship to photography also presents intriguing complexities.²⁶ People often associate photographs to a method of memory and the distinction between the two sometimes passes unnoticed. The natural organization of memory differs greatly from the organizational principles within photography. Within human recollection, remembering an event implies its significance to the individual. As Geoffrey Batchen points out, photography makes every memory ‘significant’. The scientific and precise representation of photography contrasts the fuzzy and subjective characteristics of human recollection. While a memory falls susceptible to alteration and deterioration of detail over time, a photographic image, according to Batchen, contains too much precise information in an overly linear time and space to function as memory.²⁷

Trivial activities suddenly become momentous occasions memorialized by the crisp representation in a photo. For example a picture of Samuel Cook, better known by his stage name “Sam Cooke”, illustrates the implication of significance created by the act of capturing and


collecting a photograph. (Image 4.1) The image shows Cooke seated on stool in a slouched and unceremonious way. He smokes a cigarette in a relaxed and solitary manner. In the background, a small window shows two unnamed men who appear to be casually talking, paying no attention to the singer in the studio. The walls have no art or decorative flare and the dim lighting comes from typical undramatic office overhead bulbs. The recording room houses no fancy furniture, but instead a simple stool and stand accented by two paper cups on the ground waiting to be thrown away. The photograph captures a passing moment—a transitional period between significant events—that typically elapses unnoticed. Every individual comes across in a private realm; they do not seem to be aware of the photographer taking a picture. Instead of simply documenting the scene, the photo suggests a story or pushes the viewer to create one themselves.

The everyday activity of cooking an average meal or sitting waiting between takes in the recording studio would typically be a forgotten moment. Experienced in passing, it fades from memory within a few weeks or months. However, when etched into the permanence of a photograph the record implies significance. Instead of these occurrences disintegrating from easy recollection, their lasting presence goes against the hierarchy of natural memory. The natural selection of memory without photographs evinces which events are most noteworthy by the amount of detail and clarity of the recollection. In photographs, the detail and clarity remains the same whether the image depicts the assassination of a president or just a smiling girl in a field.
Further complications arise, in regards to photographic images replacing actual memories and experiences. Since photography’s introduction to society and popular culture, many images have risen to iconic status. Similar to the relation of Leonardo Da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa” as a classic icon of the medium of painting, photos such as Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” or Ansel Adams’s landscapes have taken their place as the iconic images of photography. Although photography frequently serves as an aid to memory, iconic images such as these, both on the broader level of society and in the smaller individual level, make the viewer susceptible to losing the recollection of the personal experience all together. As Roland Barthes discusses in Camera Lucida, “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory[…], but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.” For example, a ten year old boy goes on a fishing trip with his father. At the river, the two pose together for a photograph proudly holding their catch for the day. This image may follow the original intent of its creation, to facilitate the reflection and discussion of the event and aid in the recollection of the events experienced on the


trip as a whole. Alternatively, this photo might transform into an iconic representation. In other words, instead as serving as an inspiration and boost to recollection, the photo becomes the memory itself; whenever the son thinks about the fishing trip, a third person view of this image comes to mind in place of the feelings, senses, and sights actually experienced.

Another problematic concept that arises from the craze of documenting family travels is the separation created by the camera. In an attempt to record all of the sights in their travels abroad, the individuals only see the world through the lens. In the 1889 Kodak No. 1 Grand Tour album the barrier between photographer and experience recurrently appears.

One of the most notable examples of division is most evident in a very simple image. The circular photograph shows a decrepit wall that runs into a pile of rubble. (Image 4.2) Dirt, trash, and rocks litter the ground around it. The tops of two palm trees peek out just above the top bricks under a clear, cloudless sky. A pair of small, frightened children stand barefoot closely huddled by the base of the wall, their tattered clothes caked in dust. One boy clings to the other as he raises his right arm to shield the burning sun from his eyes. The second wears his hood low and directs his squinting gaze at the ground. Six figures cast a dark shadow on the foreground of the photo. The viewer can make out distinct outline of at least four people blocking the sun. From the silhouette they appear to wear dresses with large skirts, well-trimmed suits, and fancy hats. At least two, perhaps three, of the individuals carry parasols or umbrellas of some sort.
The mysterious profiles suggest a group of upper class individuals. From the shape and distortion of the shadow, the audience plainly notices that the spectators stand several feet back from the lone children, who appear to belong to the more impoverished levels of society—possibly orphaned beggars. A mental story accompanies this image: A group of tourists, probably an affluent family abroad on vacation, walks through the city taking in the sights. They take pictures to remember the scenes. Along the way, they come upon two children native to the area. They nonchalantly snap a photo, and then pass on. Similar to visiting a zoo, an imaginary glass divider separates the patron from the wild on the other side. This approach to travel, though the popular and desired method of the time, creates a segregated experience. Observing the ‘quaint’ slums and ‘old-world’ culture while casually passing through, almost like some sort of “It’s a Small World” kiddie ride, permits the tourist to visually encounter scenes without actually having to interact. If required to closely and acutely engage with the children, the wealthy visitors stand at risk to pity them, to perhaps feel guilt or compunction for their ample prosperity, to possibly be solicited for charity, or even worse, to maybe be associated with the lower classes.

The album bombards the viewer with image after image of perpetuated orientalism and an obvious distinction between subject and tourist. The camera forms a barrier between the real experience and the photographer. As a result, those actually present end up encountering the world in a similar way to the friends and relatives left behind who only review the photographs upon the travelers’ return. The tourists’ shadows are cast in just the same way the viewer back home casts a shadow on the printed picture—detached and indifferent.

Furthermore, for those who might not have even been present or even alive to experience a specific event, iconic images might establish a false sense of relation and memory. Through seeing enough images of a specific place or event, one might feel as though they actually encountered it despite never having been there. This concept helped drive the growth of the photographic industry throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. People aspired to visit other countries; however, the costly and dangerous nature of travel kept many from reaching their goal. As a result, the popularity of mass produced images of foreign

32 Orientalism, briefly described, “is ‘a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient.’ It is the image of the ‘Orient’ expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship.” Summary quote from “Orientalism Postcolonial Studies at Emory.” (http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/orientalism/) Based on Edward Said’s book, Orientalism. (Said, Edward W. Orientalism. 1st Vintage Books ed. Vintage, 1979.)
landscapes and monuments soared. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, travel photography developed into a booming industry in the second half of the nineteenth century.\footnote{Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. \textit{Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, institutions, and Practices}. Media & Society 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. Chapter 7.} In her article “A Photographer in Jerusalem” she discusses the popularity of these foreign views, especially through the work of Auguste Salzmann and Louis De Clercq. Both photographers gained renown for their views of Jerusalem and “the orient”.\footnote{Auguste Salzman: Born 1824 in Alsace, France; died 1872 in Paris, France. Though his main interest was in archaeology, he was also a painter and an accomplished photographer. His most noted series was a collection of approximately 150 calotypes of historical monuments in Egypt and Jerusalem from his trip to the Holy Land in 1854. For biographic summary, see: “Auguste Salzmann Biography.” http://www.leegallery.com/auguste-salzmann/auguste-salzmann-biography.} In 1855 Salzmann received a gold medal at the photo pavilion of the Exposition Universelle for his panorama of Jerusalem, which allowed the viewers to surround themselves in the “full experience” of being physically present at the real scene.\footnote{For images from the Holy Land series, see: “Category - Photography | National Gallery of Canada | National Gallery of Canada.” http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/category.php?page=32&categoryid=6&withimages=.} These photographs provided lower class individuals the opportunity to experience these views without having to leave home.

Two prints of the hundreds of foreign views within Wolff Collection characterize this photographic genre. The first image is an exterior view; Samuel Bourne’s nineteenth century
photograph #1219 labeled, “The Fort, Delhi Gate. Acra. 1219.”

(Image 4.3) The second image shows an inside view; Sebah & Joaillier’s albumen print #289, from c. 1870, labeled, “Interieur de la Mosquee Ahmed.”

(Image 4.4) Though the two photos depict opposite spaces, they share similar qualities. Both compositions appear deliberately crafted with diagonal lines running along the bottom edge of the frame and winding back into the scene. These directive aids guide the eye from the foreground back to the middle, and then draws the focus deeper in to the background as the image engulfs the visual field. Precise exposure and sharp focus in combination with the empty foreground create an alluring quality that invites the observer to step into the environment as if they were physically present. The pictures’ perspective tricks the brain with a first person point of view. These types of images fabricate a false sense of memory; whenever the viewer recalls the photograph, it provides a counterfeited reminiscent feeling.

Sometimes referred to as one of the most accurate ways to represent reality, photography alternatively retains the ability to fabricate the misconception within the viewer that the subject


depicted remains present in the same manner, despite actually being physically absent or possibly dead. Paired with nostalgic items, such as a lock of hair, photos allow viewers to entertain the idea that their lost love one still lives on in that same state somewhere in the world. Thus, in Batchen’s opinion, personal memory is enhanced by photography instead of superseded.\textsuperscript{38} They provide a visual catalyst to evoke recollection of invisible relationships and emotions. A large portion of photography is based on the desire to create a memorial of some sort. As Batchen describes in \textit{Burning With Desire}, two main causes drive the popularity of memorial photography: first, the desire to remember someone else, and second, the personal fear of being forgotten upon the physical absence of self.\textsuperscript{39} Individuals dress in their finest attire and inscribe thoughtful words on the back of the photographs in an attempt to prevent the fading of their legacy.

One tintype from the Wolff Collection in particular from the 1880’s encapsulates this concept. The traditional portrait depicts a woman from the shoulders up. (Image 4.5) Her conservative black dress completely conceals her from the neck down, adorned only by a simple

\begin{footnotes}
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white scarf tied into a bow at the collar. She stares into the viewers’ eyes with a frigid, stern glare, yet at the very corners of her mouth a slight hint of a meek smile peeks through. Her hair circles her head then draws back into a meticulous, elegant bun. Behind her, only a solid colored backdrop frames her profile. On the surface of the print, prudently hand painted details pop out and draw the audiences’ attention. A train of small yellow dots lines the collar of her dress while similar white dots surround the bow at her neck held on by a painted brass button or metallic pin of some sort. However, the eyes, though not entirely realistic, appear most captivating of the colored details. The vibrant light blue and flecks of white highlights seems to jump out at the audience to lure them deeper into the photograph. The expression in the woman’s face in addition to the careful decoration illustrates the desire to memorialize the image. Whether the subject or another individual added the embellishments, the extra attention to detail demonstrates the sentimental significance of the photograph. However, despite the importance the picture once retained to those who knew the woman, it now only posses a ghostly and empty feeling due to the impersonal anonymity that ensues.

The complex relationship between photography and memory results from the contradictory concepts that intertwine the two topics. Pictures oppose the selective nature of subjective memory by carefully recording every event and detail—regardless of the trivial or significant nature of it. Memories also stand susceptible to being replaced by photograph if they
develop an iconic link to the event, ultimately risking forgetting the direct personal encounter all together. Furthermore, the camera can disconnect the photographer from the chance to fully immerse oneself in the environment. This separation may result in a disassociated memory similar to the second hand viewers’ experience, encountering the prints after the fact.

Nevertheless, some photographs allow for such a vast and engrossing investigation of a location or event that the audience consequently establishes a false sense of actually engaging in the scene first hand. Human nature drives the trepidation of being forgotten and perpetuates the desire to remember and to be remembered. Regardless of the subject matter, people establish some sort of memory with almost every encounter. Thus, the attempt to create a physical representation for a complex theoretical and abstract concept accordingly results in numerous contradictory concerns that accompany photography’s efforts to serve as a medium for memory.
IMAGES—Memory

IMAGE 4.1


**Contemporary Interpretation vs. Original Image Intent**

When a photographer lifts their camera, focuses the lens, and clicks the shutter, they create the image with intent. The specific goal of each picture may vary, but the photographers always aim to accomplish some objective. Billions of photographs circulate the world today; however, the interpretation received in contemporary times does not always parallel the original image intent. In Solomon-Godeau’s words, “The art history of photography now being created […] is an endeavour that depletes the photographs of their original meaning and fills them with a new one.”

Discarded negatives and prints offer insight into the transient nature of interpretation from its original intent to contemporary understanding. A prime example of increased value is Joe Alper’s 1962 silverprint 35mm contact sheet of Roland Kirk at Newport Jazz in Newport, Rhode Island. (Image 5.1, 5.1b) The seven film strips, five frames each, depict the famous musician soulfully playing center stage in the spotlight. Upon creation, the photographer probably had no intention for this sheet to ever reach the broader public eye. The sheet has frames with improper exposures and less than stellar compositions. Red X’s and numbers mark certain photos. Perhaps casually discarded at the time, it shows sign of wear and negligent care.

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Despite its seemingly second-rate status at the time, this page of photographs has risen through the ranks and found its place of value. It now resides in acid-free protective sleeves within special archival boxes, accompanied by specific cataloguing information. What was once just a type of catalyst to the final creation of a work has now become a valued piece on its own; whether it is saved for art or preservation of historical evidence.

The way in which photographs are stored and collected within an archive is another issue that distinctly separates the contemporary interpretation versus their original reading. In their original setting, photos in family albums were typically arranged in a way significant to its members, perhaps by date, location, event, vacation, individual, etc. Scrapbooked pages display pictures in a homemade sentimental way. However, in an archive, frequently images are taken from their original display methods and put into sterile and institutional archival boxes. Images become just one of a series; they gain a number and are laid out in an uncreative and uninspired way inside clear plastic sheets. Sekula points out, “When photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretense to historical understanding remains, although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience.”

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The very act of collection implies a certain degree of value to an item. Because someone saves an object from casual disposal illustrates its significance. Though saving things does not automatically create importance to every individual, it suggests meaning to someone. Barthes discusses what is really cast out as a photograph is thrown away writing, “…love. In front of the only photograph in which I find my father and mother together, this couple who I know loved each other, I realize: it is love-as-treasure which is going to disappear forever; for once I am gone, no one will any longer be able to testify to this: nothing will remain but an indifferent Nature.”

First prints demonstrate another reinterpretation of initial significance. Photography entails many methods that alter the audiences’ final view of the scene. Techniques such as depth of field, perspective, and altered lighting are a few ways that photographers utilize the camera to fool the human eye. Furthermore, post processing techniques that modify the pictures even more to diverge from the original experience. Eugene R. Richee’s retouched silverprint “Jimmy Dorsey and Band” from April 20, 1942 illustrates one method of post processing that considerably changes the photograph. (Image 5.2) The original frame shows musician Jimmy

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Dorsey surrounded by four fellow musicians. Each man holds an instrument and strikes a mid-song position. They wear matching formal suits and stand in a close group in front of a white backdrop. In the original composition, each member of the band shares the viewer’s attention in a dynamic interplay between each man’s pose. Contrasting the original depiction, the photographer redistributes the focus by carefully outlining Dorsey’s figure with white paint. In blocking out the musicians behind Dorsey, the photographer deems all other details in the frame irrelevant. Marked on, cropped, and painted around, photographs originally taken to remember every aspect of a scene in detail; however, in editing out selected features some parts are once again defined as unimportant.

Industrial photos compose a significant part of large photography archives today. However, their original purpose frequently differs from their use today. Many companies applied photographic technology for scientific and documentary objectives. Photography permitted a more accurate and detailed record of scenes. Furthermore, pictures could be made and reproduced at a more rapid pace. Images show the technological development within companies. A photo can allow for the precise documentation through evolution of construction sites and building creation. Because cameras offer the ability to capture the scene in a more immediate and

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less biased format, fewer variables risk altering the monitoring consistency. This practice is found on multiple occasions within archives from the New Haven Power & Light Company (NHPL). NHPL used photography in order to document many divisions within the business; however, the coal store series illustrates one of the closer monitoring examples. (Image Set 5.3)

The images within the collection document the development start in March of 1904 and span, in varying increments, to as late as 1915. Though the series contains over twenty photographs, the evolution is evident even through investigating a select few of them. In order to provide a condensed example, six images from various times are shown.\(^{44}\) Throughout the collection, most of the dates read the first (or close to the first) of the month, demonstrating a consistent appointment time for documentation. For the more substantial and significant periods of critical development in the early stages of construction, each month is chronicled consecutively with several images from multiple perspectives. The photographer provides a consistent series of different viewpoints each month. However, as the assembly progresses to working on smaller details, the quantity of photos from each ‘recording day’ decreases. Though the timing between pictures alters, some variation of “Coal Store” and the date appear inscribed on the front of most every print.

\(^{44}\) The six photographs chosen are dated: March 1, 1904; April 1, 1904; June 1, 1904; August 1, 1904; September 1, 1904; and January 1, 1905.
Beyond the documentation of construction sites, companies also employed photography in order to keep records of accidents. The NHPL contains several instances of these types of images, such as the record for the 1906 light meter explosion. (Image 5.4) The photograph shows a mangled piece of machinery with charred and contorted metal pieces branching off of it. It sits prominently in the middle of the frame with various tools and workstations standing in the background. At the bottom of the print, written in black ink just below the machine, the inscription states: “50 Light meter Exploded during gassing from lighting small nozzle on outlet. New Haven 1906.”

In studying the collection, the noticeable haphazard style of shooting of each of these photographs suggests a prior trivial status. Each image in the series depicts the site in a straightforward method. Devoid of artistic finesse or deliberate aesthetics, they clearly serve the singular primary purpose to document the building or accident. The composition and framing suggest an inattentive set up, further supported by the sometimes blurry focus and imprecise exposure. The prints’ worn state illustrate signs of negligent care in their past, possibly proposing a temporary or short-lived purpose. Contrasting its seemingly humble beginnings, the NHPL documentation archive has evolved to higher status. Instead of casual and indifferent treatment, each print earns a specific title and place within a photographic archive. The attentive
contemporary archival storage preserves each image for its aesthetic purposes in addition to its historical references, alternative to its original intentions to serve only as a documentation aid.

Some photographers, such as Eugene Atget, worked primarily in temporary scenery documentation to provide painters references to refer back to when creating paintings. As Molly Nesbitt discusses, against one of the rudimentary traits of photography, these permanent images were made with no intention to be permanent. Furthermore, the artists that employed these photos seem to work backwards. They study and constantly refer back to the precise detail in order to create the most realistic painting possible. However, no matter how much time and effort they invest, the painting fails to ever possess the exemplary accuracy of a photograph.

Some images have come so far from their original intent viewers no longer regard them as a photograph itself, but instead only see the subject represented. As Allan Sekula questions, “Are these photographs to be taken as a transparent means to a knowledge […] or are we to look at these pictures ‘for their own sake’?” Many archived pictures lose their value as aesthetic works of art or sentimental memories after decades fade and those with close connections pass

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on. These photos transform into artifacts for research. They are studied for research such as technological developments or anthropological evolutions, not for composition or emotional content. As Liz Wells discusses in the first chapter of *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, photography’s priority shifts to evidence instead of artistic significance. Social historians use it for ethnographic, agricultural, fashion, or technologic documentation. Landscape photography turns into aids for civil and military mapping and commercial practices. Abigail Solomon-Godeau further reflects on this transition stating, “[Although some images] may have originally been produced for widely different purposes to serve vastly different ends, the terms of their rediscovery have largely functioned to obscure such distinctions. For nowhere have the institutional methods of conferring aura been more clearly revealed than in the apotheosis of early photography, a process initiated by collectors, succeeded by galleries and museums, and now being academicized by a new generation of photographic historians and graduate students. The tendency to lump together willy-nilly under the unifying rubric of art the photographic work of physiologists and physicians (Marey and Duchenne de Boulogne), entrepreneurs and artists (Disderi and Le Secq), archaeological documentarians and the makers of tourist views (Salzmann and Braun) has resulted in the neglect, if not obfuscation, of important questions of intent, context, and production.”

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The physical effects of time on a photograph manifest in an obvious and pronounced way; however, the conceptual transformations prove less conspicuous. Even aspects as basic as methods of storage have completely reversed over the years. Many previously discarded images such as old contact sheets and negatives gain significance due to the subject’s inaccessibility in the modern era. Formerly trivial temporary documents from industrial archives become valuable historical references or aesthetic works. Scrapped proof prints also evince the less prominent modifications. Contrasting the typical realistic representative characteristics of photography, photographers edit their images in post processing. Cropped frames, blocked out sections, and altered exposure and perspective disregard the traditional intentions to recreate scenes in the most accurate method possible. Thus, comparing original image intent to contemporary interpretation creates a complex and contradictory juxtaposition.

IMAGES—Contemporary Interpretation vs. Original Intent

IMAGE 5.1

IMAGE 5.1b
50 Light Mills exploded during gassing, from lighting small nozzles. 1st Oct. 1908.
Conclusion

The investigation of the multifaceted complications within photography reveals the contradictory nature of the medium. In every subtopic there seems some paradoxical quality that questions any proposed conclusion. The ever changing understanding and impermanent comprehension of photography becomes evident through closely examining text, division of conformity versus individuality, transitions between the public and private realms, troubling characteristics associated with memory, and the contrasts between original image intent and contemporary interpretation.

Text frequently accompanies photos in many genres and carries a significant impact on the image paired with it. Contradictory to its efforts to spread sophistication and education, inscriptions sometimes promote narrow-minded views or skewed perspectives. Messages also fall victim to the effects of time and risk losing their original sincerity only to become empty and unsentimental. The very basis of photography’s capacity to commemorate scenes in a way verbal communication cannot conflicts with the addition of text; however, without a caption, images are more susceptible to succumb to insignificance and anonymity.

A conflicting sense of anonymity also results from certain aspects of portraiture. Some images deprive the subject of identification by stripping them of their personal identity and projecting them as a generic representative of a larger group or stereotype. Other photographs proudly acknowledge the individual characteristics and high status of the person depicted through specific props and elaborate backgrounds. Furthermore, in order to gain status in the social hierarchy, some utilize the medium to create false elevated presentation of themselves. The progression of the manufacturing technologies of photography also affected the widespread distribution of portraiture, and consequently established a conflicting correlation between one of
a kind representations and trivialization of images through mass reproduction. Pictures meant to illustrate the unique qualities of an individual become commonplace as duplicative processes feed popular culture’s desire.

The evolution of popular culture prompted the distinction between the public and private sectors of photography; nevertheless, images that bridge the two categories emerge and suggest opposing concepts. The drive for celebrity pictures derives from people’s desire to see imagery that depicts social elites performing both the everyday activities that average families identify with, despite the underlying details that still separate the social classes, and contrarily, the unobtainable fantasy lifestyle that families dream about. The collection, storage, and display of images between the private and public groupings also present a contradictory relationship. Individuals privately collect photographs from the public realm, and alternatively, private family albums relocate to the public view when passed through apathetic estates to museums and archives. The role of each photograph can reverse with each transfer it encounters.

Photography’s role as a representative medium for memory introduces another problematic topic. The precise and objective documentation pictures provide juxtaposes the subjective and selective nature of memory. Moreover, images meant to aid in recollection endanger the real memories they intend to assist; by developing an iconic association between the picture and the event, viewers risk forgetting the direct personal encounter completely. Cameras also jeopardize immersive experiences by disconnecting the photographer from the environment. This lack of direct engagement establishes a disassociated memory that more closely resembles a second hand viewers’, in that it only encounters the prints after the fact instead of actually being there. Yet despite the danger photography poses to missing or forgetting authentic memories, some pictures impose false experiences. Audiences establish a counterfeit
sense of actually engaging things first hand when images illustrate scenes in particularly captivating and absorbing perspectives that seem to immerse the viewer in the location. However, regardless of the recollection’s veridicality, every personal encounter results in some sort of memory. Humans innately possess the fear of forgetting and the fear of being forgotten, which drives the memorializing impulse in photography.

Though pictures attempt to preserve memories permanently over time, the way in which people interact and understand them continually changes. The contemporary interpretation of an image sometimes directly opposes its original intent. In the commercial sense, implied value reverses when subject accessibility shifts and discarded prints and contact sheets evolve into important historical references and aesthetic works. Post processing techniques, such as cropping and masking, evident in test prints contradict the accurate and realistic representations commonly associated with photography by brushing aside traditional conventions that prefer unaltered and objective depictions in recreating scenes. Even the physical treatment and storage of photographs in modern archives counters methods originally employed.

With the endless circulation of images in the world today, modern society has developed an apathetic perspective on photography, immune to the underlying controversies and implications that accompany it. However, when regarded with careful reflection, the potentially complex attributes of every photograph emerge. These traits raise questions that urge the viewer to investigate conflicting concepts frequently overlooked in haphazard passing glances from indifferent audiences. Veheemently studying the subtle but intricate web of interrelated complications reveals the significant impact these elements play in image interpretation. Thus, the contradictory nature of photography clearly manifests through the close examination of the underlying components of the medium.
**Image Information**

ALL IMAGES ARE SCANNED FROM
THE IRA WOLFF COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS,
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

Image 1.1—“No. 36. A Jerusalem Jew.” (c. 1870’s)
Albumen print stereograph, part of the “Good’s Eastern Series” photographed and published by Frank M. Good of London, England.

Image 1.1b—Reverse side of Image 1.1 “No. 36. A Jerusalem Jew.”

Image 1.2—Page from “Souvenir of Savannah” (1898)

Image 1.3—Untitled. (1945)
Silverprint photograph from the Irma and Margaret Korosi Stamford Family Archive

Image 2.1, 2.1b—Untitled. (c. 1860’s)
Assorted carte de visites; a selection of albumen prints from assorted photographers

Image 2.2, 2.2b—Untitled. (c. 1865)
A two page spread of albumen prints from a personal Irish carte de visite album

Image 2.3, 2.3b—Untitled. (c. 1865)
A two page spread of albumen prints from a personal Irish carte de visite album

Image 3.1—Untitled. (c. 1950’s-1960’s)
A silverprint photograph of Truman Capote cooking “Chicken Au Chocolat”; a Graphic House photo by Herm Nathan.

Image 3.1b—Reverse side of Image 3.1 of Truman Capote

Image 3.2—Untitled. (1958)
A silverprint contact sheet of photos of Bobby Darin on The Bob Crosby Show photographed by “Popsie”, New York, NY.

Image 3.2b—Reverse side of Image 3.2 of Bobby Darin

Image 3.3—Untitled. (c. 1920’s)
A gelatin silver print from the M. L. Baliazarian Rug Dealer Archive

Image Set 3.4—Untitled. (c. 1920’s)
Six gelatin silver prints from the M. L. Baliazarian Rug Dealer Archive
Image 3.5—Untitled. (1895)
A page of gelatin silver prints from a personal Kodak Album

Image 3.6—Untitled. (c. 1920’s-1940’s)
A page of gelatin silver prints from the archival storage of the Irma and Margaret Korosi Stamford Family Archive

Image 4.1—“Sam Cooke in Studio” (c. 1950’s-1960’s)
A silverprint of Sam Cooke sitting in the studio, unknown photographer

Image 4.2—Untitled. (1889)
A gelatin silver print selected from the Kodak No. 1 Grand Tour collection

Image 4.3—“The Fort, Delhi Gate, Agra. 1219” (19th c.)
Albumen print #1219 by Samuel Bourne

Image 4.4—“Interieur de la Mosquee Ahmed” (c. 1870)
Albumen print #289 by Sebah & Joaillier, Turkey

Image 4.5—Untitled. (c. 1880’s)
A hand colored tintype, unknown subject and unknown photographer

Image 5.1—Untitled. (July 8, 1962)
A silverprint contact sheet of Roland Kirk at Newport Jazz by photographer Joe Alper, Newport, Rhode Island

Image 5.1b—Reverse side of Image 5.1 of Roland Kirk

Image 5.2—“Jimmy Dorsey and Band” (April 20, 1942)
A retouched silverprint of Jimmy Dorsey and band by photographer Eugene R. Richee

Image Set 5.3—Untitled. (1904-1905)
Six silverprints from the New Haven Power & Light Company (New Haven, Connecticut) archives dated (from left to right, top to bottom): March 1, 1904; April 1, 1904; June 1, 1904; August 1, 1904; September 1, 1904; and January 1, 1905.

Image 5.4—Untitled. (1906)
A silverprint from the New Haven Power & Light Company (New Haven, Connecticut) with the inscription: “50 Light meter Exploded during gassing from lighting small nozzle on outlet. New Haven 1906.”
Bibliography


