

Article

Photography without Pictures

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Abstract: Magic, as an emanation of past presence in a picture, emerges as a theme in postmodern theories of photography. It is linked to various forms of actual and symbolic absence; an absence which creates a space that keeps us looking, ostensibly for something that is lost. Photography may not always have been digital, but it has always been magical. *Photography Without Pictures* explores the critical dialogue and disciplinary uncertainty around the terminology of an expanded photographic that derived from debates surrounding the proliferation of digital media and the previous, ontological question of the nature of photography as a technology and a pictorial medium. It is prompted by Andrew Dewdney's conviction that in order to deal with the contemporary condition of the networked screen image, we need to "*Forget Photography*" (2021). Dewdney considers the paradox that while photography is now ubiquitous, it is also peculiarly and magically undead, a simulation at the behest of mutable electronic data. The article examines three instances of critical response to contemporary photography, including the interpretation and response to several photographic artworks and one simulated photograph, to distinguish characteristics of pictoriality, authorship and temporality in photographic pictures. In asking what it means to be a real photographer, we discover that the singular observer/artist has become a crowd in respect of the image sharing culture of post-internet art. Throughout his polemical argument to *Forget Photography*, Dewdney prefers to use the term image and imagery to refer to both the photographic and the networked image. The terms picture and image tend to be interchangeable in language and inhabit each other in practice, yet there are historical differences and continuities that make the distinction remarkable in considering questions of ontology and media continuity. Pictorial, temporal and illusory 'magic' are the themes through which these photographic uncertainties unfold.

Keywords: magic; temporality; picture/image; expanded photographic; disciplinary uncertainty; social-symbolic; ontological inversion; networked screen image



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1. Carrots, Lemons and Photographs

"The question 'Where Is The Photograph?' presupposes that we have lost sight of photography or that photography is somehow lost; that it has lost a direction perhaps or that we do not find it where it should be; that it has been misplaced; that it remains somewhere, unclaimed, in some lost property office of culture." (Richon 2003, p. 71)

In his paper "*Thinking Things*", (Richon 2003) Olivier Richon's contribution and response to the question of the whereabouts of the photograph, begins with the provocation of photography as a lost object. His paper begins rather unpredictably by suggesting that photography may have gotten lost when the noun of the photograph turned into the adjective of the photographic. This is somewhat in accordance with Pavel Buchler's observation that as an exemplar of the species a singular photograph might be an abstraction, a manner of talking about photography, of problematising it, rather than something which can be located as a point of origin within the "photographic" (Green 2003, p. 81). Richon thinks at first about the use of the term photographic in the writing of the critic Craig Owens, who links it to reproduction and the loss of the notion of an origin or originality, firstly through reference to the discourse of postmodernism in the art world, and then latterly in relation to

literature and Roland Barthes' celebrated declaration of "*The Death of the Author*" (Barthes 1977, p. 142). The author's erasure—Richon prefers the idea of absence to the finality of death—gives a certain priority to what Barthes says is the destination of a work, the place of a reader who is no more a person than the author just removed, rather just "someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes 1977, p. 148). In "*Thinking Things*" this authorial absence is of a piece with an aesthetic of literary realism "critical reflection upon the photographic image owes much to literature and cinema. . . and relatively less to art history and theory" (Richon 2003, p. 72), where an excess of descriptive detail that is supplementary to the unfolding of the narrative constitutes a certain reality effect which, Richon reminds us, is aligned with the writing of history as an accumulation of facts.

Richon is not advocating to equate objects in a photograph with their descriptions in words, or to treat an image primarily as a kind of literary text, but he raises the question of text as a useful metonym that arises as a consequence of understanding the iconic and indexical nature of the photograph as some sort of descriptive record of a real that existed prior to the photograph. That the reader of a photograph can grasp it not as a copy of reality, but as an emanation of a past reality, is perhaps the most renowned of the qualities of photography and why Barthes could refer to photography as a "Magic" and not an "Art" (Barthes 1977, p. 88). Magic here refers to an idea of the imprinting of time itself into the photograph. A photograph is neither lost nor reduced in relation to language, although the relation between the two is figured through various kinds of absence. On the part of the photographic picture, an absence that maintains something of the opacity of the ordinary object in a photograph is complicit in the relation of seeing to being seen. In the well-known psychoanalytic concept of the mirror stage, one learns to look through being seen by another. There is therefore a kind of partiality to human seeing, as our gaze or look never quite belongs to us; we need to be seen in order to see. The question that Richon asks here is why it is that we are fascinated in particular by "things", objects which paradoxically don't see us. He discusses Jean Baudrillard's account of photographing objects which embody a gaze that looks at us but does not see us. Baudrillard, also a photographer and a writer, recounts that in the photographic act it is the photographer who must become like an object; "To hold one's breath to create a void in time and in the body" (Richon 2003, p. 76). In this respect the subject/photographer is, if not entirely absent, certainly somewhat subdued and "the magic of photography is that it is the object that does all the work" (Richon 2003, p. 76).

In terms of an explication for what seems like an unfamiliar state of affairs we are referred to the psychoanalyst Darien Leader's account of the theft from the Louvre in Paris in 1911 of (probably) the most famous painting in the world, Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (Leader 2002). When the picture disappeared, people flocked to the gallery to gaze at the empty space, many of whom had never seen the actual painting in the museum. Leader refers to the missing picture as an object which becomes the placeholder of a love story that tells of an unspoken and enigmatic promise, a symbol whose actual apprehension would only lead to disappointment. His account of the theft is also a theory of creativity in respect of the work of art, the art of thievery, and in this instance the performance of spectatorship in the space/place that society designates for the recognition of Art. Leader spends some time talking about the conventions of pictorial representation, the mathematical mapping of space by light and why an eye that does not see us is threatening as it evicts the seeing subject from the space of vision. What Richon is interested in here is what Leader would say was the "action of a symbolic system to organise visual reality" (Leader 2002, p. 110) and the propensity for symbolism as a form of thinking with images; behind the image there lurks not reality, but another image.

It is here that we find or return to cohabiting accounts of the dark room of the Camera Obscura. The visual representation of the mapping of space by light that flows from the object to the observer in the camera is also an account of a subject. The technology of the Camera Obscura becomes a model of and for the mind, like a dark cupboard to store

images, “So we see not objects but pictures of objects; humans are picture capturing devices” (Leader 2002, p. 21). This is what Jonathan Crary would describe as one of the “techniques” of an observer, where a rational and interiorised observer inside the dark room of the camera produces knowledge of the world according to a detached and contemplative act of vision (Crary 1990). In contrast, Richon refers us to the interiority of the Camera Obscura as a site of reversals; the darkness is the darkness of the grotto, and objects become commodities “where things stand on their heads and form an upside down image, an image which occludes and yet maintains our relation to things” (Richon 2003, p. 75). “Far from being picture capturing devices, humans are perpetually being caught by pictures” (Leader 2002, p. 25). Prompted by the proliferation of electronic, increasingly photographic and digital forms of reproduction, WJT Mitchell identified a “pictorial turn” (Mitchell 1994) in cultural theory to neutralise a perceived hierarchy between pictures and language, and in order to recognise the complexity of visual experience: “spectatorship. . . may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (Mitchell 1994, p. 16).” Mitchell subsequently attributes intentions to pictures by asking “*What Do Pictures Want?*” Specifically, what do they want from us and in return, what is it that we want from pictures (Mitchell 2005, p. 26)? As maps of human desire, pictures like the Mona Lisa, pictures like ourselves, want to be looked at.

“*Thinking Things*” is accompanied by a monochrome reproduction of Olivier Richon’s (Richon 2002) photograph of an ordinary carrot, figured and transformed by an aesthetic borrowed not only from literature but also from the genre of still-life painting. As a viewer I remember seeing on another occasion the original photograph. There is a touch of blue in the muted background but the vivid, rude orange of the carrot and its reflection in the surface upon which it sits, dominates. Somehow the monochrome version in the publication works to emphasise Richon’s description of the darkness of the camera obscura as a grotto. The carrot which because of its ordinariness has also become extra-ordinary by virtue of being pictured in such a way, functions in excess of a common carrot. . . and as Olivier Richon says, its form is not wholly innocent. I am wondering what it is that I am seeing here. This picture is a photograph, and is it Art we see or simply a Carrot? Or perhaps it is a Lemon, which seems at first to be an absurd thought. In Richon’s pictorial allusion to Still-Life I think of the art historian Svetlana Alpers writing on 17th Century Dutch painting which she describes in relation to its apparent realism as proto-photographic (Alpers 1983). In and through the description of objects in paint the Dutch tradition aimed to depict a world that existed prior to the subject, knowledge of which was given through an embodied act of vision that was nonetheless analogous with the ‘natural magic’ of pictures formed in the Camera Obscura. Chief amongst the often opulent commodities represented in the still life was the humble lemon. This fruit often appeared with the skin partially peeled in such a manner that traces of the oval circularity of the form of the whole fruit could still be discerned through its descriptive, pictorial presentation. The strip-tease of the represented lemon reveals an interior architecture of gossamer thin transparent and fragile membranes that hold the liquid. It is such a surprise, this material transformation both in paint and in nature, from the dense coarseness of the skin on the outside of the fruit. The simultaneity of inside and outside surfaces in the picture seem to propose, work, as a revelation of the essence of the object that is a lemon, and betokens something of the trust in representation that was a feature of what Alpers calls a Northern mode of picturing.

But we were talking about Carrots, and I realise that the Carrot/Lemon I am looking for belongs in Hollis Frampton’s short seven minute film “*Lemon*” (Frampton 1969). Nothing ‘happens’ in Frampton’s film that might define or indeed explain a Lemon in the temporality of film as opposed to the stasis of the Dutch still-life. The outline of the Lemon slowly emerges from and is swallowed by darkness, as a light moves slowly around it. It is an evocation of the emergence of an image in a Camera Obscura. What links these two photographic works—the Carrot and the Lemon—is for me less their formal similarities as singular objects surrounded by light and darkness. It is that Frampton’s film solicits a particular look that perpetuates a rather anxious desire to keep on looking, and even as I

realise nothing much may occur my look is captured somewhere between boredom and fascination. I cannot look away, and the shape of the lemon begins to transform into—a breast? Richon explains this appetite to keep on looking as an oral aspect of the gaze, and he comments that the dark room of the Camera Obscura is also a dining room (Leader 2002, p. 146). Darien Leader suggests that that this is the reason that some people spend their lives watching television. The continuity of the image screens or covers up the fact that at some point feeding has to stop. Richon tells us that encountering the reality behind an image is ultimately disappointing, that we need to keep on looking to enable imagination to engage with the symbolic apprehension of things.

2. Performing Photography

David Green and Joanna Lowry's conference and publication "*Where Is The Photograph?*" (Green 2003) proposed the question of where in order to displace the prevalence of debate around the what is of photography in the event of digital technologies and the migration of the photograph into an expanded photographic. In the words of Pavel Buchler, one of the contributors, the question of the whereabouts of the photograph in the critical distance of an expanded photographic field creates a "*Delirium of Doubt*" (Green 2003, p. 81). Green and Lowry, like Richon, locate the photographic picture somewhere between vision and language. In their discussion, what draws reality into a photograph is the way in which the photograph as an indexical sign works through the act or performance of photographing to designate an event. They approach the subject of signification, language and the visual through linguistics; in particular the way in which the indexical sign as a form of what linguists call Deixis works in relation to both language and photography. The concept of the photograph as primarily a temporal index of an event as a past that happened and is paradoxically present at the time of viewing—Barthes magical emanation of the past—has for Green and Lowry overdetermined the conception of photography in terms of mourning, memory and death. In "*From Presence to the Performative*" (Green 2003, p. 47) they establish an understanding of the photographic index based on Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of an indexical sign that has less to do with its causal origin, the photograph as light writing, than its function as a performative act of designation "that pointed to the event of its own inscription" (Green 2003, p. 48). As a form of designation, it is the act of photographing which "draws reality into the image field" (Green 2003, p. 48) and establishes the context of an event. This is a way of exploring the temporality of photography as a kind of 'presentness' that Green and Lowry describe as a conjunction of 'this-was-now-here' rather than a paradox of a past that is now 'present' as such. In his essay in the same volume, Peter Osborne concludes that any fixed temporal singularity of the photograph is phantasmatic, as the 'now' of the photograph is constantly shifting in relation to the 'then.' The material continuity of photographic form, from the still photograph through film and video to the digital image, what Osborne calls its "spatial boundedness", gives us "the idea that time itself might become an object" (Osborne 2003, p. 70).

The indexical as a form of designation is explored by Green and Lowry in relation to the point at which photography became Art (with a capital A) through the ironic use of vernacular photography in the work of the conceptual artists. Artists who identified with this aegis developed strategic and ironic tautologies of saying and showing that allowed the perception of the actualities embodied in the photographic image, as well as the physical processes involved in its execution, to be both the subject and object of art. In his "*Trouser-Word Piece*" of 1972–89 the artist Keith Arnatt uses the speech act theory of the ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin to explore how 'words make us do things': Here, the use of performative language seems to disadvantageously coincide with the conventional idea of photography as an imprint of the real. The "*Trouser-Word Piece*", is a quote from the philosopher John Austin, accompanied by a black and white photograph of the artist Keith Arnatt wearing a sandwich-board which announces in thick black letters "I Am A Real Artist". Upon looking at the photograph one doubts that he could be the real thing at all. In this piece Arnatt portrays self as artist as comic figure where the response of laughter

is employed to close the trap around an error of categorisation, the assumption that one knows what an Artist is in the same way that one knows about Art, through some aspect of surface appearance. The text by Austin points out that the word 'real' has a curious property in that the definitive sense in which something is 'real' is peculiarly defined by the specific way that it might be considered to be 'not-real' and that somehow the 'not-real' becomes the defining principle. The 'not-real' in Austin's phraseology 'wears the trousers'. It is not perchance that Arnatt's work is photographic, and the fact of the real black and white photograph is also a pun on a general belief that photography bears testimony to the real, raises concerns of a quite different order refracted through the deliberately informal appearance of the artist. This is the point of the joke. It is an admonition not to misplace our sense of the real onto a too-casual acquaintance with words and images, especially when the latter join forces. What wears the trousers in terms of Arnatt's artwork, are the putative facts of the photograph. Arnatt's practice keeps the question of what a real photograph/a photograph of the real is in abeyance, usually through the presence of wit and the habit of understatement. Meanwhile, we could also ask, in more contemporary terms, what it means to be a real photographer.

The critical practice of conceptual art considered the documentary function of the photograph to be premised on various forms of authentication required in order to generate belief in the veracity of the events described in the image. That it is indeed necessary to generate belief conceals certain persuasions in play in our assumption of the real, and opens up a question of the somewhat 'magical' nature of photographic representation. The authority of the Artist (with a capital A) as an author, witness, or originator of a work invites scrutiny. In Michael Foucault's notion of an author-function, he distinguishes between the biological individual and a position in the social-symbolic from where one speaks. An author, unlike a biological individual, is not fixed by any one set of co-ordinates; neither a matter of choice nor predestination, but something of what Foucault would determine as a function of a discursive formation. The ability of an author to 'authorise' depends on the complex practices of particular discourses and varies enormously on whether discourses are scientific, artistic, or literary (Foucault 1969, p. 113). Green and Lowry make some further observations about how artistic practice authorises representation and the real through their discussion of the diaristic practices of artists such as Nan Goldin, Jurgen Teller and Corinne Day. This is where a vernacular photographic anti-aesthetic, applied to the portrayal of sub-cultural lifestyles works counter-intuitively to Arnatt's irony precisely by staking a claim to a subjective real, that was an important photographic realisation in terms of the representation of politically marginalised identities. "Thus these forms of photographic practice. . .do not so much represent the world as declare it to exist" (Green 2003, p. 59).

3. Is Photography Magic?

"Of course, linking photography and magic is not an original idea in photographic history. The middle ground between photography and magic has been staked out since the camera obscura captured the three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional image inside a box." Anna-Kaisia Rastenberger. (Spenuso 2016, p. 8)

Charlotte Cotton's publication "*Photography Is Magic*" (Cotton 2015) would appear to be the apotheosis of an expanded digital photographic. This is not spectacular magic but the close-up table-top magic of misdirection; we are aware of the probability of trickery, of sleight-of-hand, but the intention here was to create a space within the viewer's imagination for magic to happen. Cotton continues a theme of magic ontology that unabashedly aligns magic with entertainment, commodity culture and the pleasures of illusion in photography; she also seems responsive to the postmodern revision of the role of the author/reader of a work. Photographic uncertainty and undecidability appear as a form of appeasement, to entice and entertain rather than to question or be questioning. The temporal effect of presentness in the photography is protean and omni-present, and there is an unwavering

confidence in the efficacy and identity of both the Art and the Artists (no need for Arnatt's sandwich-board here).

This is a project whose outcome is a book and as such it is stating the obvious to say that all of the works reproduced are reproduced photographically; photographs of pictures, photographic pictures, prints, two or three dimensional photographic objects, three dimensional installations, or most commonly mixtures of any and all of the preceding, of the work of almost eighty artists. The work is reproduced in colour and is presented one image to a page across 327 pages with the occasional double page spread. There are no immediately discernible artists projects in *Photography Is Magic* because of the way in which brief statements or comments from the artists are condensed and separated from the represented works and collated at the rear of the book. The re-photography is sometimes confusing even if its unacknowledged function is primarily illustrative. Different artworks achieve on occasion the magical effect of animating figures and marks by collapsing different spatial dimensions together. In "*How Photography Complicates The Picture*" Barbara Savedoff (2000) proposes a theory of transformation and ambiguity in still photography, as distinct from film and painting. She considers the mainly black & white analog 'classic' street photography of the likes of Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans and their use of real figures in the street superimposed with representations often on advertisement hoardings in the same space. The priority of 'real space' animates the representation and both the two dimensional and three dimensional 'real' figures look as if they belong to the same order of reality. Savedoff also talks about our tendency to anthropomorphise objects selected for our attention by the photograph. Magic happens because of our belief or conviction in attributing some aspect of objectivity to the image with respect to the way photographs are typically made. This form of spatial magic is related to the close-up table top magic of misdirection we see in the tricks with surface and space in *Photography Is Magic*, although here there is no objective reality to believe in. The 'real' is denaturalised, and whilst the pictorial surface is deconstructed and reconstructed in a riot of collage and variable materiality the conceit of the pictorial form remains as a basis for magic, even if software has liberated the photograph "from simulating the perspective of monocular human vision" (Cotton 2015, p. 8).

Cotton writes about black and white analog photography appearing metaphorically, or perhaps anthropomorphically, as an 'ideogram'; a magician in top hat and tails, as "an enactment of a uniform for creating an illusion" (Cotton 2015, p. 10). It is a brilliant description, and one that may owe something to Simon During's depiction of the craftsman-magician-author Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin (1805–1871) who dressed as a bourgeoisie gentleman and was known to have systematised misdirection "he presented feats of dexterity as relying on scientific principles" (During 2002, p. 119). In Cotton's *Photography Is Magic* it is the performative act of curation which authorises the magical photographic tricks. In the author's written text we identify the concerns of the practice, the dematerialisation of the indexical sign as the trace of the real across fractured surfaces and depths, playing in a media environment where commerce, culture and art are indistinguishable; here reality is based upon the magic of the commodity-form. Savedoff predicted that with the adoption of digital technology photography would move closer to the condition of painting. In this publication photography has moved closer to the condition of both sculpture and painting; in Cotton's non-hierarchical and non-disciplinary present the very idea of distinct disciplines of art—painting, sculpture, print and photography as such, are now defunct (Cotton 2015, p. 12).

As a reader, that is one who holds together at a single point all of the traces of the text, I realise that I am slightly bedazzled. This is identified as Post-Internet Art and as such it is often indistinguishable from the systems which enable and generate it. In this environment Photoshop is a medium, a camera is not an essential requirement and knowledge of photographic technologies are shared between artists and viewers. The curator has anticipated my role as observer and as co-participant with the work: because in this media environment "conventional distinctions between artists and amateurs, producers

and consumers of photographic images and objects have become unclear in interesting ways" (Cotton 2015, p. 9). The institutional mandate of the fine-art photographer to subvert commercial practice and produce what Cotton calls final objects, is no longer operative, having been replaced by versioning and iteration (Cotton 2015, p. 7). This seems to be an oblique reference to the detriment of the academic formalities of the university art department. The equivalence between viewers/observers and artists is significant because of the "active choices" (Cotton 2015, p. 8) made by the artists, that a viewer can recognise "through the dynamic behaviour of photographic culture at large" (Cotton 2015, p. 10). I am not quite sure that I am up to the job.

In 2016 Lebenswelt published a discussion of Cotton's *Photography Is Magic*, edited by Chiara Spenuso, with four critical interlocutors. Oscar Meo discusses Cotton's close-up intimate magic in terms of a confusion of perception where imagination works for the viewer semantically in the creation and interpretation of signs and symbols. The viewer here is seen to engage willingly in a game where it is true art to conceal art. Meo seems unsure whether Cotton's argument amounts to a strong argument for 'Magic' as such, or rather that she is describing a photographic meta-language, photography speaking rather cleverly about photography to those in-the-know. Anna-Kaiser Rastenberger takes us back to the pictorial magic of the Camera Obscura, and she considers the question of the viewer in terms of Cotton's conception of the relationship between the photographic artist and everyday photographers. She links this to an idea of the artist as prosumer, essentially linked to a market economy, producing content that is geared towards an image-sharing audience. "Commercial organisations and their commercial interests have always had a strong influence on photography" (Arnatt 1972, p. 11). However she is concerned about the absence of attention to social and environmental questions posed by the intrusion and incorporation of photographic visual technologies in all kinds of human activities. In relation to the emphasis on prosumers she asks whether the layout of the book is related to browsing through a stream of images on a screen, and the implications of this for the future exhibition of artwork, where the screen might replace the physical experience of a work in space. Rastenberger wonders if photography is the same thing or object when it is seen on screen, on paper, as a reproduction, or in an exhibition.

Denis Curti follows on with comments which relate to Rastenberger's speculative concerns. He is certain that Cotton is not talking about photography at all but about 'mere images'. Photography for Curti happens on paper through chemistry and the magic is the wonder about its relationship with the real. He is curious that if the art in the work is located in the viewer's imagination, their fantasy, then this leaves the artistic act somewhat in the background—then what is the role of the critic? There are no immediately discernible artist's projects in *Photography Is Magic* because of the way in which brief statements or comments from the artists are condensed and separated from the represented works and collated at the rear of the book. It is interesting that, from different perspectives, Curti and Rastenberger's comments indicate the way in which what Rastenberger calls pictoriality features amongst the proclaimed immateriality of the objects and the images. Reality is reconfigured by digital technologies, but in the onscreen platforms and communities "pictoriality permeates various forms of art and even retroactively influences analogue technologies" (Burbridge et al. 2016, p. 13). This echoes something pointed out by Savedoff in relation to art, although it applies more broadly. That which gets photographed, by virtue of both the activity and reproduction, is that which gets seen: that is, in some capacity, pictured.

Ben Burbridge takes a different approach to Cotton's project in that he considers the critical absences that it has been found guilty of in commentaries and reviews, and asks what it means to turn absences into potential positives. He makes an interesting case for formally innovative ways in which *Photography Is Magic* could be considered beyond appeals to the viewers imagination, in which footnotes, artist's statements and the curator's essay can be read across their locations in the book in different registers as various kinds of authorship that refuse to conform to the often hierarchical conventions of explanation and intention that privileges text over image. The critical task is perhaps to read creatively

between the text and its footnotes, or the unanchored drift of artist's commentaries in relation to their works. Burbridge thinks about this project in terms of performative critical enquiry and alternative knowledge production, whereas Curti's comments indicate that he presumes the critic's task to be in a more direct engagement with and in relation to the artist's projects and statements. In a 2015 review of Cotton's project Daniel Blight criticises Cotton's view of photographic magic as limited by not attending to the history of magic, particularly in relation to early 20th Century spiritualist photography. Here the agency behind the photograph was attributed not to a photographer but to the manifestation of ghostly intelligence, now reframed by what Blight calls photography's "digital spirit". In Blight's view photography's magic lies not in art, but as the free flow of information within network culture "preferably without an image" (Blight 2015). This is provocative commentary, but it does highlight Cotton's clearly articulated preference towards modernist art history, her anachronistic figuration of the photographer within photographic history as the embodiment of craftsmanship (Cotton 2015, p. 11). Burbridge's expectation of the potential to be able to discern a critique of late-capitalist distraction seems a touch optimistic in relation to the commodity-magic that characterises the photographic in *Photography Is Magic*. Conversely, in relation to the objectives of the curatorial practice, his defence of her project as a positive challenge to the activity of criticism seems appropriate given the discourse it has subsequently provoked. As Burbridge might have it, in terms of close-up magic, appearances can be deceptive.

4. Black Magic in Shades of Yellow, Orange and Green

Pages 26–27: "Still Life and Fruits with Taker, 2014, C-print, Charlie White" (White 2014). It's a double page spread and the only image, although I would prefer to call it a picture, made by this artist that appears in *Photography Is Magic* (Cotton 2015). It can be formally described as a still-life as the objects are laid out as a display: Papaya, oranges, pineapple, lemons, grapefruit, honeydew and watermelon, both whole and cut into sections to show the difference between the insides and outsides as in the Dutch tradition. There is some greenery for contrast with the yellow–reds in the form of grapes and lettuce and avocado pear, and a few hot orange chillies in the bottom right-hand corner. Everything is tasteful. The lighting is flat, even and balanced with few shadows. On one raised plinth there is a partially peeled blood orange, the skin dangling like that of a lemon in a traditional still-life painting. The dark red juice stains the skin, with some segments of lemon placed adjacently to show perhaps that the author of the picture is aware of his quotation. This dark orange is the darkest shade in the composition, balanced on the other side by another blood orange that has been sliced through its diameter. All of the surfaces and the supports that elevate and hold the fruit at various levels to present them to the eyes of an observer are covered in pristine graph paper, pin sharp in the foreground but slightly blurred in the background, which perhaps signifies depth of field and the presence of a camera? At the top left, an arm intrudes horizontally into the scene holding a slice of red-pink watermelon equidistant between the two blood oranges, and on the left vertical edge a hand can be seen holding wedges of cut orange and papaya. Is the "taker" taking from the picture or placing the fruit into the composition? Indeed, is this partially represented body even "the taker" because the taker could also refer to "taking" this picture, to a photographer, or even a camera? The "taker" has an implied and shared presence on both sides of the picture, and as such there is some allusion here to what Svetlana Alpers identifies as two classic and irreconcilable concepts of pictorial representation that she outlines and illustrates in her comments on the ambiguities in Velasquez' painting *Las Meninas*—on the one hand a world that is commanded by the gaze of the artist/viewer and on the other, what she calls the Northern concept of representation, that assumes a world that exists prior to the picture, like the image in a camera obscura (Alpers 1983, p. 70). There is also something of Richon's idea of the dark room as a dining room in White's photograph: I can interpret it in one sense in terms of "the taker" eating, and eating up the world, which could also be interpreted as the taker making, and making up the world. In relation to the taker(s)

of the photograph, Charlie White comments that in terms of contemporary media it is not that everyone is a photographer but that even fewer people are. The 'taker' is not so much ambivalently present as a witness to the world, or as one who commands its appearance through their gaze, but ambivalently absent as, in what Cotton describes as the condition of Post-Internet Art, the singular subject becomes subjectively dispersed, as if through a crowd. White also comments that because of this, photography as an art is 'all the more in question' and that photography must go outside "this ever-widening mainstream production and consumption" (Cotton 2015, p. 373).

5. Forgetting Photography

Andrew Dewdney's book *Forget Photography* (2021) is an unremitting critique of a terminological photographic which would maintain an ontological continuity between photography and the digital image. Dewdney argues that the digital photograph does not relate to the analog medium in any strictly ontological sense, and he has an issue with various post-photographic arguments that claim photography was in its conception "always already digital" (Dewdney 2021, p. 147). The evidence is given via John May's 2019 publication *Signal, Image, Architecture* (Dewdney 2021, p. 87). In short; the digital image is related to electrical engineering, bolometry (a measure of the energy of photons), and physiological optics. The speed of computing means that a signal as the measurement of light photons, can provide simultaneous, multiple projections and versions of a temporally dynamic image. The pixels of the digital image index the transformation of light into electronic data amenable to mathematisation, which can be realised in different forms; sound, image, mathematical code. When realised as a photograph, the image can be untraceably altered through computation, pixel by pixel. In this respect the digital photograph is ontologically incompatible with the material trace of the "writing of light" embedded in (for instance) more traditional celluloid film. John May discusses the light of the image as itself an abstraction, a partial selection of humanly visible wavelengths of light. It is light that is neither natural nor cultural but hybrid; "The image stands at the junction of light which comes from the object and another which comes from the gaze" (Dewdney 2021, p. 146). In this way the image is "a product of the scientific and cultural imagination" (Dewdney 2021, p. 147). Dewdney is interested in establishing the networked image as a screen image, rather than an image (or picture) on a screen. It is a continuous actualisation of data in terms of algorithmic computer processing realised visually as a photographic simulation. The temporality of this image, as a screen image, is no longer that of the past present or this was here now of the material photograph, but is "the moment of network access" in the context of accelerated technological convergence (Dewdney 2021, p. 162).

The networked image is neither a photograph as light writing nor a digital image, but is experienced in terms of both. This prolongs what Dewdney refers to, in more magical terminology, as photography's "Zombie" condition. *Forget Photography* is proposed as a more-than-hypothetical agenda to forget photography in order to remember, to memorialise and to recognise its contemporary presence as an afterlife. There is a thorough critique here of the complicity between capitalism, photography, representation and inequality, and the author makes no excuses for what he sees as the trope of death in the photograph and the "reality of mortality" (Dewdney 2021, p. 39). Remembering photography is also a way to forgive photography, to acknowledge its complicity in imperialist processes of colonialism, racism, the othering of representation. This kind of 'forgetting to remember' photography involves what Andrew Dewdney calls re-writing the history of photography from the point of view of the future to disaggregate the linear histories and expansive post-photographic continuities of the medium; a history or reflection that can only have form when photography's obsolescence is acknowledged.

Throughout the book both the photographic and the data image are referred to in terms of either an image or imagery. The author acknowledges the concept of the networked image to be provisional, a placeholder that seems to vacillate between absence and simulation for a form still unfolding. The emphasis on the term image seems also to

be a strategy to displace the predominance of thinking photography in terms of pictures. The question of what an image is—between language, vision, epistemology—is discussed in WJT Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Mitchell 1986). An image is a trick of consciousness, to see something that is there and not there at the same time. Human consciousness, or mind itself, is understood as “an activity of pictorial production”, replete with optical mechanisms as metaphors (Mitchell 1986, p. 17). An image flickers between emergence and stasis in material representation, embodied thought, imagination. Dewdney references Mitchell (2005) in stating that the image is something that can transcend/traverse particular media, and this is perhaps at the root of his insistence on using the term *imagery*, allied with the characteristics of the networked screen image whose mutability potentially defies the spacial boundedness characteristic of the photographic picture that would make an “object of time” as described by Osbourne above. In this view both the photograph and the photographic image it contains constitute the image of photography; this is the picture/image that Dewdney would like to consign to history (Dewdney 2021, p. 10). In terms of practice, and the continuity of pictoriality as a default social convention, the picture/image relation is one that never seems to settle, as each term continues to inhabit the other.

In what he calls *The Tyranny of the Picture*, WJT Mitchell (Mitchell 1986, p. 37) discusses the systemisation of artificial perspective by Alberti in 1435, which subsequently becomes an objective representation of “the way things really are.” These pictures have an identity with natural vision by way of an analogy with the eye, which the camera, which is built to reproduce artificial perspective, reinforces. “What is natural is, evidently, what we can build a machine to do for us” (Mitchell 1986, p. 37). In his discussion of Marx's use of the inverted metaphor of the *Camera Obscura* to describe ideology (where things stand on their heads and form an upside down image, a description that Richon, above, paraphrases) Mitchell considers the criticism that Marx was undermining his own conception of the formation of ideas through perception and imagination; the “concrete concept” in the “concrete image” (Mitchell 1986, p. 169). Mitchell's solution is to thoroughly historicise Marx's likely understanding of the *Camera Obscura*. In 1840, the *Camera Obscura* was equally known in its capacity as a *Magic Lantern*, a machine to produce optical illusions. Mitchell deals with this discrepancy, both in Marx and in general, by turning around the idea of natural vision; what if Marx thought of the eye as modelled on a machine? In this analogy, vision shifts from being understood as natural to becoming historicised as a “mechanism subject to historical change” (Mitchell 1986, p. 175). Mitchell identifies the struggles of idolatry and iconoclasm in the event of pictures which seem natural and immediate, in the face of ideas as concepts based in language in various attempts to establish a hierarchy of knowledge between the image and the word. It is a nature/culture opposition that is (in brief) evident in the semiotics of photography theory. The solution in part is to understand the text-image relation as social and historical, in all its complexities and to move beyond “this craving . . . for unity, analogy, harmony and universality. . .” (Mitchell 1986, p. 157).

A hybrid subject as part-machine can be seen to emerge in Mitchell's explication of Marx's use of the metaphor of the *Camera Obscura* that might anticipate the emergence of the ‘post-human’ particularly in media archeology. An interesting post-human example in *Forget Photography* is an illustration in the form of what appears to be a black and white photographic portrait of the virtual influencer Lil Miquela Sousa, ostensibly a 19-year-old Brazilian-American woman who is a simulation (Dewdney 2021, p. 143). As an ostensible black and white still photograph, this picture reverses Keith Arnatt's self-portrait in his ‘*Trouser Word Piece*’; it draws on descriptions of the not-real whilst staging the prospect of Lil Miquela's material actuality in photographic terms (Sousa 2016). The fetishistic magic of the commodity-image is present in the simulated photograph. Dewdney remarks that it is an aesthetic of photography as a contemporary image of fashion. In terms of the internet she is an idol appealing to a photographically literate audience, where the distinctions between artists and amateurs, producers and consumers of the image are unclear; an

audience that Cotton recognises in her Magic project. Lil Miquela's full colour animated you-tube channel is less photographic, more cartoonish at the level of imagery; but here she solicits an interactive performative engagement with her viewers via a screen image which persistently declares her non-human subjectivity as a robot and on this understanding asks for advice from more conventionally embodied interlocutors (Sousa n.d.). However uncanny in appearance, by comparison and in retrospect the still photograph begins to appear, if not nostalgic, then certainly charmingly old-fashioned. This could also be an example of what Peter Osbourne would call ontological inversion through digital re-mixing (Osbourne 2003, p. 70). This is where the relations between what was previously a dominant media form, photography, which determined our understanding of a new media manifestation, becomes reversed in practice so that the newer media retroactively transforms our understanding of the photography that preceded it. For Osbourne, this transformation is something that can only take place through practice rather than in theory. In his terms, the still photographic image, which serves as metonymic model for the whole of photography, is essentially imaginary or what he calls "mythic" (Osbourne 2003, p. 76).

At the centre of Andrew Dewdney's argument is a first-hand account of the fate of photography, in Britain at least, as Art. The moment the medium became accepted into galleries and museums as a singular and authentic object of value over and against its reproductive capabilities was the same moment when it became obsolete as a medium and where it now functions, at best, as a harbinger of the heritage industry. The problem of photography in the museum is both in relation to temporality and the occluded photographic mediation of archival objects represented increasingly via the internet and on screen. The time of the contemporary is a term that is described as the coming together of all times as a "paradoxical present"; a present in which our experience is shaped by the global and concurrent times of the internet in which possible futures are uncertain and destabilised, in "an unnamed space of viewing and being viewed, which challenges the foundational claim of the modernist subject" (Dewdney 2021, p. 106). Photography's obsolescence is that it at once illustrates historical time and paradoxically appears as a contemporary medium; it is visible as a historical object but invisible in its role as mediating other objects. The paradox is particularly illustrated by the collaboration between heritage and the Google Arts Institute which provides leading museums around the world with the technology to digitise their collections; it is a global enterprise to make heritage available online. Dewdney tells us that in 2012 the platforms contained 34,000 artworks from 151 museums in 40 countries (Dewdney 2021, p. 132). Museums are reliant on technology to make their collections accessible; but they cannot control what it means to view heritage, transformed and shared in the unnamed spaces of screens.

In conclusion Dewdney describes the image as a hybrid, socio-technical assemblage, now conceived as a quasi object (a description that comes from Bruno Latour) to designate a state of co-mingled natural/cultural entanglement. "The image thought of as a hybrid is a temporary object that a network assembles and makes visible" (Dewdney 2021, p. 196). The way in which the picture stands outside that which it represents might no longer be adequate to the way we experience the image in the social world; or capable of describing the social networks of surveillance, security and control that operate on behalf of and beyond the observer/subject. It seems that the museum is a place where the photographic picture goes to die, whilst its simulation continues as the visible, fashionable face of the data image.

The problem facing research and practice in the University, for what is described here as the new condition of the image, is that between diverse disciplines such as computer science and media scholarship "what is taken as seeing and reality is based upon a representational image" (Dewdney 2021, p. 197). It is not just a division of disciplines between science and the humanities, but a recognition of how difficult this task might be in the light of the commodification and privatisation of knowledge and the organisation of research in the academy. There is an agenda here to think about research outside of the sequestered interests of the academy, to revive the idea of the public intellectual. At the very least the

need for—not just collaboration—universities acquiesce to various collaborative initiatives, but as Dewdney states research between disparate disciplines needs to happen in the same “room”, which given the hierarchies that exist between categories of knowledge and the auditing of research in the University is rarely the case. Dewdney explains that he didn’t intend to write into academia as such, and that he wished to produce a book that was aimed at a more general public(s). An example of such a book might be Nicholas Mirzoeff’s (2015) *How To See The World*. Mirzoeff harnesses neuroscience to replace the analogy of the eye as a lens with the brain as a computer, and vision as a ‘commons’ that visual culture seeks to explore and explain. Pixels, whether words, images, sounds or video translate into Actions, whether direct, performed, converse or material, which translate back into Pixels, and so on. The world is increasingly mediated via the ‘live’ screen; at the end of his book, Mirzoeff explains “once we have learned how to see the world, we have taken only one of the required steps. The point is to change it” (Mirzoeff 2015, p. 298).

6. Forgetting Photographers

At the virtual launch of *Forget Photography* in the Photographer’s Gallery, London, the first question its author was asked was if we should forget photographers? His answer seemed to be that we should not, but the question retains some poignancy in the context of the venue and the subject. There is an interesting piece of research in *How To See The World* that quotes an opinion poll in Germany that found “that 24% of young people desired to become an artist” (Mirzoeff 2015, p. 295). Mirzoeff explains this desire not in terms of people wanting to become painters, sculptors or photographers, but that in the world of participatory media, snapchatting and performance, being an artist might seem a way to live for oneself rather than at the behest of the service economy. Immediately the question of what it is to be a “real” artist (sandwich-board optional), moves beyond the concerns of particular media or technology into more political, existential and social terms. Perhaps it seems strange that there should still be, in the university, a medium-specific focus on photography and the individual photographer? The photographic representational image still mediates the world of activism and commerce, and in terms of the latter the illusion perpetuated and encouraged in academia, is that one can live for oneself whilst being part of the service economy. This is a picture of photography and photographers that maintains it as part of a knowledge economy. For all of the energy and optimism of Visual Activism, Mirzoeff reminds us the world on screen is part of what Gilles Deleuze calls the ‘control society’ (Mirzoeff 2015, p. 157) where every choice made via the screens in our pockets leaves a trace, and individuals are quantified and analysed in terms of data, most of which is in the hands of the tech giants, Google, Microsoft, Apple; “software computes for us the world that we see” (Mirzoeff 2015, p. 160). I am immediately reminded of two things; Daniel Blight’s comment above that the digital spirit of photography is “preferably without an image”, and Charlie White’s observation that it is not that everyone is a photographer but that no-one is.

7. Conclusions: Preferably without a Picture

Where Is The Photograph (Green 2003) is now slightly over twenty years old; the book is a revision of theories of photography—the photograph as an indexical sign, the relation of the vision to the symbolic, the disciplinary uncertainty that surrounds photography particularly as art, and its transformation into an expanded digital photographic. Lowry and Green displace the ontological question of ‘what is’ the photograph with the question of ‘where’ the photograph is. They articulated the indexical link between the photograph and the world as a designation that oftentimes worked to establish rather than record a pre-existent reality. I develop the idea of the image in the picture through an interpretation and description of Richon’s photograph of a Carrot that becomes a Lemon, to demonstrate a symbolic thinking in images that is an imagining through the device of the picture, traversing painting, photography and film, which is also an account of a desiring subject. In its mimesis of the formal appearance of objects in Still Life, Richon’s photograph makes

a oblique reference to 17th Century Dutch traditions of picturing, particularly through the act of showing and an excess of description that functions to introduce what he describes as “waiting into looking” that enables an image to emerge; what is beyond the image is not reality but another image (Richon 2003, p. 72). Despite intentions otherwise, I suspect that as a conversation *Where Is The Photograph* resurrected the spectre of a real that it simultaneously questioned and wished to supersede. However, this would be to miss the point of its subtler critiques of authorship, representation and ironic image-text-magic that suggest productive critical continuities between a pictorial photographic and a screen image.

Charlotte Cotton’s “*Photography Is Magic*” (Cotton 2015) is a declaration of the legitimacy of the digital photograph, as photography and as art, as an apotheosis of the photographic where everything is mutable and nothing is real. The emphasis is on a media environment where commerce, culture and art are indistinguishable; here reality is based upon the magic of the commodity-form. Cotton’s description of the magician in the gentleman’s outfit of top hat and tails as an ideogram of analogue photography would seem to owe something to Simon During’s conception of what he calls Secular Magic, a thoroughly cultural magic that has roots in religious belief, but is characterised across its various forms through “a self-consciously illusory magic” or what During would call deceit in the service of illusion (During 2002, p. 27). There is a critical address here to what Cotton sees as the scholarly assumptions of the university art department that would see a photograph as a “final” object in opposition to a new cultural post-internet aesthetic of iteration and versioning, where the relation between artist and audience has been transformed by the culture of online image-sharing. Here a distinction between the photograph as a picture, and the networked image, is recognisable when Denis Curti observes that what Cotton refers to as post-internet art is not photography but mere images.

The magical liveliness that Barbara Savedoff recognised in the black & white street photograph which collapses three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional picture is recognisable as a device in *Photography Is Magic*; however the magical effect of the animate/inanimate relation in the photography is muted here through the function of reproduction in the book. Photography illustrates photographs that are themselves illustrations of photography, what Oscar Meo describes as a photographic meta-language. This magical mise-en-abyme is intellectual rather than affective or imaginative, as the viewer’s pleasure lies in the recognition of clever tricks. It has a parallel in Dewdney’s account of the photograph in the museum, at once an object that appears as photography itself, contingent to the occluded photography that functions as a mediation of all the other artefacts, objects, pictures, images. Ben Burbridge discerns in Cotton’s project the capacity for alternative knowledge production; Anna-Kaisia Rastenburger considers whether “pictoriality permeates various forms of art and even retroactively influences analogue technologies” and comments on the fact that the book seems to be organised around an experience of browsing images on a screen (Burbridge et al. 2016, p. 13). In order to secure and authorise the discourse around photographs, the emphasis in *Photography Is Magic* is on a certain practice of curation as a form of authorial magic. If, as per Dewdney’s comments below, photography has not always been digital, it has always been magical.

Forget Photography is a provocation to get beyond, as well as an account of, the conditions in which the question of the whereabouts of the photograph occurred in 2003. It is a call-to-arms as regards how we conceptualise the study of the image in academic discourse and in practice. The book is perhaps the first instalment of the history of photography from the point of view of the future that Dewdney proposes as essential in understanding the condition of the networked, data image. This might not be the kind of history that Richon characterises as an accumulation of facts. It seems more likely to be the kind of history that WJT Mitchell saw in Marx; a history that connects to a life-process embedded in technological and social change. Dewdney’s argument is that the ontology of the electronic image as a signal rather than light writing, might, or should, change our conception of the temporality of the image. In the data image, unlike light writing, there is no stable

linear conflation of past/present. Peter Osbourne's revision of the essentially phantasmatic relation between temporality and the photographic, as well as his idea of the emergence of ontological inversion in dominant forms of practice that would maintain continuities whilst enabling transformations between the photographic and the networked image, could also be seen as a method towards rewriting history from the point of view of the future.

The idea of the networked image exists as a placeholder for something that is emergent and transitory, the hybrid screen image, which presently shares a space with a peculiarly undead zombie photography. Throughout his book Dewdney refers only to the image. The concept of the picture as a construction of vision with the human at the centre seems no longer adequate to embody flows of information and the algorithmic automation of machine vision technologies, or delineate the social networks of surveillance, security and control that operate on behalf of and beyond the observer/subject. The shared space between the zombie photograph and the screen image is suggested in the example of the virtual influencer Lil Miquela, who draws on definitions of the not-real to stage the prospect of (her) material actuality precisely by virtue of the metonymic magic of the still photographic picture.

Photography's putative obsolescence is that it at once illustrates historical time and paradoxically appears as a contemporary medium; it is visible as a historical object but invisible in its role as mediating other objects; and it obfuscates the computational processes and dimensions of the networked image. This refers to Dewdney's account of the role of the photograph in the museum as heritage, and a potential crisis of heritage, for example in the collaboration between the museum and Google Arts Institute in the digitisation of the collections. This is one of the outstanding examples of research and argument in the book. The other is the urgency to 'develop a new literacy about the image after photography' in the University but also beyond it (Dewdney 2021, p. 171). Dewdney is not antagonistic to art, photography or technology as art or the art institutions in general but he is concerned that the very nature of collecting and ownership, the art market, recuperates the potential for radical change in that sector (Dewdney 2021, p. 179). In a brief look at the visual activism of Nicholas Mirzoeff, I note that the representational photographic image continues to mediate the world on behalf of both activism and commerce. In terms of commerce the illusion perpetuated and encouraged in the University is that one can live for one's self whilst being part of the service economy. This is a picture of photography and photographers that maintains photography as part of the knowledge economy.

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