PHOTOGRAPHY
Beyond Technique

Essays from F295 on the Informed Use of Alternative and Historical Photographic Processes

Edited by
Tom Persinger

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INTRODUCTION: PHOTOGRAPHY BEYOND TECHNIQUE

Tom Persinger

Photography is not dying and has not died. In fact, it is more vigorous than ever. The commonly felt angst (mostly among photographers) regarding the death of photography is because we have been tricked. Along the way, we were fooled into accepting a simplified definition of the medium. Photography is not simply a process, artifact, or gesture. It should not be reductively defined, but expansively considered. It is a visual language through which pictures and ideas can be shared, explored, and discussed. It is a way of communicating that can be chemical, digital, tangible, or ephemeral. It can be factual or fictitious. It can make us want things, satisfy our needs, and bridge great distances. Over its nearly 200 years of existence, it transformed our relationship with the world around us. Simultaneously, the medium itself changed and evolved.

For those who poured themselves into learning photographic process and technique, change can be hard to accept. Imagine how the daguerreotypists must have felt in the 1870s when an unorganized band of tintypists took their wagons and portable darkrooms to the streets. They crawled into every nook and cranny of America and sold cheap, but durable, photographs made on tin, for often less than a dollar a piece. I can image hearing a conversation between two daguerreotypists of the day: "Photographs on blackened tin made in the streets with such messy edges? Blasphemy! That is not photography!" Or later, in 1888, how disdainful must the reaction from the professional photographic community have been when George Eastman announced to the public that if you push the button, we'll do the rest![1] He was saying that photography now required

very little in the way of knowledge or technical expertise. If you could hold a camera and press a button, you too could make photographs. "So simple even a child could do it," exclaimed one advertisement! A statement like that must have really worked the professionals into a lather.

Back in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ground-breaking change in process and apparatus was endemic (Fig. 1). Major innovations were coming about as fast as today's iPhone updates. But, in the 1880s when flexible film and silver gelatin papers were introduced photographers were softly lulled into a beautifully long respite. During this hiatus, innovators made countless changes and improvements to film, paper, and apparatus, but mostly it was business as usual for the medium and industry. Photography was still based on chemistry and the light sensitive properties of silver halides. Though these were photography's early halcyon days, competition was fierce.

In 1975, however, the ground began to quake. So subtly and gently at first that many barely woke from their slumber; in fact, many would roll over and continue their magnificent silver/chemical photographic dream. The epicenter for that early tremor was a small lab in Rochester, NY. It was the first early warning that the entire industry was about to reinvent itself in a profound way.

Within the next thirty-five years the reinvention would be so far reaching and rapid, that many heated debates were spawned on whether digital or analog constituted the "real" photography. For a while, analog stood proudly and held its own against the plucky newcomer, but it soon became clear that its uncontested days of market dominance were ending.

With the transformation moving forward, companies like Polaroid, AGFA, and eventually Kodak, once the industry's most innovative and exciting companies, would reorganize in an effort to stay profitable and relevant, enter bankruptcy, or cease operation of their traditional photographic imaging divisions. For students of photographic history, the metamorphosis should not have been surprising. The lure of creating better pictures faster has been used in advertising to sell new apparatus and supplies since the industry's first days. These new digital techniques, both instantaneous and highly malleable, were perfectly suited to the pitch.

The latest major transformation came in 2007 when Apple Inc. inserted a camera into their revolutionary iPhone. It would not be long before most smart phone manufacturers also included cameras in their pocket–sized devices. Edwin Land's prescient comment from 1970 that a camera "would be like the telephone: something you use all day long ...

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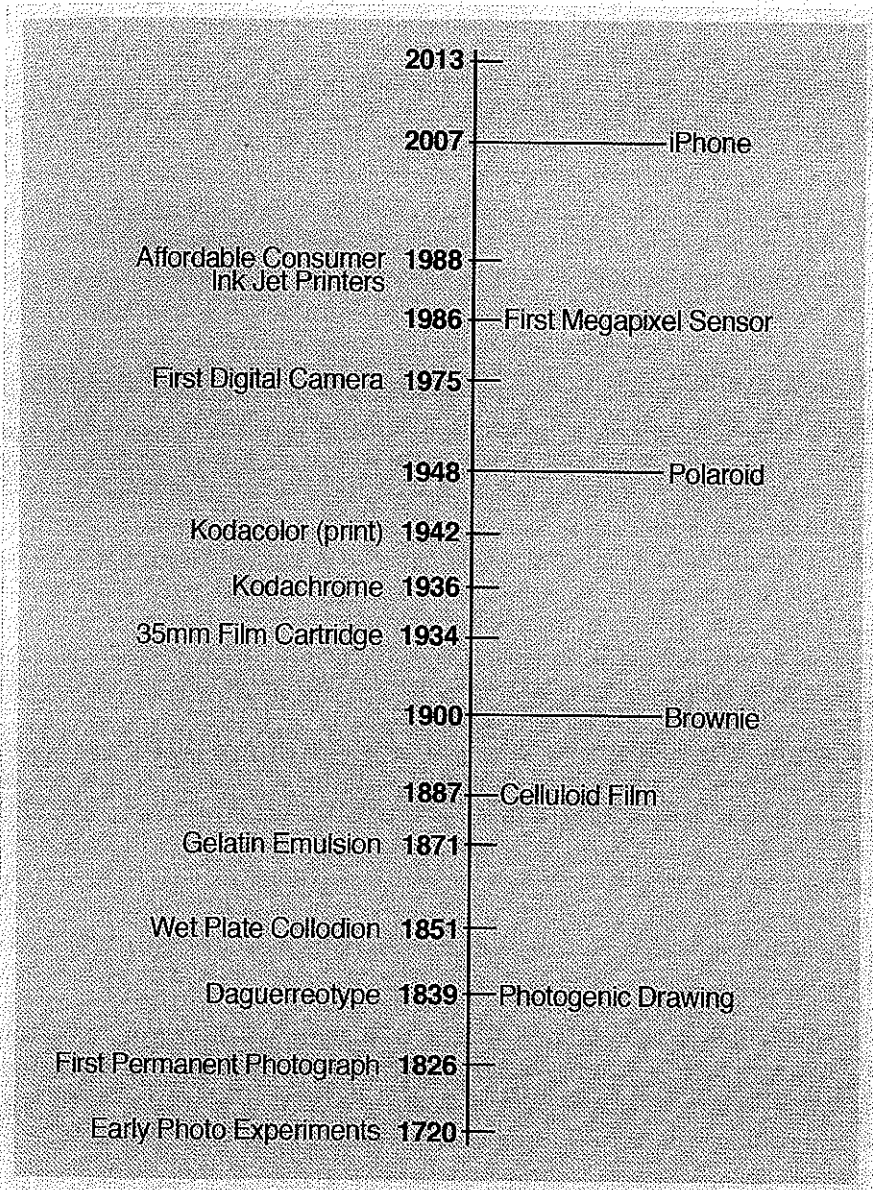

Figure 1: Abbreviated Timeline of Photographic History
Showing a few key events and inventions.

as often as a pencil or eyeglasses ... something that was always with you ..."[2] came true. And with these new technologies, the line that divides professional and amateur photographers has blurred to the extent that it has practically disappeared.

"There is no such thing as professional photographers"[3] infamously stated Marissa Mayer, the Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo! in 2013, while introducing a newly updated version of the company's online photo sharing service Flickr. While she may have been speaking of the company's recently discarded paradigm of Flickr Pro accounts, she was in fact speaking a larger truth. As early as 2006 Chris Ahearn, president of Reuters media, publicly asked the question "What if everybody in the world were my stringers?"[4] Photographic apparatus has been gradually removing image creation barriers for years. It's hard to imagine what the future might hold for the medium. Technological evolution has been its guiding light, from shadows to pixels, prints to screens, and silver to binary code. But how did we get here?

CATCHING SHADOWS

To catch a fleeting shadow and create an artifact with lasting permanence was the motivation of early photographic experimenters. In 1727, Johann Heinrich Schulze stuffed bottles full of chalk, silver, and nitric acid, and set them in the sun to see how they would react.[5] They turned purple. Others applied silver nitrate to leather and observed the transformation in the afternoon sun.[6]

In the 18th and early 19th centuries the world swirled with photographic investigation. Researchers, scientists, and inventors worked independently but concurrently in many countries. The race was on, and the time was ripe for the discovery of an apparatus that could create automatic drawings through the action of light. In 1839, Sir John Herschel would call this tool photography (unaware of the terms previous use by Hercules Florence while working in Brazil).[7] He created the term by joining the two greek words, *photos*, meaning light, and *graphe*, meaning writing, to create a simple yet descriptive word that encompassed the popular conceptions of the day.

The medium's realization would come when Nicéphore Niépce spent a long day, or perhaps several, in 1826 looking out of his window and over his estate. His camera obscura was trained at the view and the aperture projecting light onto a pewter plate coated with bitumen of judea. The result was historic. The picture he created, The View from the Window at Le Gras, is commonly accepted as the first permanent photograph. Shortly after, Louis Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (who had been in a business partnership with Niépce) and William Henry Fox Talbot also revealed their photographic research

and invention: the daguerreotype and calotype, respectively. The race had been won. And though Bayard, Dumas, Herschel, Steinheil, Kobell, Hoffmeister, Morse, and many others came forward after Daguerre's announcement with claims of prior invention, it would be these three who would each stand on the podium of victory.[8]

In a speech on the daguerreotype in 1839, the French physicist Jean Françoise Arago had the foresight to see that photography could touch "all aspects of human activity."[9] The French government granted Daguerre a lifelong stipend in exchange for detailed information about the daguerreotype process that the government gave freely to the people. Unknowingly, they had conceived an entirely new industry that would birth in just a few short years.

The medium that had been the realm of alchemists and inventors quickly transformed into one dominated by corporations and commerce. Entrepreneurs, realizing that they could make money, rapidly formed businesses. Portrait studios sold sitters little magic mirrors imprinted with their likenesses in beautiful jewel-like cases. Companies were created to produce the supplies and materials needed by the new studio operators. The industry was formed.

Though these portrait studios sprouted and multiplied quickly, the daguerreotype's prominence did not last long. In 1851, Frederick Scott Archer introduced the faster, more portable, and less expensive wet plate collodion process. The daguerreotype would eventually become photography's first process casualty and foreshadowed the medium's future.

Generally, the most efficient way for businesses to create additional revenue is through their existing customers. Companies making photographic supplies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries knew that these early commercial photographers were essentially paid by the picture. New tools, processes, or techniques that could help them create better pictures faster would be well received. The tone was set, and photography's long march down the road of adoption and obsolescence began.

A flood of new products appeared. They were hawked by a deluge of advertisements proclaiming their superiority. Innovation followed innovation with promises of new ways to save time and effort, and would help the photographer to create better pictures faster and be more profitable.

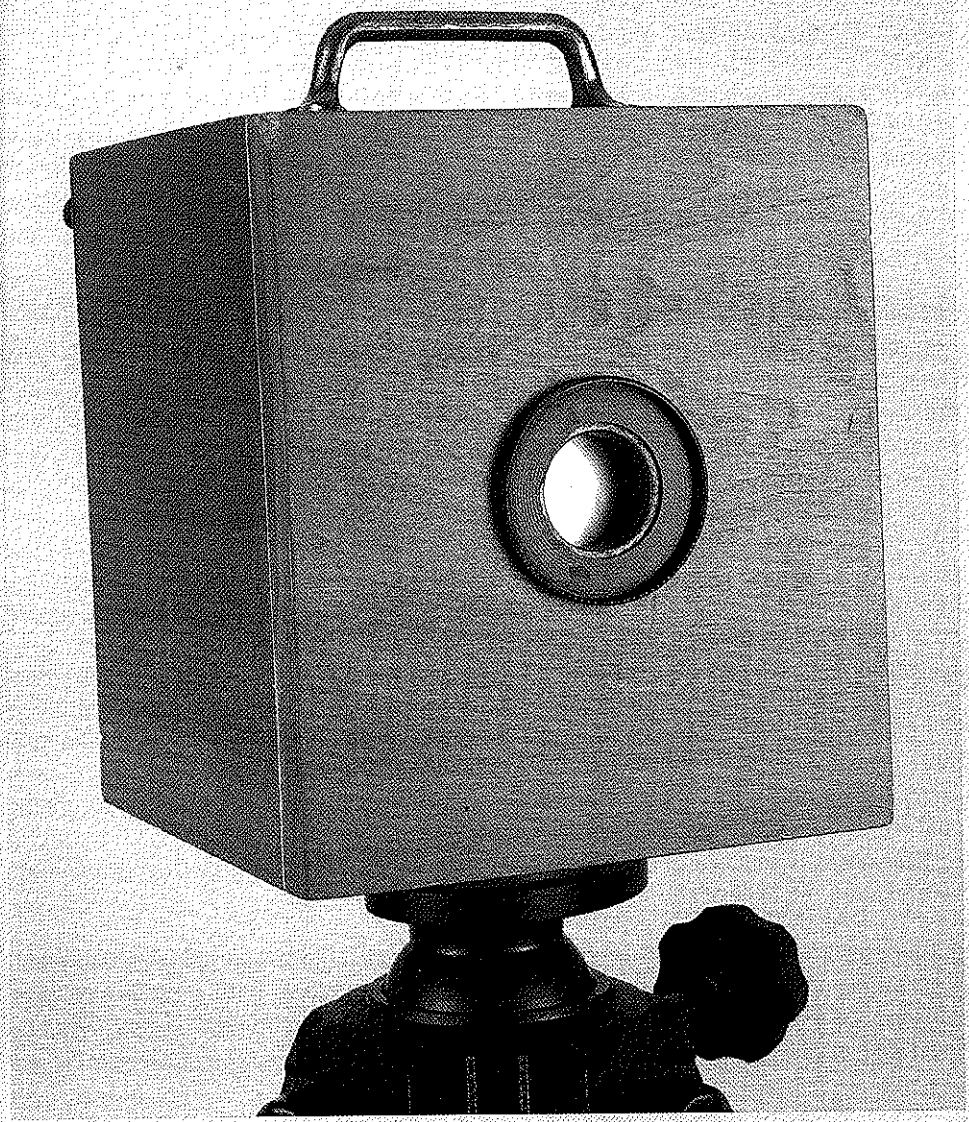

Figure 2: F295 wooden pinhole camera.
Poplar, aluminum, paint, foam, tape.

MAGIC, INNOVATION, AND ALIENATION

But, to the general public, those non-photographers unconcerned with how photographs were created, it was very magical. Long lines formed outside of portrait studios. People entered and sat stiffly across from what might have been perceived as a magical apparatus. When ready, the operator would allow light to enter the box through a tiny hole, seemingly steal their likeness, and place it permanently on the photographic plate. It must have been a profound experience. Many had never owned an image of themselves or their family, and people flocked to have their very own created.

Each short exposure, little by little, irrevocably changed the understanding of our relationship with the world. As the medium matured, photography's influence over our perceptions and memories grew stronger. It impacted the way we considered current events and the way we remembered those of the past. It could be used to reveal, obscure, or fabricate realities. It could be revelatory or quotidian, and sometimes both.

Photography grew to be commonly understood and defined through technical apparatus, innovations, and improvements. It never seemed to be the same thing twice. Some have even gone so far as to say that it has "no identity."[10] Yet it is a transformative means through which we share experiences and create memories, that has usually utilized the most recently introduced equipment. Photography's fulfillment through knowledge of black arts gradually gave way to cleaner, safer, less expensive, and more accessible means of image production.

Even though most photographers rapidly accepted and adopted new photographic methods and techniques, the older ones never completely disappeared. They were not thriving, but practitioners still existed. In the early 21st century, conditions became ripe for a resurgence of these antique processes when a couple of related events transpired. A digital culture was beginning to emerge that allowed for virtual rather than physical interactions. One could easily collect and store music, books, magazines, and photographs all on their computer's hard drive. Digital photography, for all intents and purposes, had taken over the photo world. And many desired to create something more tactile. Ironically, the same high speed internet connections and personal computers that were stirring feelings of alienation, were also instrumental in connecting photographers interested in the pursuit of handmade imagery.

THE ORIGINS OF F295

F295 began innocently enough in the summer of 2004. I had just come across plans in a woodworking magazine for a pinhole camera (Figure 2), and, after construction, was

looking for a way to learn more about its methods. A quick internet search brought me to Gregg Kemp's well-named pinhole.com website. This resource was extremely useful yet (for me) short lived. Just after my discovery, the site went off line. I waited, hopeful it might return, but it never did.

I spent the next few months browsing around the internet looking for a suitable place for pinhole information and constructive photographic dialogue. I discovered several helpful sites, but none that matched my interest in the image and alternative means of creation. There were endless places to engage in any of the usual array of photographic debates regarding lenses, films, cameras, or the most heated discussion of the day: analog vs. digital. These were of little interest to me. I was more intrigued in discussing image making and the exploration of process, technique, and method.

It was then I thought: I'll build the website that I want. I had server space I was not using, I had the technical skills, and I could set aside the time to build it. So, in a few hours in June 2004, I built the initial F295 website. I invited some people I'd encountered on the now defunct pinhole.com site to participate and it was up and running. It was so innocent that for months I did not mention it to anyone beyond the small group of folks I had invited to participate. I was not keeping it a secret, but it hardly seemed worthy of sharing. I had no idea what I'd done.

Nick Dvoracek in Oshkosh, WI, posted the first photograph to the site and others quickly followed. The site became exactly what I had been looking for: a convivial group with an interest in exploring the esoteric art of pinhole photography. They were creating photographs and self-made cameras, sharing technical knowledge, and engaging in a dialogue focused on the image and the means of creation. The discussions centered on why and how. There were no overpowering egos or judgmental digressions. But, then again, how much ego can one have when using a shoebox as a camera?

For a long while, I found the experience of hosting and moderating an online community slightly unsettling. This was back in the innocent days before the ubiquity of online personas and social media, when most still conducted the majority of their communications interpersonally: face-to-face, telephone, mail, or email. Many people did not even have an online footprint yet. I had never been fond of internet forums or chat rooms; they often seemed impersonal and odd, but this felt different. The site brought together a small population of people from across the world who shared a niche interest in pinhole photography, with a shared desire to connect with like-minded others and engage in a free exchange of information.

It was possible to ask questions on the site about obscure technical issues and receive answers in practically real time. I remember watching in amazement when a gentleman from Russia posted a question and, in just an hour or so, responses were posted from Australia, Germany, Japan, Canada, England, the United States, and several other countries. Not only was his question answered, but there were notes of encouragement and enthusiasm as well. The world seemed friendlier and smaller to me that day.

As the originator of the site, I found it humbling to see people from around the world come together in the discussion of science and art. At least temporarily, the group had found common ground and overcame politics, religion, and geographic location, all for the discussion of photography. With the then new online translation tools, even language issues were not insurmountable. In today's hyper-connected world of social media this may seem quaint, but, at that time, it was really amazing.

Then, in 2005 pictures that incorporated more than just pinhole methods in their production began to show up on the site. Some members were beginning to experiment with the use of historical photographic processes. They sometimes combined them with pinhole, sometimes with digital techniques, and often a mixture of several. F295 was open and receptive to any hand–crafted vision so long as there was transparency and a sharing of information on method.

This F295 group was not the first to experiment with the use of historical photographic process; a powerful resurgence of handmade photography occurred in the 1960s,[11] and there were many other contemporary explorers. What made the F295 group different was their keen interest in learning, experimenting, sharing, and engaging in a global dialogue on the use of hand made processes. The website expanded and the population grew. Daily traffic to the site increased exponentially. What had begun as a small, intimate group had become a large and diverse group. Fortunately, the tone of constructive support and dialogue remained.

After operating a purely online community for a few years, it seemed logical to attempt to try to create a "real" event. In 2006, I began considering the idea of creating something that would not only give F295 website participants a chance and place to physically meet, but would also provide a forum for photographers to share, in their own words, the "why" of their work. This sort of forum seemed to be lacking in contemporary photography, especially for those working with the oft marginalized, historic and alternative photographic processes. Plenty of "how-to" information was available in books and on websites, but for some reason no one seemed to be talking about the "why."

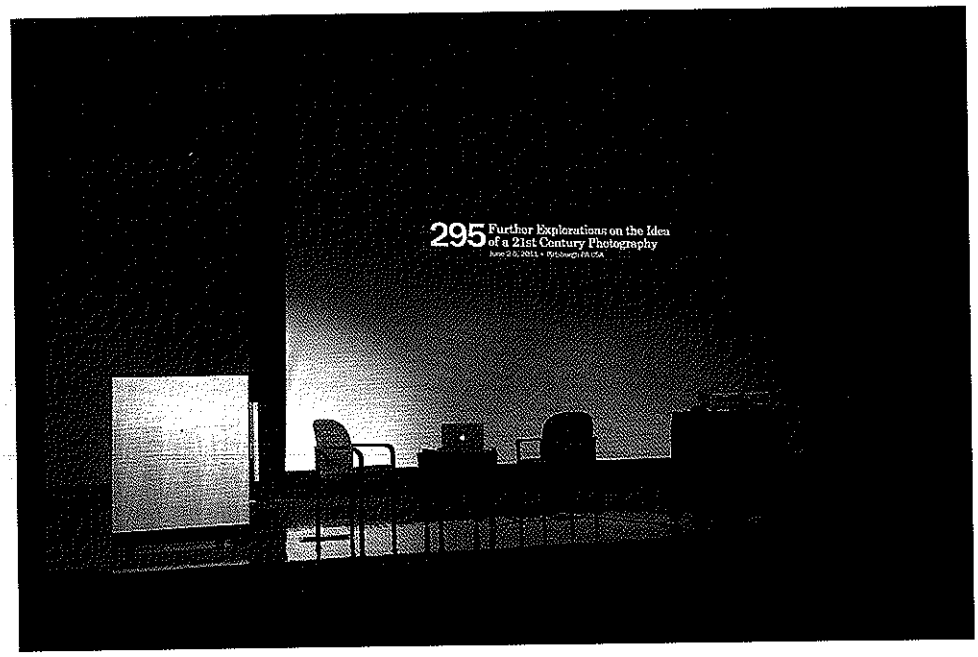

Figure 3: Before the opening reception lecture at the 2011 F295 Symposium.

My idea was to fill this gap with an event that instigated a discussion about how a photographer's vision informs his or her choice of process. What better way to do this than by having practicing photographers speak directly about how subject and content combine with process to create a final piece that more clearly articulates their argument. After several encouraging conversations and phone calls, the concept of the first F295 Symposium was born.

The F295 Symposium on Lensless, Alternative, and Adaptive Photographic Processes took place in late April 2007 (see appendix). The event featured a full day of photographers' lectures, multi-day hands-on workshops, and several exhibitions. I saw it as a celebration of photography. When planning, I did not know who, or if anyone, would come and I certainly had no plans to create a recurring event (Fig. 3). To my surprise, only a handful of people from the website community attended, but many others came. Everyone's enthusiasm, energy, and quality of artistic photographic practice and inquiry were contagious. Little did I know that hundreds of interested persons, artists, photographers,

historians, professors, curators, and the casually interested, would attend five symposia, five seminars, four exhibitions, and dozens of workshops over the next six years.

At the various F295 events, I met a wide range of photographers who were all actively exploring method and process in the creation of their work. Their reasons were as varied as the processes used to create their pictures. And, while they each had their own impetus and there were no official rules, they did share a commonality of practice and a similar set of fluid yet overarching principles propelled them forward. I began to search for a way to characterize their practice.

The next six years of events were themed around an ongoing investigation of what I would call 21st century photography. This expression grew out of a conversation with France Scully Osterman in 2008. We were in her kitchen discussing photography and how some photographers were purposely employing a range of technique and process from the 19th through 21st centuries when she off-handedly referred (I'm paraphrasing here) to it as "all being one 21st century photography." I was struck by the phrase's simplicity and began using it.

THE IDEA OF A 21ST CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHY

For a while, I had been consciously searching for a new way to reference the inclusive style of work seen on the F295 website and at the events. I was looking for a term that would open doors and stir curiosities, as well as one that would allude to the expansiveness of the practice. Most of the commonly used terms used to reference those incorporating historic process in their work were not accurate or were laden with prejudice. Often, just mentioning words like alternative or historic process would be met with swift and immediate dismissal. Not only was I looking for a way to categorize the work, but I also wanted to encourage an openness of understanding. Most of these photographers were not looking to return to an imaginary, photographic golden age, nor did they feel panicked about the future of photography. Most accepted that the industry was fundamentally changing, but also acknowledged that it was an exciting time to be a photographer. It seemed that a greater number of photographic processes, spanning different eras, were being practiced concurrently, around the world, than at any other moment in history.

Artistic vision, curiosity, and knowledge of history and photographic lineage motivates these photographers. The most artistically successful move beyond the novelty of process to a careful consideration of how subject, content, and process (form) can unite in the creation of their work (Fig 4.). The artists realize that an informed choice of photographic

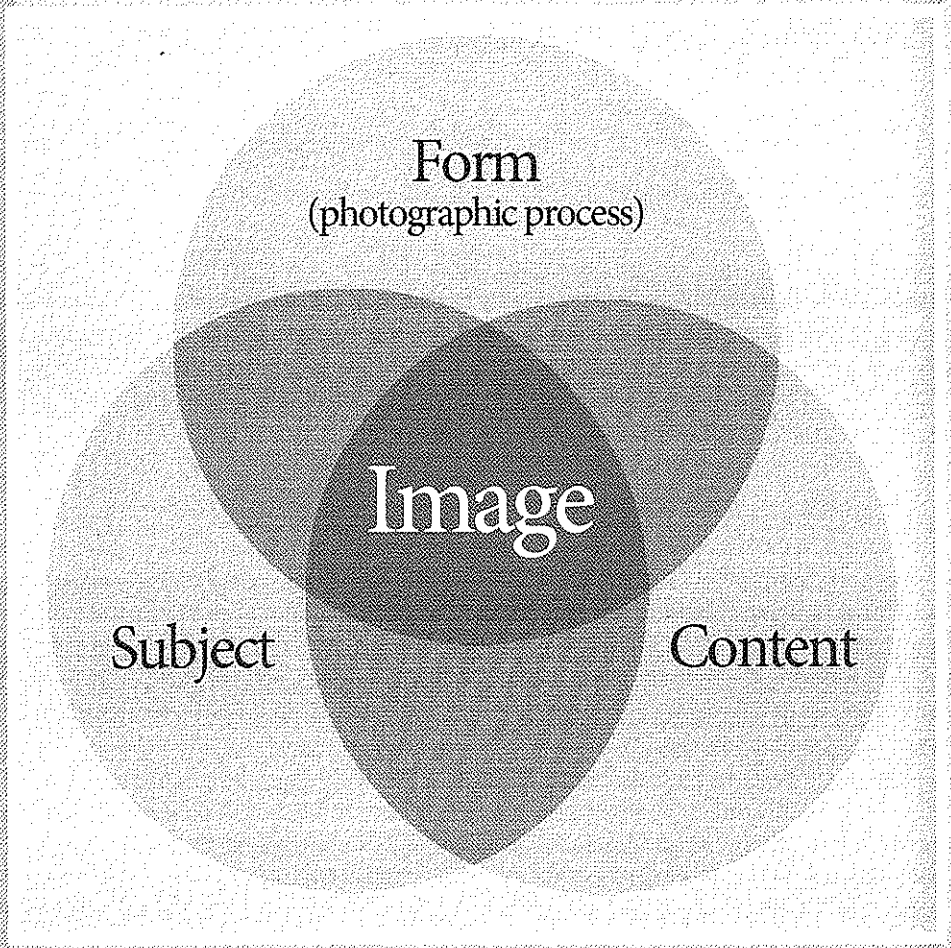

Figure 4: Illustration showing the intersection of Form, Content, and Subject.

process can be a valuable aid in more clearly articulating their message. What was once thought antique or outdated might now be refreshingly implemented in new ways, under different circumstances, to create entirely contemporary art. The group jettisoned the paradigm of technological adoption and obsolescence. And for them the days of simply accepting the latest industrially produced photographic materials ended.

These photographers explore materials, tools, and techniques that are drawn from the pages of photographic history in an ongoing search for unique and compelling ways to create meaningful imagery. For many, the choice of process is as important as the choice of subject. A consumptive and adoptive mode of photographic practice has yielded to reveal one that is expansive, creative, and full of new alternative visions. Photography would now (also) belongs to those who could imagine it, not merely those who could buy it.

While the mainstream photo world continues to evolve, many of the images being created are seemingly becoming more fleeting and homogenous. Traditionally, photographers focused on the medium's mechanistic ability to create multiple, often identical, copies from a single original negative. Recently this idea has been challenged. Digital photography is without an original, as had been commonly understood, and most of the billions of photographs created today are never experienced as tangible, independent physical objects of their own.[12] They instead live in a suspended virtual state on digital devices. But, the 21st century photographer places explicit attention on the creation of unique artifacts. They seek direct personal engagement and greater control of their discipline in a time of commercial standardization. Their priority to produce hand-crafted prints could be viewed as an act of rebellion in a world dominated by virtual images.

These photographers furtively seek answers to the questions of what it means to be a photographer, the nature of photography, and substance of its being in the world today. The "precious idea of the original"[13] may have been disappearing for most, but not for all. "We are physical beings, we create physical photographs!"[14] declared Dan Estabrook. The direct, unmediated, sensory experience of creation, informing both the work's creation and the subsequent viewing experience, is a valuable and meaningful part of the art making process. If "photographers were not much concerned with their theoretical right to claim the prestige of the artist"[15] before, they are now.

These artists are the direct heirs and descendants of the medium's experimental founders. They merge vision and technical knowledge to create bold and exciting imagery. Though historical and self-made techniques are included, contemporary methods are not excluded. They acknowledge that a judicious collaboration of process and method

is important to consider in the quest for new and revelatory ways of disclosing their contemporary narratives. It is through this active inquiry that photography has found a more sophisticated level of aesthetic maturation.

LIGHT, TIME, AND APPARATUS

These photographers are not only creating their work upon the three-legged stool of subject, content, and process (form), but are simultaneously investigating the medium's three constituent elements of light, time, and the apparatus. Every truly photographic image, from photograms to digital RAW files, are dependent upon these three characteristics for their existence. They would not and could not be photographic without them.

Photographs, in both manufacture and viewing, are the result of light. Light is the core of the term and the core of the practice. It is inseparable from the element of time. Geoffrey Batchen notes that "photography is a peculiar articulation of time."[16] Not too long ago, time was marked through the agency of light and shadow. Photography and its apparatus began to change our relationship with time (and light) at the same moment that Samuel Langley's standardized time subscription service and the railroad fundamentally transformed the national awareness of time (and place) itself.[17]

In the continued spirit of questioning presumptions, these photographers are exploring their relationship with these foundational elements in interesting ways. They have temporarily set aside Herschel's close-ended definition and instead of regarding the medium as a simple, automatic process, they are pursuing it as an open-ended investigation. Using the term geography (the study of the earth) as its precedent, the word photography might be reinterpreted as the study or investigation of light. I would add the implied elements of time and apparatus, along with the elements of subject, content, and form to create the following definition that I believe more accurately aligns with these photographer's expansive working methods.

> **Photography:** An art and practice whose production considers the interplay of subject, content, and form while actively considering the role of light, time, and the apparatus in the creation of photographic imagery.

While formulating this definition, it occurred to me that trying to find a term or set up varying taxonomies for the categorization of different types and styles of photographic practice was a fruitless undertaking. It is all one photography. Different photographers pursue the medium in different ways, with different tools, for different reasons, but for these photographers it remains an endeavor to create unique and compelling imagery

through magical means. And for none more so than those who expansively consider the wide variety of resources, tools, and techniques at their disposal.

PHOTOGRAPHY BEYOND TECHNIQUE

This volume collects 20 essays by 21 photographic artists who are, in varying degrees, engaged in this sort of expansive inquiry of contemporary photographic and artistic practice. Each piece was first delivered as a lecture at an F295 event before it was transformed into the document contained here. There have been 90 lectures at the various events over the past 6 years, and with only a finite amount of space in which to work, it was a difficult task deciding on which pieces to include. I regret that some fine pieces have been excluded solely because of spatial limitations.

The selections were made based on the degree to which I felt they offered an informed response to the following three questions:

1) Why do they, as contemporary artists, utilize alternative, historical, or handmade photographic processes and techniques?

2) How do these methods enable the further articulation of their narrative?

3) From where do they draw inspiration and ideas?

The book is mixture of longer pieces and shorter vignettes, but it is not a book about process. It contains no information on the how of the process, and neither is it about theory, though there are plentiful references to photography's great theorists. It is about a photographic practice that exists beyond technique. The art that can occur in the critical juncture where process, content, and subject merge with an active, inquisitive investigation of light, time, and the apparatus in an effort to create something brilliantly exciting.

NOTES

1. "You push the button, we do the rest" was the tagline of a successful advertising campaign by Eastman Kodak in 1888.

2. Christopher Bonanos, *Instant: The Story of Polaroid* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 87.

3. David Pogue, "New Flickr: Vast Space for Storage, at No Cost," *The New York Times* (New York, NY) May 29, 2013 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/30/technology/personaltech/the-new-flickr-space-and-more-space-free.html

4. Saul Hansell, "Have Camera Phone? Yahoo and Reuters Want You to Work for their News Service," *The New York Times* (New York, NY) December 4, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/04/technology/04yahoo.html?ex=1165899600&en=2fc516de3a35bb34&ei=5070

5. Josef Eder, *History of Photography* (New York: Columbia University, 1945) 61.

6. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997) 27.

7. Michael R. Peres, (ed.) *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography* 4th Edition (Boston, MA: Focal Press, 2011) 102.

8. Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 35.

9. Eder, *History of Photography*, 235.

10. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1988) 118.

11. For more information on photographic artists of this period see Robert Hirsch, *Transformational Imagemaking: Handmade Photography Since 1960* (Boston, MA: Focal Press, 2014).

12. Marvin Heiferman, *Photography Changes Everything* (New York: Aperture, 2012) 14. Heiferman states that there are 1.3 billion photographs being made every day.

13. Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books).

14. From a transcript of a conversation between Jerry Spagnoli, Dan Estabrook, Robert Hirsch and Tom Persinger that took place at Spagnoli's Manhattan studio in Fall 2012.

15. Evans, Walker, and Lincoln Kirstein. 1988. *American Photographs* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art). This quote taken from Peter Galassi's accompanying essay on page 190.

16. Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 133.

17. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005), 60.