Studio/World: Photography's Other Nature

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Film and Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

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Summer 2017

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Abstract

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Intervening in longstanding debates about the impact of the shift from analog to digital technology, this dissertation rethinks an aesthetics of photographic space in light of the information age. I argue that digital technology is transforming the very "nature" of the photographic medium as we know it. Since its invention in the early nineteenth century, the photograph has been widely thought of as a "mirror" or "window." Critics and scholars have consequently tended to focus on the medium as a tool of realism: it either provides proof of the reality before the camera or serves as a visual record of the past. I demonstrate the photograph's parallel evolution as a site for constructing novel spatial models for looking at and thinking about the world. I show how the photograph—alternately figured as a grid, a map, a table, or a studio—continually undermines the dominant metaphors of its own transparency.

My central claim is that we are witnessing the definitive breakdown of a worldview built around the fixed mastery of perspective to one that privileges the dynamic proliferation of pattern. To illustrate this trajectory, I juxtapose the work of canonical figures alongside the innovations of current practitioners. The first two chapters outline and complicate the camera's traditional tie to the conventions of one-point, linear perspective as a "truthful" framing of the world. Reading the photographic interiors of Eugène Atget and John Divola, as well as the "eye exercises" and "perspective games" of László Moholy-Nagy and Elad Lassry, I establish the photograph as a tool for generating what I call "ambiguous space." The next two chapters elaborate on this new paradigm for picture-making and looking. As the photograph enters the mutable terrain of the digital screen, space is rewritten as information. Tracing this other genealogy of photographic space, I redefine two key terms within photographic discourse: the "index" and the *punctum*. From the plant taxonomies of Karl Blossfeldt to the mimicry of the screen's entropic logic and the "retouching" of physical and virtual space by artists Michele Abeles, Katja Novitskova, Sara Cwynar, and others—I reveal how crucial perspectival cues such as depth, scale, and a vanishing point infinity are being overturned. I address the effects of this loss of perspectival orientation for how we imagine ourselves as locatable subjects in the world. I discover this other "nature" of the photograph as a richly ambiguous and synthetic space—rather than one that is self-evident and realist—in order to illuminate the ways that photographic practices are reinventing the limits and conditions of how we perceive and organize space, both in the picture and in the world.

Beauty is the spell over the spell, which devolves upon it.

For only what does not fit into this world is true.

—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

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INTRODUCTION

Photography's Other Nature

One minute for an image. In her article "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," the art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss begins by recounting the television series *Une minute pour une image (*1983) by the French filmmaker Agnès Varda. Aired every night just before the 11 p.m. news, each minute-long segment—totaling 170 segments in all—featured a still photograph accompanied by the voice-over of an eclectic assembly of figures. These included the reactions of famous writers, actors, and personalities such as Marguerite Duras, Delphine Seyrig, and Yves Saint Laurent, as well as those of unknown businessman, bakers, artists, street sweepers, and others from a random cross section of the everyday. The photographs chosen for this uniquely individualized public opinion poll were equally heterogeneous and anonymous. Ranging from street photography to posed fashion snaps, Atget to Cartier-Bresson, portraits, landscapes, and still lifes, the origin of a particular photograph, along with the identity of its narrator, were left unnamed until the end of the brief program, only to be republished—the image paired with an extended caption—in the next morning's *Libération* newspaper.

What Krauss highlights as significant about the responses by these varied and unexpected sources is that, regardless of whether or not they come from an "expert"—if the speaker in question is an arbitrator of culture with a trained critical eye or a casual observer sharing his or her impromptu impressions—they generally proceed through a "commentary by means of 'it's.'" Krauss thus counts the number of "it's" that Duras, for example, gives in front of a photograph of a woman's face by the fashion photographer Deborah Turbeville (eight: "I think she's dead," "It's not a person," "It is the allegory of painting," "No, she isn't dead," etc.); or that of an industrialist who projects a fantasy of nostalgic romance onto an image of bystanders passing in the steam of an oncoming train ("It's the arrival of a train, it's the arrival of a train in a dream, a woman waits for someone and obviously makes a mistake about the person; the man she was waiting for obviously is…he isn't in the shot, he has aged, and she was waiting for someone much younger…").[1] In almost every case, a succession of affirmative "it's" alternates with the negative "isn't." Krauss's long preamble of excerpted citations serves to prove her point that photography, following sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's assessment of it as a *un art moyen*—neither high nor low, but middling, average, and middlebrow—returns viewers, by the "very primitivism" of the "aesthetic discourse" that it elicits, to the reflex of blurting out what the picture is and isn't of. This universal will to projection and stereotype causes Krauss to doubt the possibility of photography as an object of serious criticism, since the medium too often encourages us, as illustrated by the premise of Varda's program, to indulge in the "simple inanity of 'a minute for an image.'"[2]

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[1] Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," *October*, Vol. 31 (Winter, 1984): 51-52.
[2] Ibid. 68.

I start and structure this dissertation, alongside and contra Krauss, by reflecting on the value of this exercise of expending approximately a minute on an image. Each of my four chapters is prefaced by a photograph or an image that I first describe and then ask questions of. But, unlike Krauss, I take seriously this exercise of trying, at the most basic level, to name, or put into words, the picture of the world that the photograph presents to us. While Krauss dismisses the answers generated by Varda's sociological experiment as fostering the "abandonment of the notion of critical competence in favor of a kind of survey of popular opinion," I beg to differ.[3] Where a specialized language for the aesthetics of the photographic image does not yet exist—or insofar as the medium troubles the modernist and even postmodern dichotomies of form and content, original and copy, the commodity and its critique, through which Krauss filters it—it would seem that the task of creating such a vocabulary must work with the attempts at expression, rudimentary as they may be, that the photograph inspires in viewers. That almost any photograph can prompt, as Krauss wearily decries, a "potentially endless taxonomy of subjects" is, as I will show in the pages that follow, its strength as a peculiarly slippery and challenging theoretical object. The possibilities that a single photograph can suggest—the unpredictable "candidates for what 'it' is," or what it "obviously" is or isn't—is a well-spring of perceptual renewal that does not preclude a rigorously achieved critical insight, but can lead to the invention of analytical moves and gestures that might sharpen and distill the too literal or too open-ended flow of interpretive free association.[4] To borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes, I embrace the "expansive ambiguity" that the photograph invites—as an image, an object, a document, a commodity, and as something altogether else as it now regularly crosses the line between the digital and the analog, the virtual and the actual—as the dynamic ground for the new models of seeing and thinking about the medium, its history, and the stakes of its contemporary practice that I offer in this dissertation.[5]

It is in fact the ambiguousness of the photograph that has, perhaps rather counter-intuitively, characterized its discursive development as an object of study. Beyond the activity of naming what is or is not in the photograph—and the possible match or mismatch between image and text, the visible as it is translated into the sayable—there is the difficulty of naming what the photograph is in itself. Since its celebrated arrival in the early nineteenth century and its cultural codification as a tool of realism throughout the twentieth, an obsession with how to pinpoint the essential "nature" of the medium has governed the discourse surrounding it. The degree zero of this discourse has been a persistent rhetoric of the photograph's inherent "naturalness," or given-ness, by which it automatically produces a picture of the world for us to behold. This revelatory promise attributed to its "nature," though, is by no means a stable entity. As the photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen outlines in his deconstructionist retelling of the medium's contested origins, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, early debates about what the photograph is vacillate on this double-ness within its seemingly self-evident nature: "Is nature painted by photography or being induced to paint herself? Is she produced by

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[3] Ibid. 68.
[4] Ibid. 52.
[5] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972), 124.

or a producer of photography?"[6] At once a representation of nature ("drawn" or "written" by light), and a material trace of nature (light "imprinted" on paper), photography equivocates between active and passive, image and language, the God-given and man-made. Is the photograph nature itself or a transcription of nature? Furthermore, to address the critical dilemma that Krauss raises, how do we articulate the aesthetic effects of the photograph—how do we speak and write about its specific formal qualities—when to allude to its nature is to invoke multiple mediations of the concept of "nature" as it, too, evolves alongside the material, perceptual, and technological shifts of the industrial and now information age?

In bringing to light the ontological ambivalence at the heart of photography's so-called "nature" through the linguistic slippages surrounding what it is and is not, Batchen underscores the chronic uncertainty that suffuses any effort to conceive of the medium as something beyond its customary use and acceptance as an unimpeachable reflection of reality. This is the view propagated by the realist version of the photograph as an astonishingly true-to-life "mirror" or "window" onto the world. Batchen, for his part, sidesteps such metaphors of transparency and declares that the "nature of photography itself [can] only be properly represented by way of a sustained paradox."[7] Complicating the language of "nature" that informs how we talk about the medium, Batchen is himself responding to the denaturalizing project of fellow photo-historians and theorists John Tagg and Allan Sekula. For Sekula and Tagg, who are invested in exposing how the medium reproduces and maintains the social and economic inequalities of a Western imperialist and capitalist regime, photography can have no nature or unified identity but is, in Tagg's words, a "flickering across a field of institutional spaces."[8] The photograph becomes the chief agent of what Sekula terms an "instrumental realism." It is utilized as an indispensible document in the bureaucratic machinery of proof erected by disciplinary social sciences such as anthropology, criminology, psychiatry, etc. In addition, Sekula emphasizes that the historical appearance of the medium coincides with the escalation and spread of industrial capitalism: "Photography is fundamentally related in its normative way of depicting the world to an epistemology and an aesthetics that are intrinsic to a system of commodity exchange."[9]

What exactly is this "normative way of depicting the world" to which Sekula refers? In my own exploration of the contours of the medium's elusive "nature," I likewise position the photograph somewhere within the nature/culture divide, but reject the polemical extremes of insisting that its meaning is either wholly given or wholly artificial and constructed. I argue for a radically formal understanding of the photograph that carefully attends to the "sustained paradoxes" that emerge from the shape-shifting tendencies of the medium's essential ambiguity. Within the existing scholarship, this ambiguous nature has been most influentially theorized by the semiotician Charles

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[6] Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 63.
[7] Ibid. 64.
[8] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 63.
[9] Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 1981): 22.

Sanders Peirce. The photograph is a special case in Peirce's well-known tripartite order of signs consisting of the icon, the index, and the symbol, because it collapses the icon and the index in order to produce symbolic meaning in the mind of the interpretant, or the viewer. Where an icon is a sign that resembles its object—a sign by virtue of "likeness"—an index is a sign that directly points to its cause—a sign by virtue of the "real connection" it has with its object. An example of an icon would be a painted portrait; the portrait looks like the subject depicted. An example of an index, as provided by Peirce, would be a weathercock spinning in the wind, which indicates the direction of the wind. The weathercock does not look like the wind, but it registers contact with it. Similarly, smoke points to a fire, just as a bullet-hole indexes a shot fired from a gun—neither sign of which needs to look like what it represents. The photograph, then, is an icon because it typically looks like what is in front of the camera; it is also an index because the camera and the subject were "touched" by the same light that is physically imprinted onto the film at the moment the picture was taken. The photograph simultaneously looks like, and has had existential contact with, the object that it signifies.[10]

Summarizing the photograph's status as an icon and an index, Peirce states: "A photograph is an icon, usually conveying a flood of information."[11] This informational "flood" points to, or is an index of, the temporal and spatial contingencies at play when the camera's mechanical click captures the flux of the world as an iconic likeness. Despite this duality, the photograph as a formal object has largely been synonymous with the photograph understood as an index of a discrete time and place, accompanied by the stance that any aesthetics of the medium must reckon with the inextricable, and at times admittedly overwhelming, historicity that it engenders. This critical apparatus built around the index—and the elevation of the photograph's indexicality as that which determines the medium's specificity—is what I try to avoid and bracket out in this dissertation. While I acknowledge the importance of the photograph as an index—and my third chapter expressly reframes the photographic index for our digitally-driven present—I intervene in the deadlock around the discussion about the medium's compromised (i.e. no longer indisputably indexical) ontology as it segues from an analog to a digital base. This shift from a mostly material, chemical substrate to one that is partially dematerialized and algorithmic has once again incited a crisis in the language surrounding the "nature" of the photograph.[12] I submit that to understand the medium in

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[10] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Of Reasoning in General," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 11-26.
[11] Ibid. 13.
[12] For a round-table summary of these debates, see Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, eds., *The Meaning of Photography* (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2008) and James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007). The shift from analog to digital technology has mostly been posed in terms of an ontological loss of the photograph's indexicality, since the digital camera translates light into numerical code. For a challenge to this position, see Tom Gunning's "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs" in *Still/Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 23-40. Gunning disentangles the "truth claim" of the photograph from its indexical status, arguing that

the wake of the digital, it is necessary to reconsider the photograph as an icon: that is, as a representation that has its own spatial and aesthetic logic as, precisely, a picture of the world, and not primarily as an indexical trace or record of it.

Turning to the photograph as an icon, I argue that what all photographs made by a camera have in common is that they present us with a perspectivally structured picture of the world. Although the limitations of the humanist worldview perfected by Renaissance, one-point, linear perspective have been thoroughly discussed within the field of art history in relation to painting, this has not held true in the writing about photography. The strong realist impulse towards harnessing the photographic medium's unprecedented ability to make life-like pictures has instead led to the habitual, if unknowing, conflation of its indexicality with its iconicity. In other words, the photograph's forceful "reality effect"—or the "flood of information" and contingent detail that it so readily supplies—eclipses the fact that it is, ultimately, a picture and not a copy of the world. Digital or analog, this picture that the photograph produces is mapped over and contained within the "normative way of depicting the world" that is the hegemonic rule of perspective. By turning away from the discursive preoccupation with the photograph as an index, and towards its pictorial properties as an icon imbricated within the system of perspective, I trace an alternative genealogy of photographic space as it intersects with digital space. I attempt to account for why the pictures of the world that we are seeing around us today so frequently do *not* look like what we think a photograph should look like.

Indeed, photography's naturalization of perspective as a worldview importantly ties the medium to the evolution of another nature: the "second nature" of commodity capitalism. This concept of a second nature has a philosophical lineage that extends back to Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and G.W.F. Hegel's distinction between first and second nature—or, put schematically, between the animalistic and primal instincts versus the educated and acculturated habits of the socialized subject. My interest aligns more with the sense in which Theodor Adorno uses it—following permutations of the idea in the writings of Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, and Walter Benjamin—to portray the degradation of nature in general within the "estranged, reified, dead world" of the mass production and circulation of the commodity fetish. The alienation of human relations—from each other and the products of our labor—by the transactional relations of commodity exchange is not surmountable by stubbornly enforcing the difference between a first nature that is pure and originary and a second nature that is artificial and conventional.

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even before the arrival of the digital, the photograph as a document or "proof" of the real was highly manipulable and mediated. He asserts that the digital does not eliminate the photograph's indexicality, it simply stores it differently. Likewise, Stephen Prince has argued that our belief in the reality of the photographic or filmic image does not depend only on a referential (or indexical) realism but on a perceptual realism, in what he calls a "correspondence-based model" of representation. Prince clarifies how "unreal" digital images can look startlingly "real," because digital technology "increases to an extraordinary degree a film-maker's control over the information cues that establish perceptual realism" such as texture, depth, lighting, and movement. See Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Spring, 1996): 27-37.

Within the gulf between a first and second nature lies not only the loss of some immediate or intuitive way of apprehending the world, but the full-scale mystification of reality such that, as Adorno writes, "this world of estranged things cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers."[13] The world remade by second nature becomes mysteriously puzzling and irrevocably abstract. According to Adorno, second nature transfigures everything into "semblance"—a façade of the real that is at its core "mythical," perpetuating an eternal dialectic between what is and what appears to be. "Just as the element of semblance," he explains, "is an aspect of every myth, indeed just as the dialectic of mythical fate is in every instance inaugurated by semblance in the form of hubris and blindness, so the historically produced elements of semblance are always mythical."[14]

Adorno's theorization of the interdependence between first and second nature—or how the latter usurps the former with a mythified illusion—links his thoughts to the work of Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space*. For Lefebvre, however, "second nature" does not categorically mean the debasement of nature by capitalist exploitation. Within Lefebvre's theories about urban space and everyday life, the possibility of a "second nature" designates the goal of creating a new kind of space in which "living labor can produce something that is no longer a thing, or simply a set of tools, nor simply a commodity." In this regard, second nature—which is the fruit of a "true" appropriation of natural space and resources that restores the primacy of use value over the "false" appropriation propelled by the capitalist obsession with exchange value—has the power to "[turn] the world upon its head" as the "imaginary and the utopian incorporate (or are incorporated into) the real." The successful production of this quasi-utopian space—"spaces for play, spaces for enjoyment, architectures of wisdom or pleasure"—would not entail a return to nature, but its replacement with a collectively imagined and emancipated second nature, "standing in for [first nature] or superimposing itself upon it without wreaking complete destruction."[15]

While there are foundational differences between Adorno's and Lefebvre's interpretations of second nature, both thinkers agree that, whatever stage of capitalism in which we are currently caught, we are living in a world where things are not what they seem due to the abstraction of reality into superficial appearance. While Adorno calls this all-encompassing breeding of illusion "semblance" or "myth," Lefebvre posits that it is the result of the broader triumph of mimesis within capitalism.[16] Mimesis and the free

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[13] Theodor Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 261.

[14] Ibid. 268.

[15] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 348.

[16] Bridging these themes of mimesis and nature, Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* was conceived as a "natural history" of capitalism's second nature. Within the ruins of the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, the imposition of "unnatural" connections between things surfaces as a formal principle of commodity capitalism. Items become rebuses that have one form yet serve a totally different purpose (i.e. "palm tree and feather duster," "hairdryer and Venus de Milo," "priestesses who raise high the

reign that it gives to "imitation and its corollaries" allows for the over-production of an "abstract 'spatiality' as a coherent system that is partly artificial and partly real." In a passage that echoes Peirce's language of iconicity, Lefebvre comments:

> Nature is imitated, for example, but only *seemingly* reproduced: what are produced are the *signs* of nature or of the natural realm—a tree, perhaps, or a shrub, or merely the image of a tree, or a photograph of one. In this way nature is effectively replaced by powerful and destructive abstractions without any production of 'second nature,' without any appropriation of nature; nature is left, as it were, in a no-man's-land.[17]

In this upside down world where the signs of nature have supplanted nature itself, "mimesis…pitches its tent in an artificial world, the world of the visual where what can be seen has absolute priority, and there simulates primary nature, immediacy, and the reality of the body."[18] Petrified and fascinated by this "world of signs [that] passes itself off as a true world," subjects are overcome by the pull of the visual, which "skirts or submerges problems, and diverts attention from the 'real'—i.e. from the possible."[19]

Lefebvre's concern with the social production of space as an antidote to this encroaching takeover of a universe of misleading and illusionistic signs presages the work of postmodern theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard. These writers condemn the conversion of a "society of spectacle," in which capital is transmuted into the image, into an information society, where the image is rewritten as immaterial code. In the disenchantment wrought by the postmodern acceleration of images and signs, the affective anchors of time and history are forfeited; the entire world becomes a simulation; and metanarratives of enlightenment and truth are atomized by the multiplicity and relativity of language games in an era utterly enslaved to the computer.[20] The complete and total submission of the real to a technologized order of mimetic semblance and imitation is ironically touted as a move towards liberation, with more information precipitating more access, choice, and knowledge. Lefebvre presciently denounces this specious equivalency, which resorts, again, to a rhetoric of transparency:

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vessels into which we drop cigarette butts as incense offerings"). As a type of "human aquarium" where "organic life is withered, and in this condition put on display," the phantasmagoric world of the arcades instantiate the idea that "God is made by machine" under commodity capitalism—or that the creation of the affinities between things in the world is completely arbitrary and manufactured. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 540-541.

[17] Ibid. 376.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid 389.

[20] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

"The rule of this world is founded, then, on transparency. It leads, however, into opacity and into naturalness (not that of 'nature,' but that of the signs of nature). This is a fraudulent world, indeed the most deceptive of all worlds—the world-as-fraud."[21]

I cite Lefebvre at length because he so eloquently and concisely gets at the state of things in which the photograph as a means of visual representation and as a vehicle of information (as an icon *and* an index) becomes the optimal stage for playing out the fantasies and pitfalls of a world in thrall to "second nature," in either its positive or negative, utopian or dystopian, sense. If it can be said that the new "nature" of our times is information—that "flood" which we face at every turn in our peregrinations through the screen-based visual and textual interfaces of our excessively mediated daily environments—the photograph is ever more relevant as a symptomatic artifact in its exceptional mobility through the traffic of this digitally revamped "world-as fraud." "Partly artificial and partly real," the photograph participates in fueling the "second nature" of commodity capitalism by automatically reproducing and disseminating its perspectivally centered techniques for cultural production and myth-making. Where one of the teleological aims and consequences of capitalism's relentless push to profit and accumulation is the violent subjugation and ordering of the natural world, perspective's rationalization of visual space fully adheres to this conquering objective. Moreover, perspective, too, is buttressed by a rhetoric of transparency. It is, of course, a calculated distortion of our natural sense of sight and space—a mathematical formula devised to simulate the illusion of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional plane. Nonetheless, it has become so ingrained as a sign of "naturalness" through its consummate mimesis of a vision of "natural" space that it is taken to be a "truthful" analogue for the real thing.

To be clear, the project of this dissertation is not to denaturalize perspective as an ideological construction of vision—this has already been done by the many scholars and critics whose work I build upon throughout my chapters. Rather, I hope to elucidate how the "trick" of perspective—"the most important trick in the armory of illusionist art"—is itself undergoing a massive transformation as the methods and tenets by which it has inalienably made the photograph into a recognizable picture of the world are being dismantled as the medium becomes entwined with the exponentially more malleable and variable space of the digital.[22] Classical perspective relies on a set of non-negotiable pictorial coordinates to conjure up the improbable effect of a "natural" space from a resolutely flat surface: these include the presence of a vanishing point, placed on a homogenous geometric grid, upon which objects and figures are arranged by size and proportion according to their imaginary distance from a hypothetically monocular, immobile viewer. The mechanics of the camera imposes this virtual system onto every representation it produces of the "real" world. In this dissertation I look at photographers and artists, by contrast, whose practices contribute to undoing this paradigm. By playing with the iconicity of the photograph through manipulating its in-built perspectival space in unusual ways, their works make apparent another spatial logic that is coming to the fore in the medium's transition from a predominantly analog to digital context: the

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[21] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 389.

[22] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 243.

ascendance of pattern over perspective as an organizing principle for the photograph's picturing of the world. I argue that the "decorative" or ornamental capacity of pattern repositions us as spatially mobile viewers; we participate in a mode of seeing in which the photograph does not reveal the world, but reveals the multiple ways that the world can be occluded in the picture.

The body of the dissertation is devoted to demonstrating this thesis that we are witnessing the definitive breakdown of this familiar worldview established around the fixed mastery of perspective to one that privileges the dynamic proliferation of pattern. The first half of the dissertation outlines and complicates the conventions of linear perspective that have dictated our conception of how photographic space works. The second half charts the more mutable terrain of pattern as it arises alongside and overtakes perspective, dramatically altering what is possible in the construction and perception of this space. Each chapter, in turn, focuses on a thematic dyad—"Info/Grid" (Chapter 1), "Body/Map" (Chapter 2), "Table/Archive" (Chapter 3), and "Studio/World" (Chapter 4)—that illuminates a prominent spatial motif in the work of a canonical figure next to the innovations of current practitioners. This dialectical matrix further helps to organize the counter-models that I put forward for the photograph which, taken together, seek to undermine the dominant metaphors of its supposed transparency. I thus alternately reconceive of the photograph as a grid, a map, a table, or a studio. In the first three chapters, I show how crucial perspectival cues such as depth, scale, and a vanishing point infinity are being overturned in contemporary photographic practice. In the fourth chapter, I propose that the move away from perspective towards pattern stimulates a reversible, "multistable" way of seeing that befits the photograph's split nature as part-icon and part-index, part picture and part trace of the world. Through this strategically genealogical method of relocating the past in relation to the present, I reevaluate key figures, terms, and tropes that have shaped our historical understanding of the medium in order to retheorize the present scope of what the photograph is and can do.

Under the heading "Info/Grid," the first chapter, entitled "The Empty Rooms of Eugène Atget and John Divola," rethinks the popular metaphor of the photograph as a mirror or window onto the world. I delineate the origin of this metaphor within the history of linear perspective as it intersects with the *camera obscura*. I argue that these tools for picture-making and looking share the common staging devices of the "room" and the "grid." I engage the critiques of linear perspective by Joel Snyder, Jonathan Crary, and Hubert Damisch to illustrate how the historically specific "sense of space" instituted by perspective has, as Erwin Panofsky writes, over-determined our "sense of the world."[23] Replacing the mirror and the window, I rely on the new figures of the room and the grid to read a series of photographic interiors by Eugène Atget and John Divola, who are known respectively for their pictures of turn-of-the-century Paris and modern-day Los Angeles. Far from the straightforward, documentary style that their work seems to exemplify, these photographers purposefully install mirrors and windows throughout their pictures as incidental "props" to multiply the layers of possible information in the spaces that they choose to depict. Contesting the naturalization of the photograph as a

[23] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 34.

tool of realism, I investigate how it can be used as a very different kind of tool, one for creating what I call "ambiguous space."

In the second chapter, "Looking Up, Looking Down: A New Vision in Motion," under the theme "Body/Map," I elaborate on this ambiguity of photographic space as it relates to the scale of the human body. I examine the work of the artist and educator László Moholy-Nagy along with the "perspectives games" and "eye exercises" of the early twentieth-century ophthalmologist and psychologist Adelbert Ames and the artist Elad Lassry. Each of these figures stages the human body as a point of instability within the optical puzzles generated by the photograph's uncertain dimensionality. Through deliberate distortions of distance, scale, and proportion, they use the photograph to reorient viewers proprioceptively to novel spatial possibilities. Furthering the critique of perspective from the first chapter, I explore the theories of constancy scaling and projection in the work of art historian Ernst Gombrich and the visual psychologist Edward L. Gregory. I reimagine the photograph as a kind of map, one that precariously positions the viewer somewhere between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. Situating Moholy-Nagy's call for a "New Vision" as a historical precedent to Fredric Jameson's aesthetics of "cognitive mapping," I argue that digital technology is amplifying the camera's distinctively synthetic way of picturing the world, uncovering pattern as perspective's dynamic other.

In the second half of the dissertation, I redefine two central terms within photographic theory: the index and the *punctum*. The third chapter, "Image Search: Picturing the Digital Index," concentrates on the theme "Table/Archive." I reformulate the index as a "table" for descriptive display and archival classification. Following the work of Michel Foucault, who excavates the Classical table of knowledge as the locus where epistemology and vision, knowing and seeing, meet, I discuss its resonance with the still life table as site for the facture of perceptual knowledge in Svetlana Alpers's study of Dutch still life painting, *The Art of Describing*. Combining the taxonomic table and the figure of the table in the still life genre, I show how the table's dependence on analogy as an instrument for comparison and measurement cultivates a "working" look that defies the mastering look of perspective. Through the assemblage of partial aspects that the photograph as a "working" table facilitates, I assert that pattern organizes information where perspective organizes space. I track the progression of the photographic still life from its cataloguing of nature's patterns and forms in the work of Karl Blossfeldt to the mimicry of the entropic logic of the Internet and computer screen by photographers Daniel Gordon and Michele Abeles. Expanding upon communication theorists Claude Shannon's and Warren Weaver's technical definition of information as a unit of possibility within a coded pattern of transmission, I contend that an infinity of information is displacing the order of vanishing point perspective.

The final chapter, "The *Punctum* Retouched," under the heading "Studio/World." revisits Roland Barthes's idea of the *punctum*—or that detail in the photograph that "pricks" or "touches" the viewer. I analyze the *punctum* as a myth that Barthes tells about the indexicality of the photograph. I then look closely at a selection of studio-based works by Katja Novitskova, Sara Cwynar, and Lucas Blalock that deploy the shifty indexicality of the Post-Internet photograph to disorienting effect. Each of these artists takes advantage of the ambiguities of photographic space as it is interpenetrated by the digital to "retouch" our perception of the ways in which the photograph can occupy

physical and virtual space. I argue that their hybrid, analog-digital works—which create the illusion of a palpable "texture" through variegations of pattern and information—function as decoys for our attention in a world where what we see is not what we get. If the purpose of a decoy is to mislead us with false details and confusing clues, I ask the classic question: What is wrong with this picture? Drawing from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein on "aspect-seeing" and James J. Gibson's theory of "ecological optics," I reveal how these artists "unflatten" the photograph by enacting a game of perceptual occlusion that I claim defines the aesthetics of the medium's changing "nature." This is a nature, I conclude, which does not fix a picture of things "as is," but can, as a cipher for something or someplace *other*, point us in the direction of all that we cannot see and name within the increasingly complex and volatile world from which the photograph springs.

CHAPTER 1: INFO/GRID

The Empty Rooms of Eugène Atget John Divola

Fig. 1.1, John Divola, "Evidence of Aggression #11," *Continuity* (1995)

In this photograph from John Divola's *Continuity* series—filed under "Evidence of Aggression"—what appears to be a crime scene poses itself within a slightly ambiguous perspective (fig. 1.1). A pile of too tidy debris sits beneath a hole in the wall. Just above the roughshod opening of this hole hangs an impressive, gilt-framed mirror that, quite incongruously, reflects nothing back but an opaque darkness. Instead of an illuminating view of the surroundings, only the faintest trace of a phantom figure—dressed, it seems, in a vaguely out of place fashion—mars its black surface. To one side of the mirror, an ornate side table emits a bright glare, even as undefined shadows loom from the opposite direction. And, while the hole at the center of the picture points to some blunt act of force, creating a breach that, almost like a window, invites us to peer through it into the amorphous distance of the next room, the mirror, by contrast, stands as an obscure barrier to our line of sight. It reveals the uneven lighting and disorienting limits on this side of the wall. The crime in question—the hole, the figure, what lies beyond the pierced divide—gives way to a sudden awareness of the scene's strange lack of depth: where are we if not in a room?

A placard on the floor situates us in the "Crooks Bedroom" from *Larceny Lane*. The mixed-up shadow play in the picture begins to make more sense. We are not, then, really in a room, but on a set: specifically, "Set No. 10: Senate Hotel," "Date: 6-10-31," "Prod. No: 615-00," "Dir: Roy Del Ruth." This internal caption inserted into the photograph supplies the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" of what we are seeing. It nominally shifts the location from a crime scene to a Hollywood soundstage.

But even with this new frame of reference, the accumulated spatial defilements in the picture beg for explanation. If this is a movie still extracted from some larger narrative arc, why does it include such jarring details as the headless man? How can the mirror so dramatically expose the unreality of the space in which this (fake) crime occurs? Unlike the concrete evidence of the hole—which now seems to anchor the scene as a tangible setting for some elusive plot twist—the mismatch between what we expect to see and what the mirror actually shows dismantles the illusion that this is a realistic space for action. Where this may indeed be a room, or a set, or a crime scene, it may be none of these or all of these at once. With its curiously conflicting "vanishing points," the photograph, like the mirror, leaves us hanging.

The other images in Divola's series fall under the similarly *noir*-like headings of "Hallways," "Mirrors," and "Incidental Subjects." Following them we are led deeper into a maze of well-lit yet seemingly disconnected spaces. Hallways turn around non-existent corners, ceilings drop abruptly from view, and windows and mirrors, echoing the one in this picture, often introduce a telling break in the field of vision, as their static photo-inserts dully imitate daylight or else entirely fail to register a stagehand or actor passing by. Interiors unfold, like life-size perspective boxes, within the angled confines of three walls, or they merely consist, as it turns out here, of a flattened, two-dimensional backdrop that suffices to provide the coordinates for a deferred and displaced violence. Collected one after the other, the disjointed clues scattered throughout these spaces hint at some elaborate funhouse hoax. Nonetheless, their conscientious disarray has a decidedly practical application. Never to materialize in the films themselves, the photographs are "continuity stills." They exist solely as placeholders—a vast repository of visual cues—for the arrangement of props and lighting in case a scene needs to be re-shot or edited later on.

Describing his interest in these stills, Divola—a photographer known for his own images of abandoned and vandalized sites throughout the Los Angeles area—highlights their status as, precisely, a "kind of fabricated or planted evidence." Rather than proof of a crime, however, what they serve to corroborate, according to him, is the rise of the photographic image as a "fictive construct" that has become the "representational ground" for "what we accept as real."[1] Drawn from the ancillary materials of Warner Bros. films made between 1931-34, the stills derive from a period when the industrialization of cinematic fantasy was especially intense. At the peripheries of each set was a teeming production line of designers, builders, cameramen, directors, producers, and studio photographers whose diverse duties demanded the technical need for the cross-referencing "paperwork" of the continuity still. Under a range of expert eyes, these stills helped to collage together the more or less seamlessly coherent versions of time and space that we eventually see on screen.

From behind the facades of this movie-making machinery, the continuity still thus circulated as a vital vehicle of information. On a greater level, though, the purpose of the still—to deliver a smoothly consistent reproduction of a scene over and over again—is analogous to our traditional understanding of what the photograph is supposed to do in general. The "mirror with a memory," the photograph records whatever chance configurations are placed before the camera. Binding light and space onto a chemical

[1] John Divola, *Continuity* (Santa Monica: RAM Publications, 1997), 7.

base, it transforms this ephemeral link into a material fact. And yet, a large part of this belief in the photograph as the indexical imprint or physical evidence of the real—regardless of how artificial or made-up this "real" may be—depends on the parallel conviction that this trace is presented to us within a perspectivally accurate frame. In this vein the photograph is typically seen as a faithful "mirror," on the one hand, and as a transparent "window," on the other. It either reflexively bounces back, or directly opens onto, the spaces that it captures. The technological "triumph" of the medium, as Oliver Wendell Holmes writes, is this feat of "making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture."[2]

But, as we witness in this still from *Larceny Lane*, the photograph does not always or necessarily behave in this predictable manner. It can, at times, unsettle and throw off, rather than affirm or stabilize, our perception of how the picture and the world—or the mirror and the window—interact and connect. Taking this conspicuously discontinuous still as a visual epigraph for this chapter, I use its provocative disordering of perspective as a starting point to rethink the photograph as a mirror or window onto the world. In what follows, I trace the emergence of these familiar metaphors within the history of linear perspective as it intersects with the *camera obscura*. These tools for picture-making and looking in turn share the common "staging devices" of the room and the grid. Replacing the mirror and the window, the structuring figures of the room and the grid will operate as key tropes for thinking through the photographs of Eugène Atget and Divola himself. In the work of these two photographers, we find an extreme formal amplification of the potential readings and misreadings—much like those modeled by this anonymous still—that a simple photograph of a room can inspire.

Through their vivid distortions and multiplications of perspective, the rooms of Atget and Divola demonstrate how to conceive of the photograph as a very different kind of tool, one for generating what I propose to call "ambiguous space." While each photographer approaches the medium in an apparently straightforward, documentary way, their pictures, upon closer examination, undermine such a self-evident response. Both Atget and Divola purposefully install and proliferate increasing layers of information—with the occasional aid of mirrors and windows themselves, which return in their photographs as incidental props—in the spaces that they choose to depict. As we shall see, their evocatively empty rooms become the expansive stages upon which many alternative roles and possibilities for the photograph can develop.

In many respects, the mirror and the window—as part of the apparatus, as well as symbolic motifs—are embedded into the earliest moments of the history of photography. The first known photograph, for instance, is Nicéphore Niépce's view from his studio window, "View from the Window at Le Gras" (c. 1826). To make this "heliograph," Niépce adapted the principles of the *camera obscura*, in which light passing through a small hole in the wall projects an image onto the opposite wall of a darkened interior. Niépce focused a portable *camera obscura*—fitted with a mirror to "right" the naturally inverted image—onto a pewter plate coated with asphalt and subsequently washed with a mixture of lavender oil and petroleum. It took several hours, stretching across a full day,

[2] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 73.

to "fix" an impression of the geometric slanting of nearby roofs in the French countryside from a high window on Niépce's estate. Along with Louis Daguerre's later chemical innovations, and William Henry Fox Talbot's transfer of the process onto paper, Niepce's window ushered in the gradual realization of the photographic medium as a series of views traced onto a surface, originating from a room (etymologically, *camera* meaning "chamber" or "room") within a room.

Retracing the story back even further, the view from Niépce's room is arguably undergirded by yet another window: the gridded one for constructing a "correct" or "legitimate" perspective outlined by Leon Battista Alberti in *De Pictura*, or *On Painting*, published in 1435. In his book Alberti instructs painters on how to create "apparent space" in a picture through the method of one-point perspective. As he describes it: "I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint." This rectangle is divided into "as many parts as it will receive," in order to compose a grid upon which to determine a "central point."[3] This "central point" corresponds to the "vanishing point" used by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi in his "rediscovery" of linear perspective circa 1420. In a proof that would lay the groundwork for Alberti's geometric formula, Brunelleschi set out to illustrate the perspectival accuracy of a painting he had made of the Florentine Baptistery. To do so, he drilled a hole—"as tiny as a lentil"—into the back of the painting. Looking through this peephole, the viewer, standing at a specified distance from the church, would then hold up a mirror facing the painting at approximately arm's length. Waving the mirror away, the reflection of the painted view and that of the building itself—by virtue of the converging "vanishing points" that the hole designated—would be indistinguishable.

Like the mirror in the *camera obscura*, the mirror in this experiment helped to augment and verify the image. It proved that the illusion of a three-dimensional structure can issue from a two-dimensional representation, and that a building, viewed from any distance, would maintain its "metrical coherence." To enhance this illusion, Brunelleschi applied a silver sheen to those areas of the painting that displayed patches of sky, "so that the real air and atmosphere were reflected in it, and the clouds seen in the silver are carried along…by the wind as it blows."[4] From this initial conjuring of architecture and sky, Alberti superimposed the grid of his "open window" onto Brunelleschi's mirror. He tied together the "beholder and the painted things he sees" via a pyramid of orthogonals and transversals that extended on the picture plane as if "into infinity."[5] It is in this sense of an infinitely deep view that Leonardo da Vinci would claim that the effect of perspective is like "nothing other than looking at a thing through a transparent pane of glass"; or that Albert Durer would state that *perspectiva*, from the Latin *perspicere*,

[3] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 56.
[4] Antonio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), 44.
[5] Alberti, *On Painting*, 56.

means "seeing through."[6] In another relevant iteration rooted in the early French science of optics, perspective also names the art of making mirrors.

Given this nexus of overlapping parts and metaphors—a hole, a mirror, a window, and a wall or surface that acts, by extension, as a type of screen—it is understandable how photography, frequently regarded as the synthesis of linear perspective and the *camera obscura*, might be interpreted as their historical apotheosis. The mutual goal of these proto-photographic precursors was to achieve a certain realism—one that, significantly, is bound up with simulating an illusion of spatial depth. Peter Galassi, in his book *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*, summarizes this position when he writes: "The origins of photography—both technical and aesthetic—lie in the fifteenth-century invention of linear perspective. The technical side of this statement is simple: photography is nothing more than a means for automatically producing a picture in perfect perspective." In its ability to literally transcribe a view—and, ultimately, to evolve a "syntax of art devoted to the singular and contingent"—photography, Galassi concludes, is the "epitome of realism."[7] The perspectival illusion of Alberti's "open window" is assimilated into the *camera obscura*'s projection—through the other "window" or "hole" of the aperture—of the world onto a two-dimensional plane. With the photograph, we therefore "see through" the picture twice over. A mirror-like window, it mechanically transposes depth onto surface.

In a more nuanced articulation of photography as this "tool of perfect perspective," Joel Snyder argues that, despite its purported realism, it is important to remember that the camera does not grant us a natural image of the world but in fact instrumentalizes the prescribed conventions of linear perspective.[8] Cautioning against the conflation of photography as a tool of realism with the real itself, he writes:

> Cameras do not provide scientific corroboration of the schemata or rules invented by painters to make realistic pictures. On the contrary, cameras represent the incorporation of those schemata into a tool designed and built, with great difficulty and over a long period of time, to aid painters and draughtsmen in the production of certain kinds of pictures.[9]

The conversion of the "picture surface" into a "transparent plane" was itself, as Snyder notes, an "outgrowth of the need to extend artistic practice" to accommodate the distinct sort of paintings that Alberti wanted to fill his perspectival schema.[10] These were the objects, people, and events of the *historia*, or *istoria*, which ideally, in Alberti's estimation, should include a "copiousness and variety of things": animals and buildings, as well as individuals of different gender, dress, age, and social class, with one person

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[6] James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 48-49.
[7] Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 12.
[8] Ibid. 17.
[9] Joel Snyder, "Picturing Vision," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring, 1980): 511.
[10] Ibid. 518.

that "admonishes and points out to us what is happening here; or beckons with his hand to see."[11]

Perspective, in other words, following Brunelleschi's prototype, was first and foremost a kind of architectural study, devised to portray spatial depth within a visual scene. For Alberti, it was mainly a preliminary exercise to prepare the ground for sketching out the size, proportion, and distance between figures in space. Remarking on the desirable features of the *istoria*, for example, Alberti encourages painters to concern themselves above all with mastering the "movement of change of place" within a picture, so that "some bodies are placed towards us, others away from us, and in one body some parts appear to the observer, some drawn back, others high and others low."[12] This meticulous choreography of bodies in varying states of gesture and motion necessitated perspective's systematic organization of pictorial space, mapping out a gridded guideline for their proper arrangement. "Bodies are part of the *istoria*," he continues, "members are parts of bodies, planes are parts of members." The task of any *istoria* is to figure out how these "parts fit together in the painted work."[13]

Brunelleschi's architectural foundation for perspective thus yields to Alberti's more theatrical conception of how to utilize its distribution of "apparent space." The particular space of the photograph, though—if it is indeed the combined tool of perspective and the *camera obscura*—would seem to be more dynamic than the frozen tableaux of Alberti's parable-like *istoria*. Against this crowding of the picture plane under the controlled hand of the artist, Jonathan Crary emphasizes the "metaphysics of interiority" that defines the classical experience of the *camera obscura*, which positions an "interiorized observer to an exterior world, not just to a two-dimensional representation, as is the case with perspective."[14] The images produced by the *camera obscura* are not nearly as predetermined as those produced within the calculated grid of linear perspective. Unlike perspective's stationing of the subject at an optimal point of view that aligns with the vanishing point—and the accompanying effect of unifying the seer and the seen—the *camera obscura* encloses "an indeterminate extensive space in which an observer is ambiguously situated." Occupying this space as a "free-floating inhabitant," the spectator wanders somewhere between the point of the aperture and the plane of the wall of projection. "The *camera obscura*," as Crary writes, "[does] not dictate a restricted site or area from which the image presents its full coherence and consistency."[15]

This clash between the totalizing space of perspective and the inherent discontinuity in the space of the *camera obscura* is essential to my claim that the mirror and the window—those emblematic figures of perspectival unity and transparency—cannot adequately contain the complexity of what the photograph is and does as a hybrid product of these two kinds of spaces. Analyzing the subject-effects of this in-between space of the *camera obscura*, Crary underlines the viewer's loss of bearings with respect to the "undemarcated, undifferentiated expanse of the world outside." He compares this

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[11] Alberti, *On Painting*, 78.
[12] Ibid. 79.
[13] Ibid. 70.
[14] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990), 34.
[15] Ibid. 41.

phenomenological uncertainty to René Descartes's similar characterization of the mind as a darkened room through which the light of reason can only enter via a withdrawal of the senses from all "corporeal things" ("I will now shut my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall disregard my senses").[16] Instituting the epochal split between the body and the mind, Descartes's philosophical "proof" is most pertinent here in its transfer of the locus of representation and knowledge away from the exterior world and into an abstract, interior one. Extrapolating from this "Cartesian *camera obscura*," we cannot truly perceive or know the world simply by "seeing through" the two-dimensional screens of a mirror or window. Instead, we must meditate upon the extension of space and objects within the darkened room of the mind that is also pivotally figured, in Descartes's other critical contribution, as a sort of grid: the coordinate system that he invents to summon a three-dimensional world, once again, from a two-dimensional surface through the numerical charting of points on a plane.

In its dialectical rationalization of the space of perspective and the space of the *camera obscura*, the infinite, homogenous space of the Cartesian coordinate system is where the room and the grid most clearly manifest themselves as the invisible supports behind the more visible metaphors of the mirror and the window. Photography mediates between the *camera obscura*'s "metaphysics of interiority" and the exteriority of perspective's two-dimensional plane. It projects a hypothetical interior—a perspectival box—upon which to stage the grid of representation and its negotiation of objects and bodies in space. Along these lines, Erwin Panofsky in his landmark essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form* observes that the Cartesian grid, "in the guise of a 'coordinate system,'" resolves the central perspectival problem of delineating "the difference between 'front' and 'back,' 'here' and 'there,' 'body' and 'nonbody.'"[17] It formalizes an index of spatial orientation, which fulfills Alberti's scenographic ambitions for perspective as a "reticulated net" of lines and points "equivalent to a network of spatial adverbs" of "what is here, what there, and what over there."[18] In the context of Alberti's text this indexing of space is geared towards delimiting the best method by which to maneuver figures within the intricately imagined scenes of the *istoria*. In the modern context the workings of linear perspective—formerly comprehensible only for a quite specific audience of painters and architects—is naturalized as the dominant mode of realist representation. Perspective becomes the governing force of a "sense of space" that extends, as Panofsky writes, into our very "sense of the world."[19]

What might it mean, then, to disentangle this naturalization of perspective's "sense of space" from our "sense of the world"? I argue that to privilege the room and the grid over the mirror and the window is one way to begin challenging this equivalence. By resorting to the more explicitly constructive metaphors of the room and the grid, we are obliged to acknowledge that the perspectival realism associated with the photograph—the sense of "seeing through" into the depths of a picture—is not a pre-given property of the

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[16] Ibid. 43.
[17] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 34.
[18] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 6.
[19] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 34.

image. As a result, we can inquire into the pluralistic origins of perspective as something other than the exclusive purveyor of the real, and dwell more fully within the "indeterminate" space that the *camera obscura* intrinsically harbors within it. Hubert Damisch, in his magisterial treatise on the history of perspective, adopts this interrogatory stance to excavate the "perspective stories" buried under its single origin myth. Damisch argues that perspective was never just a tool of realism, but was utilized more broadly as an ornament of illusion. As he enumerates, and as we have briefly glimpsed, perspective was first, "an extension of architecture," second, "an extension of theater," and third—as the work of Atget and Divola will flesh out in more detail—"an extension of decoration." "Decoration is linked to the theater, and the theater to architecture, and architecture to decoration and even to painting, from which Alberti," as Damisch comments, "maintained that it had borrowed most of its ornamental elements: columns, pilasters, cornices, pediments, etc."[20]

Under these new terms, if we were to look at the photograph again, we might see surfacing from its depths—as Damisch sees in Alberti's *istoria*—the armature of these bits and pieces of décor borrowed from architecture, theater, as well as painting. Perspective steps forward as part of this assembly, laying out an "apparent space" to put things in place. It unveils itself as an indispensable staging device, rather than as underlying evidence of the real. Likewise, the photograph—as a "tool of perfect perspective"—supplies a projective space for the "copiousness and variety" of myriad channels of visual information to enter into the picture. Turning now to the work of Atget and then Divola, we can ask anew—in light of this more capacious view of perspective and of the photograph—what their mysteriously empty rooms, with their mysteriously ambiguous perspectives, seek to represent or accomplish. In their very emptiness, the rooms of Atget and Divola bring into relief the photograph's function as this indeterminate, ambiguous space that holds open multiple entry points into its contingent play of meanings and uses.

As with the many overlooked aspects in the history of perspective, the view onto the emptiness in the photographs of Eugène Atget (b. 1857-1927) has also been informed—or misinformed—by a singular origin myth. This myth is perhaps advanced most famously by Walter Benjamin, who, in his early essays on photography, compares Atget's photographs of turn-of-the-century Paris to scenes of a crime. As a "virtuoso" photographer of the "unremarked, forgotten, cast-adrift," Atget, according to Benjamin, initiates an emancipatory "new stage" in the history of the medium. "The scene of a crime, too, is deserted," Benjamin writes. "It is photographed for the purposes of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences."[21]

Looking at one such empty scene, one may very well wonder what it is "standard evidence" of (fig. 1.2). Like an inverted visual echo of the photograph with which I began, the picture shows a mirror in a room—this time, though, the mirror acts to increase the depth of the room, creating more "apparent space" than there actually is. The

[20] Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 237.
[21] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken: 1969), 226.

Fig. 1.2, Eugène Atget, *Hôtel Matignon*, *Austrian embassy*, c. 1905

Fig. 1.3, Eugène Atget, *Hôtel Matignon*, *Austrian embassy*, c. 1905

mirror has been fitted, rather oddly, into a fireplace, and in it we can catch a reflection of Atget himself underneath the black curtain of his camera. Writing in the early 1930s, Benjamin, in his "crime scene" assessment of the Atget's work, had undoubtedly yet to grasp the full scope of the photographer's oeuvre, which, in the final count upon his death in 1927, numbered over 8,000 negatives. Nevertheless, Benjamin saw a hidden political valence in their almost uniform emptiness. For him, it signified Atget's disavowal of the "signposting" found in commercial photography, with its "world-is-beautiful" gloss that can "endow any soup can with cosmic significance."[22] Disregarding the fact that Atget himself identified as a commercial photographer—specializing, as he advertised, in "Documents pour artistes"—Benjamin casts a rather romantic aura around him. As he tells it, Atget was a former actor who became so "disgusted with the profession" that he "wiped off the mask, and then set about removing the make up from reality too."

Benjamin's staunchly anti-theatrical position falls in line with his idea that Atget's photographs "suck the aura out of reality."[23] To complicate this myth-making reading of his work, however, here is a second image from the same series (fig. 1.3). Around 1905 Atget took a total of thirty-seven photographs of the then Austrian Embassy (known as the Hôtel Matignon, today the official residence of the Prime Minster of France). The series begins with the door knocker at the embassy's entrance, proceeds up its curved staircases, detours through several alcoves, and ends up in the upper salons where the fireplaces are all blocked off by mirrored panels. Many of the same elements in this picture persist from the previous one: the circular sofa, the floral carpet, even the black curtain of Atget's camera, moved to the margins of the frame. It could, ostensibly, be a different view of the same room. But upon closer scrutiny, the patterned molding on the ceilings and walls do not match. It is a different room, from a different angle—a variation on a theme. Following Benjamin's "crime scene" interpretation, Atget does seem to be stalking the traces of some unknown event throughout the building. Yet, if this were really so, the theatrical way that he composes these images—posing his camera frontally, then furtively aslant, like an actor making his way across a stage—would seem to be highly extraneous. What "evidence" can be gleaned here? Or, as John Szarkowski put it: "What did he think he was photographing?"[24]

Molly Nesbit, in her monograph *Atget's Seven Albums*, unpacks the myth surrounding Atget's practice by suggesting that what he was really photographing was a profusion of "technical signs." Far from a revolutionary iconoclast who rejected the commodity form of the photograph, Atget was thoroughly enmeshed in it on a daily basis. As Nesbit explains, Atget primarily photographed "on spec" for the numerous clients that he kept alphabetically in his *repertoire*. This address book or directory included "a network of painters, illustrators, engravers, architects, decorators, sculptors, set designers, amateurs of *Vieux Paris*, libraries of many kinds, and publishers."[25]

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[22] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2 (1931-1934)*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 526.
[23] Ibid. 518.
[24] John Szarkowski, cited in Gerry Badger, *Eugène Atget* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001), 96.
[25] Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 20.

Satisfying these clients spurred Atget across Paris in a methodical pursuit of their requests: for the stone motifs on historical landmarks; for the avenues of "Old Paris" that remained after Haussmannization; and for the assorted interiors and settings that could provide the backdrops for illustrators and painters to slip their caricatures or stories into place. Processed and sold at about 1 franc each, Atget's images traveled between "painters' cartons, decorators' folios, and libraries' files."[26] They were, in short, stock photos—something to store away for reference or study. Confirming this anonymous fate, Atget himself habitually maintained, "These are simply documents I make." In answer to Szarkowski's question, it would seem that what Atget chiefly saw in his photographs was another kind of *repertoire*: a panoply of looks, namely, client's looks.

The theatricality that Benjamin evacuates from Atget's pictures is thus very much rooted at their formal core. Atget was not so much invested in fixing or extracting the truth from a past moment in time—rag-picking or salvaging the "forgotten" and "cast-adrift" from obscurity. Much more practically, he aimed to set a stage, or lend the *mise-en-scène*, for someone or something to fill in the picture later, or to take it up for some larger purpose or project. Nesbit argues that this "technical, that is to say, the commodity form" did not ever leave Atget's photographs.[27] In one picture alone, he could insert any quantity of technical signs to appeal to his prospective audiences. Of the two pictures from the Hôtel Matignon cited here, for example, the mantelpiece arrangement of the bronze clock and candelabras might be of interest to a historian or antiquarian; the wall flourishes or furniture could be replicated by a decorator or craftsman; even the mirrored reflections could be mined towards a painter's *étude* on how to execute a composition in "complementary view," juxtaposing foreground and background within the same picture.

This stockpiling of information into a single photograph renders it into a peculiarly excessive "document." Harkening back to Alberti's preparatory use of perspective for his *istoria*, Nesbit likens Atget's photographs to technical drawings in a "manufacturing process: they were a step, a preliminary diagram that would help produce another commodity and nothing more."[28] In this regard they are not unlike the continuity stills that paved the way for the assembly line machinations of cinematic illusion. Yet, Atget was catering not just to the movies, but to an entire industry of print, theater, architecture, and any other number of venues of cultural production and consumption. Beyond their supplementary function, then, I would contend that Atget radically aestheticizes—in a way that neither Benjamin nor Nesbit anticipates—the virtual inexhaustibility of information within the photograph itself. When Atget proclaims that "these are simply documents that I make," he reduces the value of his authorial intervention, insisting upon the information his photographs contain over the frames through which this information is conveyed. To the contrary, I would insist just as strongly that Atget's artistry resides in the polysemous labor of his photographs to metonymically unfold multiple frames of looking within the image. He does this by skillfully manipulating perspective, opening up and maximizing the space of the photograph so as to absorb as many potential views and projections as possible. He exploits the medium's power to capture contingency into a formalized and staged artifact.

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[26] Ibid. 17.
[27] Ibid. 82.
[28] Ibid. 98.

Underscoring the latent theatricality of Atget's approach to photography, Nesbit observes that, behind his lens, "the document resembled nothing so much as an empty box."[29]

Returning to the images of the Hôtel Matignon above, this statement is strikingly embodied in the photographs themselves. Atget's photograph of the "empty box" of the room incorporates the other "empty box" of the mirror in the fireplace. One perspective slides into another, and this digressive concatenation of perspectives is what constitutes the series as a whole, "endowing emptiness with variation."[30] Framing the "proscenium arch" of the mirrored fireplaces like a picture window into another space, Atget reflexively represents his own orchestration of the photograph as an empty stage for the future enactment of multiple looks and circuits of looking. Gazing into this theatricalized "looking glass," the room seems to fold back on itself—an effect that Atget cannily dramatizes. Notably, this play of mirrored reflections was a customary attribute of the Parisian interior. In *The Arcades Project* (a compendium of citations and motifs that reads like the textual counterpart to Atget's body of work), Benjamin notes that the "window mirror" was a "characteristic furnishing" of fashionable Parisian apartments, and that the city had a "passion for mirror-like perspectives." In the "mirror galleries of rococo interiors," the amplification of space "makes orientation difficult." "Where doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in, with all the equivocal illumination." Space itself becomes "ambiguous, double-edged."[31]

In his photographs of the Hôtel Matignon, Atget discloses his own picture-making strategy, in the sprit of the age, to be "ambiguous, double-edged." His matter-of-fact documentation of a room transforms into an allegorical manifesto of his role as a photographer who, in many ways, is involved in this comprehensive business of making "real life" continuity stills. Into the regimented *repertoire* of his photographs, Atget implants strata upon strata of spatial clues and visual signs. Each photograph carries within it its own unique piece of information, yet this information is only accessible—much like the "evidence" in a Hollywood continuity still—depending on the point of view, and the "technical" savvy, of whomever is doing the looking. In this sense, a certain measure of perspectival ambiguity is almost always built into Atget's work. Perspective is flexibly employed as a staging or framing device to make room for the open-ended play of representation. Mirrors and windows, similarly, become the fortuitous props that help to embroider and expand the purview of the photograph's "apparent space." "Working like a stage designer, but with only two dimensions," as Maria Morris Hambourg writes, "Atget learned to limit, direct, and modulate space with planar architectural elements and light." He came to understand that space was at the "crux of his pictorial problem."[32]

The principal task of Atget's photography was not, then, to chase down the traces of "what-has-been"—Benjamin's "standard evidence for historical occurrences"—but to gather an immense index of "incomplete" space: room after room and street after street of

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[29] Ibid. 147.
[30] Ibid. 119.
[31] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 538-542.
[32] Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget, Vol. III* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 14.

views and perspectives that acted as the empty boxes for the multi-faceted trajectories of viewers' projections. Within this forward-looking rather than backward-looking temporality, the photograph concedes some of its authoritative purchase on the real; it becomes a luminous cipher of possibility—a document of sheer décor—lying in wait for its future elaboration. Perspective, too, in this "decorative" capacity, doubles itself. The pictorial ground it constructs turns into just another figure among all the other "technical" information lurking within the frame. Nesbit latches onto this accumulation of "functional ambiguities" within Atget's photographs to underscore that the unseen plenitude within their emptiness was part of his "signature": "The ambiguities did not take anything away from the value of the pictures as commodities; ambiguous, the documents shimmered with possibilities. The technical sign acquired a glow."[33]

This technical "glow" that Nesbit ascribes to Atget's "documents" inflects them with a different "aura" than the one that Benjamin credits the photographer with eradicating. Whereas Nesbit ultimately concurs with Benjamin in her recuperation of Atget as a tradesman-scholar with crypto-Marxist sensibilities, I argue the opposite. Less polemically and more obliquely, Atget exchanges the ritualistic "cult of remembrance" associated with conventional portrait photography—the most prevalent use for the medium up till the turn-of-the-century—for a more profound imbrication in the abstraction of space within capitalist modernity. Following Benjamin's founding premise for *The Arcades Project*, the world after the rapid industrialization of the 19th century is left in a kind of "dream state," strewn with phantasmagoric constellations and rebus-like formations that are partly artificial and partly real. Rather than serving as a disenchanter—draining the "aura" out of reality—Atget re-instills it back into the photograph in a different form. While his photographs disguise themselves as mirrors or windows—offering a see-through guarantee of the real—they cloak their true identity as the prime vehicles for transmitting the piecemeal abstraction of space within this dream world. Space itself becomes a kind of information to be hoarded and disseminated via the photograph, which can just as easily—against its evidentiary promise—serve to disorient rather than secure our epistemological and perceptual bearings, multiplying reflections and counter reflections, real projections and fictive ones. In Atget's photographs, space is installed as a structure of ambiguity that correlates with the intensifying degrees of information that the photograph is intended to communicate. The photograph becomes the background—the empty box—in which this masquerade of partially legible and partially illegible visual signs takes place; it becomes a tool for generating ambiguous space no less than realist space. The glowing "aura" of the technical in Atget's photographs emanates from this ever-present static of crisscrossed visual cues, suffusing their emptiness with a barely detectable perceptual noise.

This reading of the deliberately ambiguous spaces in Atget's work goes against his popular acceptance as the clear-eyed herald, as Benjamin put it, of a "new stage" in photography. By this account, Atget is the first photographer to deliver the unprecedented "shock of realism unadorned." As Berenice Abbott, one of his greatest champions, phrases it, Atget's photographs give us nothing less than "the real world, seen with wonderment and surprise…mirrored in each print."[34] John Szarkowski—who repeatedly

[33] Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, 84.
[34] Berenice Abbott, *The World of Atget* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964), viii.

figures the photograph as a "mirror" or "window" in his influential formalist analyses—additionally upholds Atget as a master of realism, declaring that Atget "in his thirty working years provides perhaps the best example of what a photographer might be."[35] Yet, as I have attempted to show, this mythical canonization of Atget's work requires a slight displacement in our own point of view. To continue to accept him as the paragon and progenitor of modern photography, we must also accept that its origins spring from what are quintessentially a set of not quite "correct" or "legitimate" perspective studies. Atget's technical "documents" were not strictly valued for their quality as coherent pictures, but for the quantity of serviceable information transported within their bounds. The "new stage" in photography that Atget rightfully symbolizes should thus be taken, more advisedly, as coming out of his consummate awareness of the photograph *as* a stage for the circulation of information within the growing channels of mass communication. This does not diminish their value as exemplars of what the photograph is or can do, but rather exponentially diversifies its role—no less that of Atget's as "*père de la photographie moderne*"—as something infinitely more surprising and versatile than just a routine mirror or window onto a world. Moreover, this is a world where the experience of space, in the wake of the all-encompassing rise of commodity capitalism, has itself begun to fragment into something infinitely more abstract and indefinable.

Recalling Damisch's tripartite periodization of perspective as first an extension of architecture, then of theater, then of decoration, Atget's photographs comfortably extend into all these spheres. In their exceptionally protean emptiness, they affiliate themselves with a wide scope of aesthetic, commercial, historical, political, and philosophical points of view. If we are to take them as the founding texts of modern photography, they imply that, at its base, this traffic of projections is immanent to the photograph. Seen from another angle, or another, or another, the photograph can just as readily disrupt as uphold the supposed realism upon which so much of its "perfect" picturing of the world rests. This loosening of the bind between perspective's "sense of space" and the photograph's more ambiguous "sense of the world" is even more pronounced in the work of John Divola, to whom we turn to next. Divola materializes the submerged aesthetics of information in Atget's photographs in a more overtly "decorative" way. In his empty rooms, we watch the "open window" of perspective steadily recede as a torrent of visual noise is brought to the photograph's documentary surface.

Where the emptiness in Atget's photographs provides an abundant space for viewers' projections, the emptiness in Divola's photographs is filled with the cumulative residue of the very real tampering, interference, and destruction of a space wrought by a stream of anonymous interlopers. Working over fifty years after Atget, Divola (b. 1949) began his career in the 1970s by photographing sites marked by actual "evidence of aggression" in and around the neighborhoods of Southern California, where he continues to live and work today. In early series such as *Forced Entries*, *House Removals*, and *Vandalism*, Divola established his ongoing preoccupation with structures whose boundaries have been ruptured or breached. As with Atget, what brings Divola to these emptied out spaces—which have since become the default settings for almost all his photographs—is not an attraction to the nostalgic pathos of obsolescence or decay but

[35] Szarkowski, cited in Badger, *Eugène Atget*, 3.

rather the artistic exigency of needing a place to make work. As Divola frankly relates of his decision to actively locate these disenfranchised pockets within Los Angeles's suburban sprawl, "The reason I ended up in abandoned houses is that I didn't have a studio. There was no way for me to deal with any other mode than the documentary because I didn't have any money to rent a studio."[36]

Appropriating these rundown structures as his studio, Divola—who, besides collecting continuity stills, has also photographed the made-to-order nature of Hollywood landscapes, as well as, in the early 1980s, the slow demolition of the MGM back lot in Culver City—grounds his work in this long-term documentation of the built environment (whether real or artificial) as it deteriorates. While this may seem to be a relatively familiar subject within the documentary mode, Divola distinguishes himself in his treatment of this deterioration by concentrating, as he elucidates, "on the points of interaction between inside and outside."[37] Trespassing into these neglected structures, Divola formally isolates the further absence left behind when windows are shattered and doors have been kicked in, opening up a permeable threshold of rectangles, squares, and grids within the photograph's already "empty box." In this manner Divola trails the breakdown of the material strictures of perspective's "apparent space" as the room, interior, or house that he is documenting itself breaks down.

This metamorphosis of an empty space into a found studio for Divola's photographic experimentations is exemplified in his *Zuma* series (1977-78), which tracks the demise of deserted lifeguard headquarters on Zuma Beach in Malibu, CA. The inaugural image of the series presents us with yet another iteration of the central motifs we have seen in the photographs discussed thus far (fig. 1.4). What appears to be a crime scene is in fact a real one this time—at least in the minor sense of theft, vandalism, and, as we will see, arson. Although there are no mirrors in the room, its "picture frame" windows open onto the scenic expanse of the early morning sky over the Pacific Ocean. Bits of glass from the broken windows litter the brown-carpeted floor, and something like a crowbar or file lies amidst the wreckage next to an empty suitcase. The photograph documents a fairly spare and nondescript scene, but there is something in the way that Divola shoots it—symmetrically balancing the trapezoidal outlines of the ceiling and the floor as they converge towards the hazy dawn horizon—that highlights its flimsiness. One takes away the sensation of looking into an artificial set, with the sea and sky as backlit projections, and the miscellaneous detritus so much "fabricated and planted evidence."

Divola accumulates dozens of photographs of the house as it disintegrates over the course of two years. In the literal slow burn of its collapse, however, it is not just the weather and the elements that conspire to erode it, but a motley crew of forces that accelerate the building's almost epically cinematic ruin. Besides the random vandals that punch holes in the walls and leave behind newspapers and liquor bottles, the Malibu fire department uses the house to practice extinguishing fires. Its successively charred interior becomes a surreal counterpoint to the cyclical sublime of the "unearthly conflagration" of Los Angeles sunsets "whose optical effects," as Fredric Jameson has written, "are due,

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[36] John Divola, *Three Acts* (New York: Aperture, 2006), 137.
[37] John Divola, "An Interview with John Divola," in *Three Interviews: Divola, Callis, Axelrad*, ed. James R. Hugunin (Chicago: U-Turn, 1987), 5.

Fig. 1.4, John Divola, *Zuma* Series, 1977-78

Fig. 1.5, John Divola, *Zuma* Series, 1977-78

we are told, to the extreme density of chemical pollution in the atmosphere."[38] This incendiary quality is heightened by Divola's own interventions into this chain-reaction of activation and destruction. Whereas Atget installs ambiguous space into his photographs as a "service feature" for his clients, Divola unapologetically takes up the "empty box" of the room as a blank canvas for his graffiti. Spreading a net of "evenly spaced marks" that aggregate into a "wide kind of field,"[39] he collates the layers of "evidence" within the photograph into an aesthetic statement. Typically using silver spray paint, Divola's deskilled painterly gestures offset the fiery bursts of the pink and orange sky with an indoor shower of silver rain (fig. 1.5). As the building creeps towards its dissolution, the "points of interaction between the inside and outside" become vibrantly discordant. Patches of soot and ash revert the peeling interior—with Divola's marks still faintly visible—into a nearly monochromatic backdrop for the hallucinogenic spectacle of the natural landscape outside (fig. 1.6).

In their recursive following of a single site as it changes over time, Divola's photographs would seem to be continuity stills of the most literal sort. Interestingly, Divola himself categorizes them as a kind of "paperwork"—not insofar as they efficiently circulate information, but as a reaction to the photograph's role in the escalation of "secondary" information throughout contemporary visual culture. If Atget's stock photographs symbolize a "new stage" for the medium in the early 20th century, by Divola's time, the photograph is firmly inculcated into almost every realm of artistic and cultural production. As Divola recounts, his formative encounters with art were in fact primarily filtered through the photograph:

> Being out in Los Angeles [in the 1970s], I wasn't seeing much art in its original form. I was looking at art magazines and seeing photographs of performances, photographs of minimalist art, photographs of paintings on walls—all manner of art reduced into photographic reproduction…By the time I began my *Vandalism* work I'd concluded that everything is fabricated to be photographed…ultimately, if [art] has any cultural efficacy, it is through its representation photographically.[40]

Giving credence to Benjamin's insight that, with the ubiquitous rise of the photograph, "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility," Divola's personal experience of the truth of this statement coalesces into a pointed aesthetic strategy.[41] Pursuing this idea of the "fabricated to be photographed," Divola explicitly takes advantage of the visual dissonance that can occur between art—or life—and its photographic reproduction. Un-grounding the viewer's sense of perspective throughout his work, he exploits the photograph's easy transition between art and

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[38] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 178-9.
[39] John Divola, "Interview with John Divola (1978)," interview by Dinah Portner. *Journal of Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies,* September 1978: unpaginated.
[40] John Divola, cited in Karen Sinsheimer, "California and John Divola," in *John Divola: As Far As I Could Get* (New York: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2013), 98.
[41] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 224.

Fig. 1.6, John Divola, *Zuma* Series, 1977-78

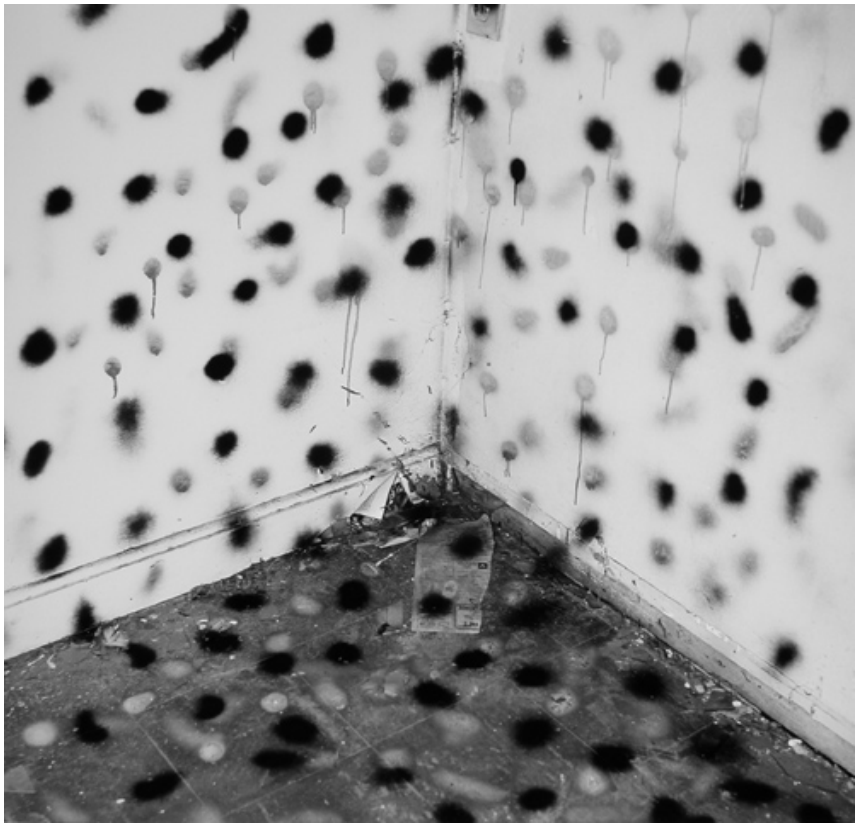

Fig. 1.7, John Divola, *Vandalism* Series, 1973-75

document in order to reverse the trajectory of Atget's "documents pour artistes," making his documents "pass" for art and vice versa.

In this regard, Divola, despite his embrace of the photograph as a document, emphatically divorces it from nature. While the photograph is indisputably an index or trace of something in the world, this something—as with Atget's readymade backdrops mistaken for crime scenes—may not be what we think it is. Divola notes the increasing "remoteness of the natural" within the photograph, which, as he comments, has "become so charged" that we no longer "see it 'uncontaminated' by cultural conventions." As his fascination with the half-real, half-fake dream world of Hollywood attests, for Divola, what now substitutes for nature is the faux nature and faux sense of space that the photograph artfully dissembles and reinforces as a "fictive construct" for "what we accept as real." This does not mean that the photograph "lies"—an accusation put forth by postmodern critics of photography, who reduce it to the mere dumb prop of ideological discourse. Instead, Divola—in his play with this movement of the photograph between art and document—exposes how the photograph can be used for something other than the standard "reality effect" that has become its redundant sphere of possibility. "We're in this 'envelope' of second-hand information which is increasing," Divola explains. "My work is more and more a reaction to existing in that envelope. I'm simply adding my images to the envelope."[42]

Through Divola's self-conscious approach to the photograph as this tool to react against—as well as add to—the "voluminous onslaught" of visual information in which we have become immersed, he brings us to the final stop of the dizzying metaphorical transport between the photograph as a mirror, a window, a document, an empty box, a room, or a crime scene. All these potential functions and identities are subsumed into Divola's formal toolbox for constructing the photograph as something against nature—and against the transparency of the photograph as a mirror or window—even as it seems to be the ideal container for its encapsulation. Playing with our growing uncertainty about the photograph's reflective veracity, he pursues its denaturalization through premeditated acts of "decoration." Co-opting the grid as one of his central decorative motifs, Divola vandalizes the "apparent space" of the photograph's "perfect perspective" such that its ineradicable illusion of depth is subversively undone. On the importance of the grid as a figure in modern art, Rosalind Krauss appositely observes that it opposes perspective's "science of the real": "[The grid] is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface…Unlike perspective, the grid does not map the space of a room or a landscape or a group of figures onto the surface…It is a transfer in which nothing changes place."[43]

The startling groundlessness of the grid's leveling of space is what we find in this photograph from Divola's *Vandalism* series, in which an *ad hoc* grid of dots and points confronts the viewer with the photograph's emphatically two-dimensional surface (fig. 1. 7). For this picture Divola applied his signature graffiti technique of "evenly spaced marks" onto a corner of an empty room. These marks appear to be somehow suspended in space, levitating like a blur of drops and drips. Although it may appear as if Divola has

[42] Divola, *Three Interviews*, 22.
[43] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979): 52.

manipulated the surface of the photograph after it has already been printed—or has even double-exposed one photograph on top of another—what we are looking at is the visual consequence of his physical alteration of a real, three-dimensional space that, when transferred onto the photograph's two-dimensional plane, translates into an unnerving stillness and flatness. Turning the photograph's "perfect perspective" inside out, Divola draws our attention to its fundamental depthlessness. The very illusion of depth is shoved into the "background" of the picture, as the centrifugal dispersal of drifting "blind spots" overshadows the central "vanishing" point. Indeed, Divola's floating grid brings to mind Alberti's other grid, or the "veil" that he recommends as a painter's aid: "This veil I place between the eye and the thing seen, so the visual pyramid penetrates the thinness of the veil…This veil always presents to you the same unchanged plane…On panels or on walls, divided into similar parallels, you will be able to put everything in its place."[44]

Here, the "unchanged plane" of Divola's veil works towards the opposite effect, even as it seems to retain Alberti's "visual pyramid" within the picture. Far from holding "everything in its place," Divola's lattice of dots and points fluctuates and flutters, reverberating like pricks of visual noise. Reminiscent of the burnished silver that Brunelleschi applied to accentuate the sky in his painting, Divola's use of silver and black spray paint is also a nod to the optical tricks employed by the set designers and decorators of old Hollywood, who would exaggerate the color tones and lighting on a set knowing that everything would be recorded onto black and white celluloid. Divola plays a similar trick in this photograph, with the awareness that the interaction of black and silver dots would generate layered shadows when converted to a photograph. Bringing us back to the interiority of the Cartesian *camera obscura*, this optical effect of the hovering dots stems from the fact, as Divola explains, that "your mind forms them into a grid which has its own kind of existence separate from the surface on which it lies."[45]

Using the grid for this disorienting rather than organizing effect, Divola interrupts the smooth performance of the photograph's perspectival realism. As we have seen, Divola's photographs are fraught with this facturing of visual noise in the empty spaces that they depict. Noise—which can be defined as a stream of unexpected or unwanted signals within a channel of communication—is amplified in Divola's pictures as a means to hold the viewer, and not the picture, in place. In looking at his photographs—and this photograph in particular—we are caught in a net of perceptual doubt about its mechanics, construction, and perspectival orientation. They compel us to question what we are looking at, in the same fashion that Atget's empty rooms lead us to question what has happened or is meant to occur there. The auratic static of the "technical" in Atget's pictures thus reemerges somewhat differently in Divola's work in his knowing play with the technical limits and possibilities of the photographic medium. We experience a palpable ambivalence about where to place our focus—no less belief—within the flurry of visual signals that Divola either implants or leaves to run loose within the photograph, letting these contingent points of reference bounce off of each other in the picture and in our minds. This build-up of visual information is not, as with Atget, a function of the photograph's commodity status, but is a kind of formalized "interference pattern" that Divola lodges within the photograph to unsettle or confuse our assumptions about its true

[44] Alberti, *On Painting*, 68-69.
[45] Divola, "Interview with John Divola (1978)," unpaginated.

purpose. Instead of one central point of focus, there are many; instead of a "sense of space" that coheres with our "sense of the world," there is, again, a disconnect between what we expect the photograph to show and what we see.

In this double-edged use of the photograph to document both the contingent configurations of a very real space and to undo the realism of that space within its photographic reproduction, Divola borrows Atget's stage and paints a grid on it, redirecting and interfering with the range of projections that can take place within the photograph's "empty box." He throws the "open window" of perspective awry, deploying the grid's "lateral spread" in which "nothing changes place" to graphically manifest pattern—or in Damisch's terms, decoration and ornamentation—as perspective's other. This underplayed role of perspective coincides with the other, underplayed role of the photograph as a tool for generating—in opposition to the naturalization of the "correct" or "legitimate" space of perspective—what I have called "ambiguous space." As the flatness of patterned surface overtakes the illusion of perspectival depth, the photograph—no longer merely the "tool of perfect perspective"—itself begins to act in ways that paradoxically renew rather than tautologically reproduce our familiar perceptions of the world around us. Under this new light, the photograph reveals itself as more of a puzzle than a mirror or a window. Rather than allowing us to instantaneously "see through" it, it forces us to piece together a better picture of the ever more complex and information-saturated world that we now inhabit.

Divola has said that the "beauty of photography is distance."[46] Instead of thinking of this distance in terms of perspective's infinitely deep view, perhaps another way to consider it is to understand the photograph as always potentially preserving within it that "indeterminate, extensive space" of the *camera obscura*. The empty rooms of Atget and Divola hold the ambiguity of this space open, bending the "mirror with a memory" in such a way that it shimmers with mirage-like possibilities. And, like a mirage, each photographer's work arises from the material limits of a pre-existing world, even as they regularly produce images that exceed it. The auratic "noise" in their pictures, then, comes from this unique "technical" distance nested within the photograph, which engages us from within this gap between the real and its photographic representation. As Divola says, affirming the unpredictable expansiveness of the medium for the maker and the viewer alike: "You can't control it totally; that's the thing about photography, it pulls you into the world."[47]

[46] John Divola, "Interview with John Divola," interview by Simon Baker, in *John Divola: As Far As I Could Get*, 80.
[47] Divola, *Three Acts*, 141.

CHAPTER 2: BODY/MAP

Looking Up, Looking Down: A New Vision in Motion

Fig. 2.1, Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Untitled*, 1926-8

A sequence of photographs taken by Lázló Moholy-Nagy (b. 1895-1946) during the late 1920s at the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany, seem to act as a set of informal "eye exercises." Each image presents itself as an off-kilter architectural study. Instead of stationing himself at a level vantage point, Moholy-Nagy climbs and balances, crouches and dangles from various angles of the iconic art school's stacked balconies and gridded glass facades. The one or two human subjects present in these snapshots are no more stably situated. They either glance down from a great height or glimpse upward from below. Peeking and peering at each other and at Moholy-Nagy, they interact with the blocky modernist structures around them like adventurous children climbing an enormous architectural jungle gym. In one image a lone man throws an arm and a leg over the corner of a railing as if he is about to jump or fly off. Moholy-Nagy skews his camera from the ground up so that the man is balanced at the apex of what appear to be tiers of steel and cement soaring into the sky. In another image, two women are positioned on separate floors of a Dessau master-house. One lies on the ledge of a lower terrace as she

looks up at a second woman leaning over an upper balcony with her back turned to the Moholy-Nagy who, somewhere still higher up, completes this zigzag of staggered bodies and gazes (fig. 2.1). In these photographs largely composed of shadowy planes and slashing diagonals, the human figures anchor our sense of scale and distance. But their irregular placement in the space of the picture—tilted this way and that, with their partially obscured bodies never facing forward nor securely settled on a horizontal-vertical axis—elicits a momentary vertigo. We, too, must struggle to get our bearings as we figure out where to align our point of view.

For contemporary viewers, Moholy-Nagy's simple hide-and-seek games of perspective likely seem quaint. As artifacts of a "New Vision," however, they are typical of a post-WWI avant-garde's concern with pioneering a uniquely photographic way of seeing. Moholy-Nagy coined the term to encompass his experiments in sculpture, theatrical design, lens-less photograms and photo-collage, in addition to his camera-based photography. Through the aesthetic and pedagogical program of the New Vision, he aimed to usher in a "new viewpoint in the visual arts [that] is a natural consequence of this age of speed which has to consider the moving eye."[1] As with many of his artistic peers that embraced the technologically utopian fervor of the 1920s and 30s, Moholy-Nagy took advantage of the innovation of the portable, hand-held camera to document the accelerating sensory traffic of an industrial urban modernity. He ventured out with his lightweight Leica I to track down unorthodox vantage points previously inaccessible to the large-format, baseboard camera with its bulky equipment and constrictive movements that had characterized the medium's earlier decades. Exercising a physical boldness that matched the camera eye's newfound mobility, he pursued perspectival anomalies such as "the view from below, from above, the oblique view." Caught in mid-air looking up or down from unprecedented angles, the contortions of such views, he declared, would "often disconcert viewers who take them to be accidental shots."[2]

Moholy-Nagy's deliberately "faulty" photographs, then, were expressly staged to destabilize the viewer. Through them, he sought to galvanize a "concentrated gymnastic of the eye and brain"—a task which most "city-dwellers" are "compelled to perform…day by day" from cars, trains, elevators, and planes.[3] By engaging with the uncertainties of a photographically produced pictorial space, viewers are asked to improve the connective capacities of "[their] optical organ of perception, the eye, and [their] center of perception, the brain."[4] For Moholy-Nagy, a committed educator as well as artist, teaching the eye and mind to see anew thus meant a reconditioning of them. He saw the photograph as an infinitely resourceful tool for pushing viewers to confront the visual and cognitive terrain of a new spatial logic. In traversing the hidden potentialities of photographic space, he believed that we might learn to "see the world with entirely different eyes."[5]

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[1] Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 246.
[2] Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 28.
[3] Lázló Moholy-Nagy, "Photography is creation with light," cited in *Lázló Moholy-Nagy: Photographs from The J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1994) 14.
[4] Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 43.
[5] Ibid. 29.

Yet, how can the photograph help us to achieve these "entirely different eyes" through which Moholy-Nagy wishes us to see? This chapter will focus specifically on the role of the human body—our own and those located within the picture—in negotiating the novel spatial possibilities that the photograph can make visible. The "ambiguous space" of the photograph, as explored in Chapter 1, suspends us somewhere between the room and the grid, the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional. It does not reliably adhere to our assumptions about how the space of the picture and the space of the world should fit together. I consider what Moholy-Nagy's goal of setting our "vision in motion" might mean for us today with the intensification of digital technology as the widespread mode for photographic production and display. With the arrival of the digital, there is an ever greater dissociation between real and virtual space, or the space of the world versus that of the picture. This dissociation, and the glitches and rifts that it has engendered in our habits of seeing, forms the basis for the need to rethink the photograph yet again, in this case, as a map—one that can train us, I propose, in an intensely *synthetic* mode of seeing.

To see a photograph synthetically—as opposed to "naturally," from a too sure or over-determined point of view—is to become conscious of the perceptual "switching" required to combine discrete parts into a complex whole. As I illustrate through another set of "perspective games" and "eye exercises" by the early twentieth-century psychologist and ophthalmologist Adelbert Ames, Jr. (b. 1880-1955) and the artist Elad Lassry (b. 1977), it entails approaching each picture inquisitively, as we would any unknown space, as we attempt to orient our looking. Examining the ways that bodies are organized within and by the picture, I analyze how the work of these figures use the body as a pivot point for proprioceptively introducing viewers to the spatial paradoxes that can proliferate within the photograph. The term "proprioception" (from the Latin *proprius*, meaning "one's own," and *capere*, "to take" or "to grasp") designates those internal faculties of our nervous systems that govern our awareness of the relative position, movement, and speed of our bodies in space. While proprioception does not only, or necessarily, depend on vision, I argue that the New Vision *as* a "vision in motion" turns on this transformation of our seeing into a fully kinesthetic act. We discover new positions from which to see and, finally, reconceive of our place in the world through the bodily encounter with the unpredictable configurations of photographic space.

Although it has more or less become a truism that the eye of the camera and the eye of the observer are not the same thing, the idea that the photograph merely reproduces what we see—translating our fleeting perceptions into a more perfect representation—nevertheless endures. The camera is widely regarded as an extension, a mechanical appendage that enhances our sight, just as the conception of the picture-as-window persists as the underlying template for how we read and mentally frame many if not most images, photographic or not. In his prolific writings on the New Vision—collected in his three books *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), *The New Vision* (1938), and the posthumous *Vision in Motion* (1947)—Moholy-Nagy rails against the collective malaise that keeps us chained to the "antiquated esthetics" of this notion of pictorial space as a "box in which to create an illusion of reality."[6] This restrictive view—"with

[6] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 271.

only the front side open"—works against the expansive "new space concept" that he wanted to inculcate into viewers' systems.[7] It impoverishes the progressive aesthetic potential of theatrical design, the film screen, and the photograph—representational spaces which, in the first half of the twentieth century, would all undergo radical redefinition—reverting them into a perfunctory "setting for sentimental naturalism."[8]

In this respect, the renewal of vision advanced by Moholy-Nagy was as much about unlearning certain ways of seeing as it was about inciting new ones. The most pressing matter at hand was to dismantle the paradigm of linear perspective inherited from the tradition of Renaissance painting. Moholy-Nagy claimed that this outdated model of picture-making and looking had been indelibly "stamped upon our vision."[9] His promotion of a "hygiene of the optical," in which the "health of the visible" can be felt "slowly filtering through," revolved around creating ways to move past or break up perspective's box-like view.[10] To this end Moholy-Nagy's ambitiously exhaustive publications on the subject—tantamount to vanguard textbooks or instruction manuals—reinforce the lesson of a New Vision *as* a vision in motion. His books are a mixture of manifesto, art historical sidebars, dialogical captions, irregularly shaped photographs, technical advice, anecdotes, typographic samples, intertextual footnotes, architectural plans, newspaper and magazine clippings, and other curious drawings and diagrams. Assembled into a didactic totality, Moholy-Nagy bombards the reader-viewer with these polyvalent materials, simulating the fractured and frenetic stimulation that defines the industrialized urban world and our physical mobility within its multidirectional traffic: "Speeding on the roads and circling in the skies has given modern man the opportunity to see more than his Renaissance predecessor. The man at the wheel sees persons and objects in quick succession, in permanent motion."[11]

Pulling us out of our "visual lethargy," motion and movement stand out as keywords in parsing through Moholy-Nagy's overwhelming succession of text and image as he outlines the foundation for his new visual education. Drawing particular inspiration from the Cubist painters who tackled, a few decades before, the sensory dilemmas of our "new space reality," Moholy-Nagy lauds their success in stylizing a "multi-view system" in which the world can be apprehended from different, simultaneous points. Rather than mimetically reproducing what we see, the Cubists—and with them, the Constructivists, Suprematists, Futurists, etc.—invented a "dictionary" of pictorial movement that shifts and dislocates, twists and turns, sections off and superimposes, geometricizes and distorts. Comparing this dynamized space to a corporealized entity, Moholy-Nagy writes:

> Now the picture-plane itself begins to be the subject for analysis. It is divided up. It is conceived as a rigid body whose secret the artist attempts to reveal by means of line and plane organization, visual illusion, color, rhythm, geometry, etc. The

[7] Ibid. 264.
[8] Ibid. 273.
[9] Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 28.
[10] Ibid. 38.
[11] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 113.

> picture-plane is activated by cutting and penetrating it, by turning it about and pulling off its skin.[12]

This dissected pictorial "body" puts the usual perspectival rules in flux. "The illusionistic three-dimensional space representation of the Renaissance"—which inevitably provides a depth view—"gives way to a space representational form which works with a division of the surface through lines, planes, flat objects, etc."[13] Warping the picture plane against itself—distortion, in short—is the essential strategy of a vision in motion. Much like the acrobatic arrangement of human figures in his photographs, Moholy-Nagy's cultivation of a "moving eye" did not rely on the literal mobility of the image but, in a radical disruption of the prevailing optic, on prompting viewers to see the space *inside* of the picture differently.

This distortion of the pictorial field—and of our vision—can take diverse forms, and mean different things in different media. But within the two-dimensional parameters of painting and photography, it is most frequently accomplished by upsetting the position of optical command drilled into our consciousness by classical, one-point perspective. Imported wholesale into photography from painting, the power of perspective's "eye-witness principle," as the art historian Ernst Gombrich names it, is what most forcefully ties us to the obsolete model of the picture as a box or window. Offering an all-powerful, one-to-one relationship between the picture and the viewer, the mathematical invention of perspective depended on the distortion of our natural, binocular vision—focusing it through the metaphorical "peephole" of the vanishing point—to bring about its illusion of monocular mastery and control. Moholy-Nagy, in a repetitive rhetorical drill of his own, therefore emphasizes again and again, as if persuading us to memorize this formula of the New Vision: "Distortion equals motion because what we generally call 'distortion' is only distortion in relation to the fixed perspective of the Renaissance painter." And, "The Cubists changed the static and arrested monocular vision of the Renaissance to binocular vision—vision in motion." And, "By juxtaposing or mingling views, the result [is] a composite object appearing for the uninitiated as a 'distortion' (within the convention of the fixed vanishing point perspective). In reality, the process [is] *vision in motion* (rendered on the picture plane). Its practical consequence [is] a revision of our visual perception."[14]

Going by Moholy-Nagy's metonymic dictum, if distortion equals motion equals binocular vision equals a vision in motion—at the heart of his theory of a New Vision is an eye-witness that fails to stay in place, or one who looks beyond or around the central peephole of the closed box of linear perspective. Moholy-Nagy enlisted his body and the camera to dislodge viewers from this unmoving center. Looking up, looking down, from side to side, he defied the camera's automatically "correct" perspective, inserting crisscrossing horizon lines and erratic vanishing points. The displacement of human figures in his photographs—one farther, one closer, one above, one below—provides another cue to recalculate our bearings as viewers. Neither the photographer nor his

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[12] László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1938), 37.
[13] Ibid. 71.
[14] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 118.

subjects are in their "normal" place, according to the realist dictates of linear perspective, which strictly delimits the movement permitted within its geometrical bounds. Occupying alternate spatial planes, they defy the standard axes of orientation—with the camera held level to facilitate a visual plumb-line—that govern the composition of most pictures. This scrambling of positions works against our expectation of what a picture "in perspective," especially one that contains people, should look like. It becomes difficult for us to "enter" the picture as if it were a space equivalent to our own. Revising our regular route of orientation, we must relocate ourselves in relation to its reshuffled triangulation of camera, bodies, and picture plane.

With the introduction of this link between distortion and the eye-witness principle, it is worth pausing here to consider the place of human figures in the history of picture-making in general. In his book *The Image and the Eye*, Gombrich offers some crucial insights on this matter with respect to perspective. Reminding us of the original impetus for the codification of perspective in Alberti's *On Painting*, he historicizes its emergence as a theatrical tool—the most invaluable, if invisible, "prop"—for an earlier version of the "sentimental naturalism" against which Moholy-Nagy so vehemently agitates. "The purpose of art that led to the discovery of illusionistic devices," Gombrich writes, "was not so much a general desire to imitate nature as a specific demand for the plausible narration of sacred events."[15] Deemphasizing man's presumably innate drive to "copy" nature, Gombrich highlights this other, more experiential desire of the viewer for better settings—for more cohesive, legible, and life-like spaces—in which to observe a story, or *istoria*, unfold. Pre-Renaissance pictures did not uniformly employ the hierarchical visual pyramid of perspective—an absence which yields, to modern eyes, amusingly unfathomable miscalculations of dimension and scale, with bodies that are too small or too big, positioned too high or too low, on the picture plane. "The rise of naturalism presupposes a shift," Gombrich continues, "in the beholder's expectations and demands. The public asks the artist to present the sacred event on an imaginary stage as it might have looked to an eye-witness."[16] In this light, the evolution of realism was not about the pursuit of mimesis for its own sake, but the artist's concerted effort to respond to the viewer's questions such as: "'What does this onlooker feel?'; 'What sort of fabric is his cloak?'; 'Why does he throw no shadow?'"[17]

As the perspectival code came closer to fabricating this "imaginary stage" through the refinement of depth cues via more sophisticated applications of color, light, shade, texture, and draftsmanship, it also perfected its ability to place people and objects in this space according to their proper size and distance from each other and, most importantly, from us. While perspective supplied the coordinates to render a scene in depth, this depth necessitated a universal measure of reference, and this is where the artist—and by proxy, the viewer as an "eye-witness"—comes into the picture. In the same passage in which he likens the picture plane to an open window, Alberti enlists man as measure. After inscribing a "quadrangle of right angles" to designate a window, Alberti, speaking as a painter, writes:

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[15] Ernst Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1982), 20.
[16] Ibid. 21.
[17] Ibid. 23.

> …I determine as it pleases me the size of the men in my picture. I divide the length of this man in three parts. These parts to me are proportional to that measurement called a *braccio*, for, in measuring the average man it is seen that he is about three *braccia*…Then, within this quadrangle, where it appears to me, I make a point which occupies that place where the central ray strikes. For this it is called the centric point. This point is properly placed when it is no higher from the base line of the quadrangle than the height of the man that I have to paint there. Thus both the beholder and the painted things he sees will appear to be on the same plane.[18]

Intertwined with the construction of perspective from the start, the human figure serves a twofold function. Within the picture, it is a proportionally derived point of identification for the viewer. It exists as "a kind of perspective within the perspective system," "regulating," "orienting," and "providing directions" for our looking.[19] Even more significantly, the abstraction of the beholder to determine the scale of all the players on the stage of the *istoria*, positions us, as the sovereign eye-witnesses, at the referential center of this virtual world. The world of the picture is presented as an extended projection of our own. It creates a mutually constituted sense of space in which one ostensibly mirrors the other.[20]

To return the discussion back to photography, it can be said that in the modern era, the camera, as what Peter Galassi has called the "tool of perfect perspective," automatizes this belabored painterly act of manual eye-witnessing.[21] It absorbs every possible view we could have of the world into a perspectival window-box that is, at the same time, a supposedly accurate representation of that world. Parroting this prevalent attitude, Gombrich writes: "The camera, like the skilled artist," is understood to "simply transcribe the optical data which mediate visual experience," mapping the "optical world by mapping the visual sensations which correspond to it."[22] Indeed, with the extra degree of verification bestowed by its status as an indexical trace (a topic I will address in the next chapter), the photograph, in its point-and click verisimilitude, has been "given the

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[18] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 56.

[19] Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 398.

[20] In her book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Anne Friedberg elegantly outlines how the viewer stands at the crux of the intricately imagined scenes of central perspective. "The body of the viewer," she writes, "suggests a scale for the bodies in the representational confines of the painting. The human was in a central position as a spectator in front of a pictorial world but was also the measure of the world. The painter's position was also to be the position of the viewer, framing and delimiting the image." See Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 33-35.

[21] Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 17.

[22] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 178.

same footing as a mirror."[23] This is undoubtedly why, far from painting, it has become synonymous with the evidentiary assurances of the eye-witness principle. By contrast, this is also why distortion is the touchstone of Moholy-Nagy's vision in motion. The ocular and cognitive regime of the New Vision not only endeavors to upend the outdated "box" of perspective, but to eradicate the corollary idea of the photograph as a mirror for our seeing—a mirror, moreover, scaled to the measure of our bodies—and through which we accept the distorted projections of linear perspective for our "natural" perception.

And yet, despite this normalization of perspective within modern vision, there has always been, as Gombrich points out, a "spectrum, as it were, between perception and projection."[24] This is the spectrum, with its startling slippages of what we perceive versus what we project—versus what may in fact be there—that I would like to bring back into dialogue with the human figure as a privileged vehicle for carrying out the distortions of a New Vision. For, this process of distortion—like the use of the human body as a measure "within" and "without" the picture in the creation of perspective—is itself twofold. It does not just present the viewer with a parade of unusual perspectives (although it can do that). More than that, it reorients and remaps our habitual lines of sight toward entirely different, and yet to be fully articulated, spaces and spatial dynamics imbued with a palpable sense of mobility. The objective of a New Vision in motion is to reset and reposition the eye and mind of the viewer by activating the otherwise staid relationship between our bodies and the "body" of immobile picture plane. It is about envisioning this new relation to our bodies in space.

On this point Gombrich gestures, albeit skeptically, towards a rethinking of the photograph as something more like a perceptual map *for* rather than a mirror *of* our seeing. In his essay "Mirror and Map: Theories of Pictorial Representation," he registers the murky boundary between these two visual models. He attributes their confusion to the viewer's desire for "constancy" from the image, or the guarantee of "cognitive anchorage" in making meaning from what we see. This impulse to project or fill in the gaps and contradictions of the inherently limited scope of our vision perpetuates an ongoing conflation between the mirror and the map. "In maps," he explicates, "we want identicals to show as identical regardless of the angle from which we happen to look at them."[25] With the aid of the map's legend or key, we know that predetermined landmarks "have a scale that allows us to translate the distance of symbols on the map into distances in the city or country; we know that the grid permits us to locate any of the listed items within a given square. We quickly learn the use and the limits of these handy tools."[26]

But whereas we can unlock the dimensions of a given topography in the real world by correctly decoding a map's key, perspective pictures fail as maps because there is no set key. Contrary to the map's conceptual legibility, which relies on the viewer to seek out a pattern of visual consistency, "it is different with the projected image…[which] records the multivalent information the single eye would receive when placed at the apex of a 'visual pyramid.'" Unlike the lateral spread of a map, a picture in

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[23] M.H. Pirenne, *Optics, Painting, and Photography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 168.
[24] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 37.
[25] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 206.
[26] Ibid. 174.

perspective is not designed for a mobile viewer with binocular vision; it positions us at an optical summit that authorizes us to survey a scene, but by no means to decode the space it represents. Yet, since we look to the photograph as having the "same footing" as a mirror, we want to hold onto it as a document of a stable physical reality that can impart the coordinates for moving through a real space just as a map would. Collapsing the conventions that distinguish the mirror and map, "we want perspectival representations to share certain characteristics with maps. In other words, we do not want them to function only in peep-boxes for monocular viewing from a fixed point, but to convey their information much as maps do to the moving and scrutinizing eye."[27]

While Gombrich himself does not encourage us to mistake the photograph for a map—and seems to insist on the impossibility that it could ever fulfill such a function in the first place—I would nonetheless like to pause on his identification of this extremely illuminating misstep in our understanding of how perspective "mirrors" versus "maps" the world. The strategic play with this confusion will be important, as I will later show, for delineating a distinctly photographic—or synthetic—way of seeing. For even if we reasonably know that the "apparent space" (i.e. depth) in the picture is an illusion, we still cling to the belief that anything and everything that falls within its purview will follow laws identical to those that make the world operate and cohere on this side of the looking glass, so to speak.

Historically, perspective, as we might recall from Chapter 1, was largely utilized as a staging device. It not only manufactures spatial depth on a two-dimensional plane, but assigns a definite size and distance, with the idealized viewer's body as a measure, to whatever is deposited within the confines of its grid-like "room." In this way the theory of perspective has, Gombrich qualifies, been "treated as if it were a mapping procedure." Placing people and objects of "apparent size" within its central projection, a perspectival picture resembles a map insofar as it "indicates a class of objects, though a class of which only very few members would ever be known in our environment." Jumping from one dimension to the other, as viewers, we tend to "take one specimen of the class—the flat design on the plane in front of us—for another, the solid object over there." In this mental transposition of the flat thing for the real thing, or the mirror for the map, the "geometrical proof" of perspective transforms, as Gombrich notes, into a "psychological puzzle."[28]

Returning to the idea of our need for "constancy" in interacting with our visual environment can help us to grasp this movement of perspective from proof to puzzle. Constancies are a category within cognitive psychology that rationalize how our minds stabilize our perceptions of the phenomenal world based on the knowledge we have of distance and scale (as well as shape, color, light, etc.), in spite of the evidence of external stimuli that might contradict, or even completely disprove, such a point of view. Our eyes and minds labor ceaselessly to smooth out perceptual incompatibilities, such that our vision itself should be recognized as a sustained synthesis of subjective inferences that intuitively blend perceptions and projections, and not the embodiment of the objective eye-witness it is so commonly granted to be ("I saw it with my own eyes"). As Richard L. Gregory explains in his classic text *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*,

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[27] Ibid. 211.
[28] Ibid. 191.

constancies account for changes in our visual surroundings so that we know that "things do not shrink with increasing distance nearly as much as their images get smaller."[29] Put differently, we know that things preserve the same size, even if they look smaller as they move farther away or bigger as they come nearer. Buttressed by our awareness of the regularities of space that usually obtain, we compensate for these vacillations in an object's apparent size by recalibrating our estimation of its distance from us, scaling size and distance proportionally to form a "constant" picture of things.

Constancies, in this manner, are indissoluble from the process of orienting and situating ourselves in the world. Like the "identicals" on a map, they assist in the suitable judgment and assessment of an incessantly shifting stream of information. But to apply the generalizations of constancy scaling to that "class of objects" which are people and things mapped on a picture plane is to wander into an alternate universe where the certainties of linear perspective can start to bend into something much stranger. This puzzling of our vision is most explicit along the axis of depth, which is how perspective conveys distance within a pictorial scene. Our perception of depth in the real world is markedly different from our perception of the depth on a two-dimensional surface. In the latter we are supremely cognizant of—even as we reflexively "see through"—the barrier of a flat surface. Underlining this difference, Gregory recapitulates, "Depth cues cannot be appropriate both for the flat surface of the picture and for the scene of objects they represent. All perspective pictures have a curious depth paradox: they *represent* depth, with their perspective and other depth cues; yet as *objects* the pictures *are* flat and their textured surfaces provide depth cues showing that they are flat."[30]

To clarify, where perspective purports to give a geometrically consistent view of the world—and, while it does exactly that on a flat surface—extrapolating from that view into the relentless multiplicity of the physical world may lead to unanticipated *inconstancies* of perception. "Projection," as Gombrich elucidates, "cannot tell us what is out there, only what might be out there"[31]:

> If you have a geometrical theory you must take the geometrical consequences, and it is clear from the theory of central projection that you cannot reverse the process: while we can work out what the projection of a given three-dimensional object will be like on a given plane, the projection itself does not give us adequate information about the object concerned, since not one but an infinite number of related configurations would result in the same image, just as not one but an infinite number of related objects would cast the same shadow if placed on the beam emanating from a one-point source.[32]

On a practical level, this means that, as "we turn, the information changes."[33] If we turn away, or around, this way or that, the picture itself may turn out not to be what it seems to

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[29] Richard L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 222.
[30] Ibid. 227.
[31] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 208.
[32] Ibid. 191.
[33] Ibid. 259.

be, or to represent something other than what it appears to represent. And, with these various turns, I would add, the alleged "map" of perspective morphs into a misshapen mirror, while the frozen "mirror" of the photograph, which so perfectly perspectivalizes the world, proves to be an oddly volatile conceit. A mirror for the painstaking projections of perspective and not an instantaneous, point-for-point reflection of the world, the photograph, we might restate, is a veritable "counterfeiting of the truth."[34]

Given this other, internally disruptive tendency implanted within the very structure of a perspectival picture, it would seem that Moholy-Nagy's injunction to throw out the eye-witness box of perspective and replace it with the unregulated field of distortion are tasks that are indeed intrinsically allied. Seeing perspective (and the photograph) as a puzzle rather than a proof—or, as an open-ended map for unknown spaces rather than a faithful mirror for those already known—allows us to reconceive the formerly "rigid body" of the picture plane, as Moholy-Nagy endorsed, through those newly inventive "means of line and plane organization, visual illusion, color, rhythm, geometry, etc." At this juncture, though, I would like to intervene in the aesthetic free-for-all to which his open summons to distortion might give license, and temper his enthusiasm for an unbridled vision in motion by interjecting a working definition of space that anchors it to the possibilities and constraints of the human, and not just pictorial, body. The human body, as we saw, is that absolute measure of scale at the center of the spatial illusions of perspective. As such, its inappropriate scaling and misplacement—playing our visual and cognitive constancies against themselves—arguably furnishes the greatest opportunity for an invigorating mobilization of our vision.

It is in this vein that Moholy-Nagy himself links the body to vision through the category of motion. Explicitly defining space through the body, he states that "space is the relation between the position of bodies," and "spatial creation is the creation of relationships [between the] position of bodies." Privileging vision in this creation of new spaces, he goes on:

> Each of our senses which can record the position of bodies allows a grasping of space. Thus space is known to man, first of all by means of his sense of vision. This experience of the visible relations of positions of bodies may be checked by movement—alteration of position…From the point of view of the subject, space is naturally to be experienced most directly by movement.[35]

Without naming it as such, Moholy-Nagy describes a proprioceptive process of "seeing" space through bodily movement. While our vision can orient us in space, it is our bodies that come to know that space by moving through it. By registering the incremental

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[34] Pirenne, *Optics, Painting, and Photography*, 90.

[35] Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 163. Besides sight, the other senses that Moholy-Nagy lists are a "sense of hearing," a "sense of equilibrium," and a "sense of locomotion." These three senses all fall under the heading of the vestibular system, which refers to the organs in the inner ear that regulate spatial orientation, balance, and acceleration with respect to gravity and movement. In conjunction with a sense of vision, the vestibular apparatus contributes to our overall muscle-joint sense of proprioception, although here I concentrate on the visual aspect.

displacements of our bodies, our vision helps to control the reactions of our muscles and joints in propelling our locomotion through the world. New spaces are created by and within the picture when we find ourselves trying to move through—here cognitively rather than somatically—positions of seeing that we had not known before. The goal of the New Vision to "see the world with entirely differently eyes" is deeply connected to this continual repositioning of our bodies in response to the picture's cognitive pull as a point of spatial orientation, drawing new visual and spatial lines for the viewer to follow.

Like a modernized version of Alberti's counsel to the painter of *istoria* to attend to the body's "movement of change of place" in a picture, Moholy-Nagy's definition of space as the "relation between the position of bodies" brings it up to date with the multidimensional "new space concept" of the time. Alberti, too, "desired all these movements" of the body to be displayed in a painting: "up," "down," "right," "left," "moving closer and then away," and "going around."[36] Whereas "modern man" may experience these "alterations of position" at an exponentially accelerated rate than his "Renaissance predecessor," both Alberti and Moholy-Nagy notably link the complexities of spatial creation to the movement and mapping of bodies in space. In the transfer from Alberti's directive for the body's staged movement within the *istoria*'s two-dimensional stage, to Moholy-Nagy's more liberated echo of that sentiment in his New Vision, however, we have reached a crossroads where painting and photography diverge in their capabilities to portray and use the human body as measure. For while the "apparent size" of bodies in a painting, along with all their actions and movements, belong to the discretion and skill of the artist, this is not true of the camera, which, in this respect, cannot lie. It can only show these bodies and their positions in "true" perspective within the "real" spaces that they inhabit.

The potentially anomalous behavior of the body in a perspectival projection is enlighteningly illustrated by the well-known optical illusion of the Ames room, which stages the structural breakdown of perspective when faced with the dimensions of real bodies. Designed in 1934 by Adelbert Ames, Jr., a polymath who invented several ingenious games of perspective, it demonstrates how the ambiguity of perspective can trouble our proprioceptive ability to locate and position ourselves in the world. In a version of the room shown here, two women wearing complementary, floral-print dresses look directly at the camera (fig. 2.2). The woman on the right appears twice as large as the woman on the left. The smaller woman casts appropriately diminutive shadows on the massive walls behind her, just as her companion casts appropriately gigantic ones against those same walls that can barely accommodate her. The low ceiling bears down on the woman on the right, whose body is turned in profile towards the woman on the left, herself turned at an angle towards the viewer. Thickly outlined on the room's walls are identical "windows" that accentuate the pair's difference in size. The drastic disproportion of scale between these two women—so alike in their appearance and demeanor in every other aspect from their hair, to their shoes, to their jewelry, to their clothing—makes one wonder if our eyes are deceiving us. What would happen if the woman on the right were to cross over to the other side? How might we ourselves fit into this perplexing funhouse of a room?

[36] Alberti, *On Painting*, 79.

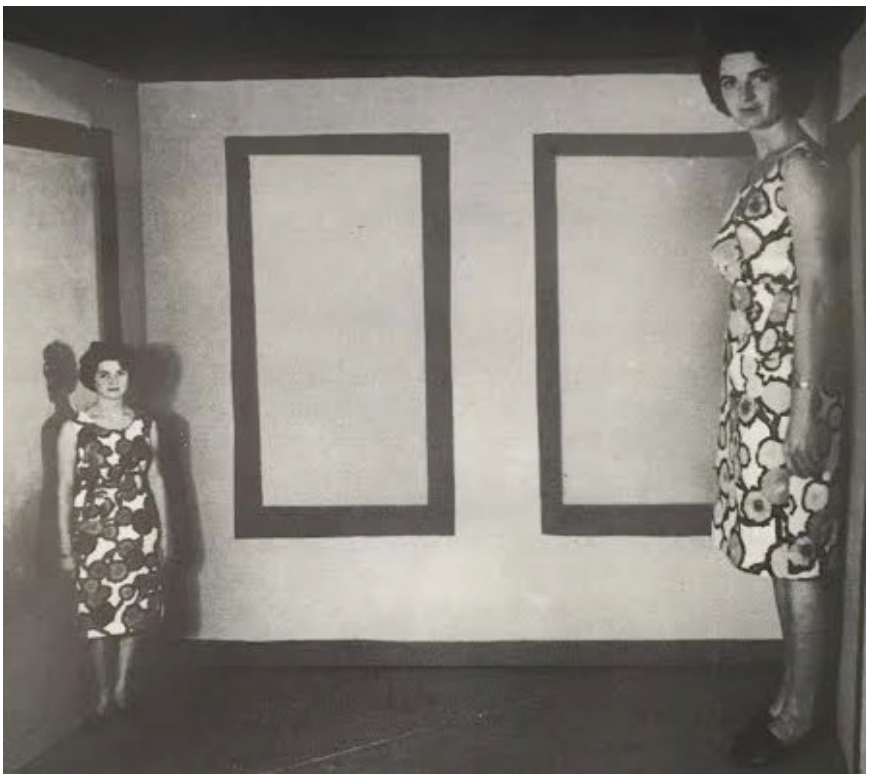

Fig. 2.2, "The Ames Room," Richard L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*, 1966

If we were to imagine this room without the two figures, it would be utterly unremarkable. We could peremptorily slot it away as a photograph of an empty room with normal dimensions—a standard perspectival box, as it were, "with only its front side open." But the presence of the figures—who serve as a critical reference point for our own "mapping" of the space—refutes this initial impression. In sifting through the contradictory elements of the picture, we might ask ourselves a series of questions: have we ever seen two people that are identical except for their proportions, and if so, in what context? Is the woman on the right the life-sized model of the cutout on the left, or is the smaller woman the model for the blown-up copy on the right? These conjectures are unsatisfying, since, as we can see with "our own eyes," the women each look fairly "real." The floor looks flat, the walls look straight, and the women stand calmly and vertically upright. How, then, are they taking up space in this incongruous fashion? The depth cues in the photograph do not add up. We are left with this conundrum: is it the bodies, the room, or our eyes that are deceiving us?

To solve the perspectival puzzle of this picture, we must make a number of perceptual hypotheses, entertaining multiple guesses and synthesizing multiple solutions. "This is a betting situation," Gregory comments, and "the room shows that perception involves betting on odds." Based on our perceptions, we bet that everything is as it should be, except for the bodies in the room. In actuality, it is not the bodies, nor the photograph, but the geometry of the room that has been distorted. The farthest wall of the room recedes downwards to the left to form a backwardly canted stage, while the windows, seemingly rectangular, are trapezoidal in shape, narrowing incrementally from left to right. Neither of the women, nor we, are on the same plane. The interior horizon

line slopes back at a diagonal, so that the woman farther away is partially below our line of sight, while the woman closer to us is partially above it. "Evidently we are so used to rectangular rooms," Gregory writes, that "we accept it as axiomatic that it is the *objects* inside (the people) which are odd sizes, rather than the *room* being an odd shape."[37] We forget that perspective, as an artificial depth cue embedded within the picture, "sets constancy scaling *directly*," erecting an unchallenged framework for our looking.[38] The illusion of the Ames room works so flawlessly because it manipulates the blind spot of this framework, accommodating only a single viewing point: a peephole for one eye. Under these exceptionally distorted circumstances, the human eye does finally become equivalent to the eye of the camera.

The paradox of the Ames room uncovers the core of extraordinary ambiguity concealed within the geometrical transparency of the perspectival picture. It reveals how startling things can become when the restrictions of linear perspective, built into the very mechanics of the camera, are projected onto bodies and spaces that exceed its prescribed view. As the room—or the photograph of the room—graphically demonstrates, on the flip side of the eye-witness principle is perspective's propensity to flatten out—or dramatically compress—the multitudinous information within a picture. This is the "blind spot" of perspective that Ames exploits through the technique of anamorphosis, which plays with the limits of perspective. An anamorphic picture—from the Greek *ana-*, meaning "up" or "back," and *morphe-*, "to shape"—looks distorted when seen frontally but rights itself from a sideways view. The trick of the Ames room lies in its anamorphic distortion of the physical space before the camera, expanding and contracting the coordinates of a normal rectangular room to fabricate an impossible reality right before our eyes. The room's distortions show that, far from a mirror, if we take the photograph as a substitute for our vision, we may be led radically astray. The photograph is more like a mask or scaffold that occludes the "infinite number of related configurations" and the "infinite number of related objects" just behind, above, below, to the right, to the left, etc. of our appointed view. Misled by conflicting depth cues, we transpose the "flat design on the plane" onto the "solid object over there," inappropriately scaling things to agree with our known sense of space (that the room is a room). The Ames room, in this sense, functions like a three-dimensional geometrical proof that is also a live-action psychological puzzle. It makes clear, as Gombrich summarizes, "that perspective creates its most compelling illusion where it can rely on certain ingrained expectations and assumptions on the part of the beholder."[39]

In light of these assumptions, we might ask the follow-up question to the highly effective "eye exercise" of the Ames room: can we ever possess a clear-cut perception of the "real" space within a perspectival picture? For Ames as for Moholy-Nagy, the value of the photograph—which is neither fully bound nor unbound from the grounding grid of linear perspective—lies not in its ability to replicate a "real" space but to mobilize our vision in new directions. By positioning the human figure as a strategic site of instability within their pictures, they affirm that our perception of space, whether pictorial or

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[37] Gregory, *Eye and Brain*, 185-6.
[38] Ibid. 226.
[39] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 261.

physical, is tethered to the ongoing proprioceptive readjustment of our bodies toward other bodies and objects in the world. Similarly, both Gregory and Gombrich conjoin the idea of a "better" seeing with the more agile and nuanced movement of our eyes and minds as we "move" through the virtual space of the picture. For Gregory, for whom "pictures are inherently paradoxical," every picture requires us to reason forwards *and* backwards.[40] We must integrate what we see and what we know, modulating our vision as we go, with the acknowledgment, as he remarks, that within our mind's scaling for constancy, there are always two kinds of scaling at work: "*'upwards'* from depth cues and *'downwards'* from seen depth."[41] We synthesize "upwards" from visual signals to our eyes and "downwards" from our perceptual knowledge and assumptions. An awareness of this "bottom-up" and "top-down" combination of perception and projection prepares us to manage the unavoidable fallibilities of sight with a greater discernment.

This physiological and psychological balancing act of seeing is part of the two-way circuit of illusionism and realism that typifies the "eye trick" of all perspectival pictures. Like Gregory, Gombrich also proposes a formula to broker the paradoxical nature of perspectival pictures. He postulates that the "negative principle of the eye-witness record" can give rise to a more cognitively malleable mode of seeing. Rather than subscribing to the conviction that a perspectival picture shows us the world as we see it, we should accept that it in fact "enables us to eliminate from our representation anything which could not be seen from one particular vantage-point," leaving the "question open as to what can be seen."[42] This negation of the eye-witness principle can itself open up onto a heuristic for decoding the paradoxical space of the photograph. Both pictures and maps, as Gombrich reminds us, "can give us information, but only if we are familiar with the code."[43] If the photograph, as an ineluctably perspectival picture, is a poor map for the real world—presenting us with only one tenable point of view—it can still be, I assert, a *cognitive* map, steering our mind's eye through the vicissitudes of scaling "upwards" from our perceptions and "downwards" from our projections. The cognitive map thus supplants perspective as a framework for our seeing. It offers a more dynamic model for relating to the picture, providing us with ample room to incorporate the constancies and inconstancies of our perceptions as we react to our visual experience.

Describing this mobilized mapping of our vision, Gombrich sketches out how, as soon as we enter a space, we do not so much fix a perspective as instinctively negotiate a provisional cognitive map. "We are normally moving through the world mapping our environment through a continuous series of readings of changing aspects," he writes. "From this point of view the geometry of the visual cone [of perspective] is much less relevant to perception than are the changing aspects of forms in motion, which give us all the information about the invariant features of the world out there we may need." Entering a room, for instance, "you may first receive a vague mental picture of a space and then use your eyes to modify and refine this map by entering some of the features that concern you. You may look for a seat and have no visual or logical problem in plotting its location on your cognitive map, for as you move your eyes and yourself the

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[40] Gregory, *Eye and Brain*, 238.
[41] Ibid. 227.
[42] Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 256.
[43] Ibid. 280.

vista changes."[44] By Gombrich's account, this formalization of an *ad hoc* cognitive map is the quite mundane yet fine-tuned synthesis of our binocular vision as it moves through the three-dimensional world. We knit together a succession of pictures and impressions as we orient ourselves to the visual information delivered by our surroundings.

Extending this synthesis to our engagement with the ambiguous space of the photograph can likewise help us to adapt a more "informed" approach to seeing. Through cognitively mapping the space of a picture, we can train ourselves in a kind of synthetic seeing, switching between the two and the three-dimensional, the proof and the puzzle, the mirror and the map. This synthetic mode of seeing is an adamantly spatial proposition: our eyes and minds do not simply latch onto what is "inside" the photograph in a top-down reading, solving the picture at first sight. Instead, we attend to how the "relation between the position of bodies" within and without its space—ourselves included—organizes our sense of world. The multiple layers of this seeing synthesizes our naturally mobile point of view alongside the artificial and projected one delegated to us by the picture. The ambiguities of the photograph necessitates this other understanding of space as well as this other mode of seeing and "moving" through the picture. In contrast to how we have been conditioned to understand it, as we saw with the Ames room, the picture of the world, and the bodies in that world, which the camera captures, is sometimes the only place that such a space, and such bodies, can coexist. When broken down into their component and astonishingly distorted parts, they may not match up to anything that we know, or is viable, in reality.

Moholy-Nagy's theory of a New Vision, then, can be historicized as a prescient precursor to these ideas of cognitive mapping and synthetic seeing. For Moholy-Nagy, the photograph was not the surefire means, as it swiftly came to be assimilated in a broader cultural context, to reproduce an existing vision of the world. Through the New Vision's strategy of distortion, it was beyond all else an immeasurably versatile tool by which to cobble together new perspectives that could reorient viewers to industrial modernity's disorienting spatial realities. When looking at the photograph, we can proprioceptively adjust ourselves to spatial arrangements that deviate from a typical, one-point perspective. This bodily "seeing" can help us to imagine and materialize other ways of taking up space in the world that do not correspond to the inflexible position assigned to us by perspective. The promise of photography resides precisely in this power to cognitively map, and not perspectivally mirror, the world as it changes.

"The illiterate of the future," Moholy-Nagy predicts in *The New Vision*, will be "the person who cannot photograph."[45] Refining this prognostication ten years later in *Vision in Motion*, he reiterates: "The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen."[46] Walter Benjamin, closing his "Little History of Photography" with this (unattributed) warning by Moholy-Nagy, notoriously interprets it from an "eye-witness" standpoint as the need for "inscription to come into

[44] Ibid. 196.
[45] Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 52.
[46] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 208.

play" as the "most important part of the photograph."[47] Captions become necessary to anchor viewers—as delayed bystanders to an unidentified scene—in pinpointing the events that occurred within the space documented by the photograph. I strongly venture that, for Moholy-Nagy, this is not what he meant by visual literacy. To become "literate" through the photograph is not to relegate ourselves preemptively to the camera's eye-witness position, seeing what we think it sees as a mirror for our sight. It is somehow to recognize—and to be able to synthesize visually and cognitively—a kind of space that we could not see, and would not even exist, without the photograph. We see with "entirely different eyes" when we become adept at exercising this spatial mobility, a proprioceptive "reading" of space with our eyes and our bodies, in relation to the picture.

"Every cultural period [has] its own conception of space," Moholy-Nagy reflects, "but much time is required before people can consciously realize it."[48] Like the Ames room experiment, the eye exercises of the New Vision try to make unfamiliar spaces legible through the space of the photograph. The photograph becomes a perceptual map for this combinatory, synthetic seeing, honing our perceptual apparatus to deal with the spatial complexity of an "age of speed" that multiplies spaces that are progressively condensed, compressed, and distorted. Beyond an eyewitness to a "crime scene," or an onlooker for the "narration of sacred events," we become the observers of new perceptual problems posed by the world and set on the stage of the photograph. As we will see, the shifting terrain of these perspective games—in which the terms and conditions of our cognitive mapping start to take on different contours and stakes—is explored in the work of Elad Lassry, who carries on the project of putting our vision in motion. Using the human figure once more to decenter our seeing, Lassry provokes our eyes and minds to new spatial turns, carefully exploiting the widening gap between what we see and what we know as the photograph becomes imbricated with the space of the digital.

In an oft-cited formulation from his 1984 essay "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Fredric Jameson diagnoses a "new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" as the "supreme formal feature" of what he calls the postmodern "hyperspace" of the then nascent, but now full-blown, "Information age."[49] Defined by an obsession with surface—or the "hallucinatory exhilaration" of multiple surfaces—this new postmodern space usurps the depth model of a prior modernist space, seeping into all realms of thought, culture, and aesthetics.[50] "Nor is this depthlessness," Jameson expounds, "merely metaphorical," but can be felt "physically and literally."[51] It manifests in a symptomatic "mutation in built space itself," as the logic of the late capitalist system—a massive global conglomerate of political, financial, social, and technological transformations—produces increasingly

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[47] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999) 527.
[48] Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 161.
[49] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 9.
[50] Ibid 12.
[51] Ibid 13.

bizarre and disjunctive spaces that throw into doubt our ability to "cognitively map" this excessively flat and unnatural landscape.[52]

Jameson guides readers through the interior of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles—designed by architect John Portman and finished in 1976—as an allegory for the experience of this space. He paints an exasperating picture of something like an impossible space. A reflective glass exterior forms a blinding outer shell for the hotel, which consists of four concentric towers grouped around a multi-floor lobby. Inside, pod-like balconies hang clustered over the lobby's indoor garden atrium, which can only be reached by unmarked entryways or meaninglessly color-coded elevators (green, blue, red, yellow) that spit visitors out into a "milling confusion." "Repel[ling] the city outside," the hotel's prismatic "glass skin" induces a "placeless dissociation." It is not "even an exterior, inasmuch as when you look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it." Groping for orientation, the visitor to this architectural folly encounters "the feeling that emptiness here is absolutely packed, that it is an element within which you yourself are immersed, without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume. You are in this hyperspace up to your eyes and your body" in a confounding "suppression of depth."[53]

This collapse of distance that characterizes the experience of the Bonaventure provides a descriptive segue to the "placeless dissociation" that pervades Elad Lassry's 2008 film *Untitled* (16mm, color, silent). The work features four actors as they attempt to interact with a box-like structure that we quickly realize is not even there. Departing from a series of photographs found in a 1971 science textbook teaching students about the phenomenon of "forced perspective," Lassry restages the exercise with three women and one man in a short 9-minute film, reframing it as a "series of portraits of them in the space."[54] In the original exercise, models stood around a painting of a house, alternating between the right and wrong placement to educate students about forced perspective which, like the Ames room, exploits the discrepancies between our perceptual habits and the position of the camera to manipulate the apparent size and distance of people and objects. The focus of Lassry's film, however, is not to educate the viewer about the elementary, how-to mechanics of this illusion, but to draw attention to the act of our eyes seeing—or, as he puts it, to make a "nervous picture": "A nervous picture is one that makes your faculties fail, when your comfort about having visual information, or about knowing the world, is somehow shaken."[55]

Paramount to the "nervousness" that Lassry's "moving pictures" arouse is the mobility of the actors. As they move around, we soon pick up on the sense that the space that they inhabit cannot possibly correlate to the one we see. Divided into a dozen extended, frontal stationary shots, the actors, flattened like toy paper cut-outs, "play" with the blue and yellow, *trompe l'oeil* house, one by one, and as a group. They take turns shrinking or growing larger as they disperse across the squat, cartoonish building that,

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[52] Ibid 39.
[53] Ibid. 42-44.
[54] Elad Lassry, "Interview with Brendan Fowler," *ANP Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (November 2010): 67.
[55] Elad Lassry, "On Display," *Frieze* November/December 2011: 93.

here, becomes a kind of deflated perspectival box layered over the "white cube" of the stripped down studio set, canceling out any depth of field. It is also here, in the weird anti-gravity of this box within a box, that we begin to feel that the human figures are wandering around a room distorted to inscrutable dimensions. We get the uncannily weightless sense of a "space existing in two distinct dimensions at once, in one of which it leads a rectangular existence, while in that other simultaneous and unrelated world it is a parallelogram."[56]

In one shot, the four actors, each of proportionally equal size, sit on the roof of the house, smiling casually at the camera (fig. 2.3). In a subsequent shot, the man, in a dark navy shirt and slacks, stands awkwardly inside of the building. He strains his torso forward, ducking his head underneath the doorway, as he proves altogether too tall for the house on top of which, a minute ago, he was sitting. In another shot, a woman in a pink dress keeps trying, and failing, to rest her forearm on the window ledge. Laughing, her body droops and drapes as she hovers always just a bit above or below the mark (fig. 2.4). In the film's most comically jarring shot, three of the actors remain on top of the roof, while the fourth woman, now about twice the size of her companions, fills the height of the house's right doorway (fig. 2.5). We know from the lesson of the Ames room that the space in front of the camera must be distorted, and that the camera itself—along with our point view—is probably perched or floating on some other plane. Where "up" equals farther back and "down" farther forward, we might guess, among any number of configurations, that the foreground of the picture is tilted downwards, the background tilted upwards, and the entire ground tipped sideways. The actors do not "see" the space that we do. As Jameson would have it, they are immersed in the emptiness of this photographic "hyperspace" that vacillates between several dimensions at once. We track their movements back and forth, up and down, as we clumsily work to make sense of this shallow space whose perspectival illusion is at first intensified, and then gradually wanes, as it fades into the painted background prop that it is.

In the elongated eye exercise of this film, Lassry reveals the central concern of his work, which is an investigation, as he says, into the "tension that still exists in photographic space."[57] Lassry—who, besides photography and film, has done dance performances and sculptural installations—is nonetheless primarily known for his photo-based work, which richly mines the twentieth-century photographic archive for pictures "that have fallen between the cracks, that have been destabilized, misplaced, or rejected."[58] These often take the form of advertising or product shots; stock, publicity, or celebrity photos from vintage magazines; or, like the ones from *Untitled*, those discovered in old textbooks. Making the bulk of his work in his East Hollywood studio, Lassry's geographic propinquity to the movie industry is part of the sensuously saturated—and, at times, kitschy and self-avowedly cheesy—stylistic vocabulary of his work, which, as one critic writes, is suffused with a "luscious depthlessness" and

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[56] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 126.
[57] Elad Lassry, "Studio Visit," *FlashArtonline.com*, November 18, 2008, http://147.123.148.222/interno.php?pagina=studio_det&id_art=210&det=ok&title=Elad-Lassry (accessed March 16, 2015).
[58] Elad Lassry, cited in Barbara Pollack, "Wide Angle," *Architectural Digest*, September 2013: 64.

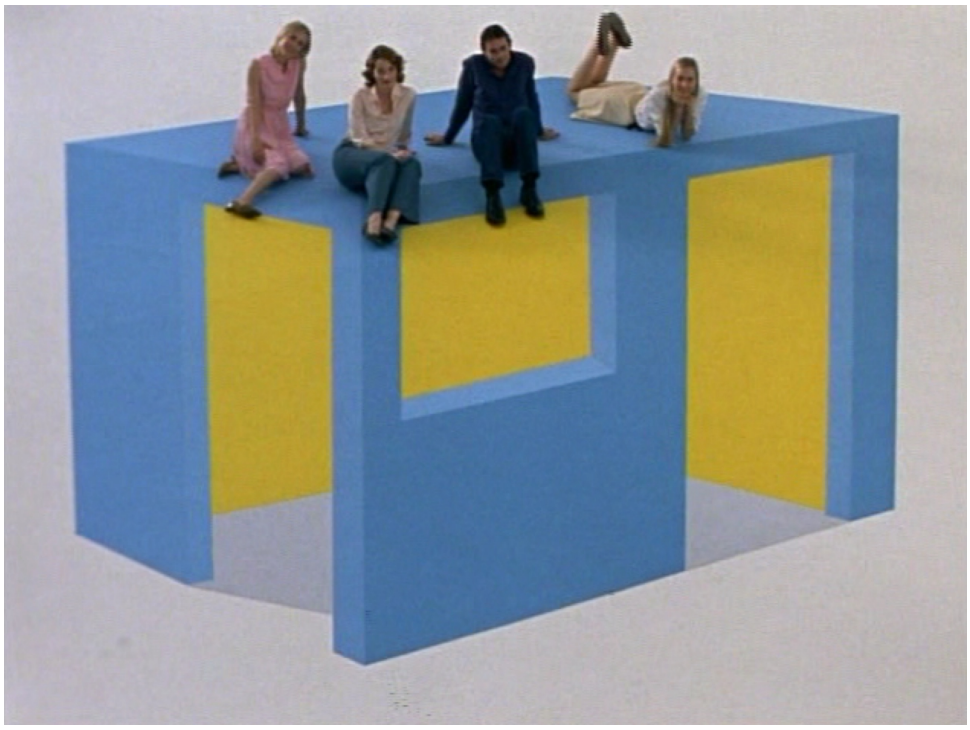

Fig. 2.3, Elad Lassry, detail of *Untitled*, 2008. 16mm film, color, silent.

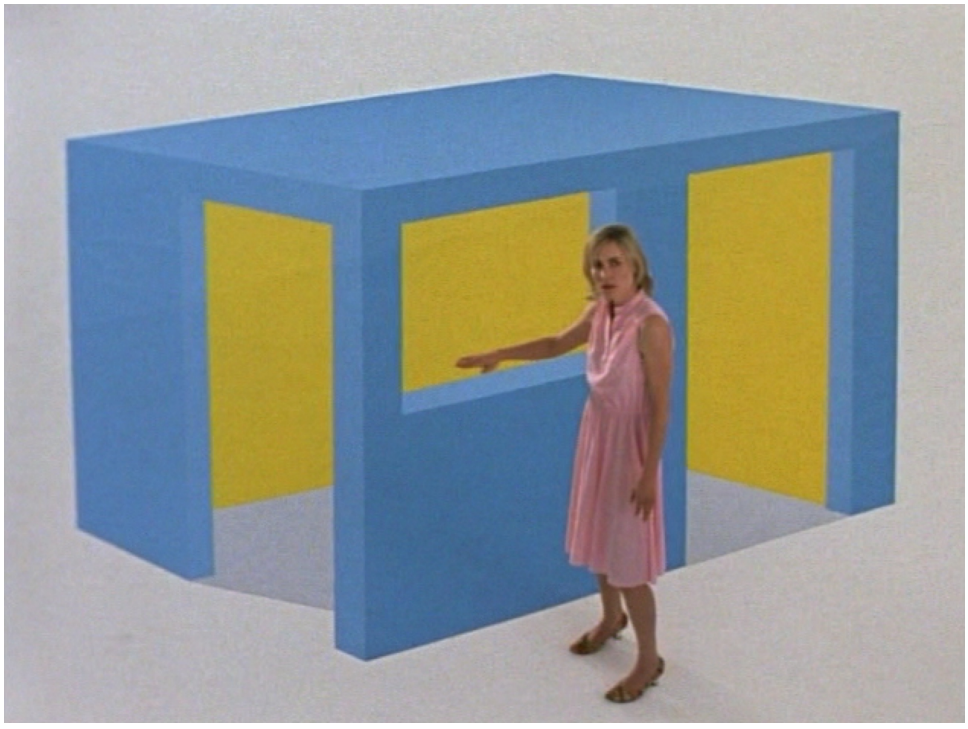

Fig. 2.4, Elad Lassry, detail of *Untitled*, 2008. 16mm film, color, silent.

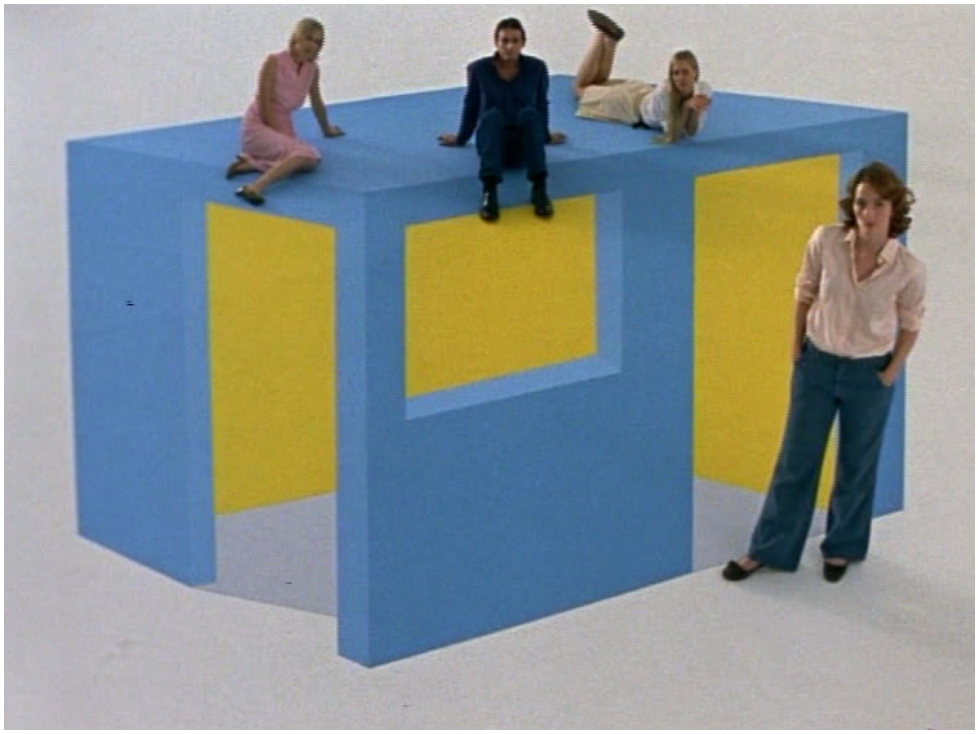

Fig. 2.5, Elad Lassry, detail of *Untitled*, 2008. 16mm film, color, silent.

"strikingly airless atmospherics."[59] Yet despite this behind-the-scenes industry connection, Lassry's real interest lies not in the well-trodden critique of the photograph as a commodity (in the spirit of the Pictures Generation), but, in his words, in "both the impossibilities and possibilities that surround pictures."[60] Like Moholy-Nagy, Lassry insists on photographs as "tools that teach," facilitating a "coming to terms with seeing."[61] As pedagogical tools, he favors "exhausted" images, or those that are so generic that they are pegged as stereotypes. It is in the viewer's snap judgment of these redundant images that Lassry locates a fertile ground for staging a heightened perception. "I'm fascinated by the collapse of histories," he relates, "and the confusion that results when there is something slightly wrong in the photograph."[62]

Putting Lassry in dialogue with Jameson, we might read the perceptual pastiche that underwrites the artist's practice—redoubling, restaging, and reactivating the nostalgic gloss of old photographs in novel ways—within a larger context of the ascendance of a postmodern hyperspace that itself collapses distance and history in a confusion of how to place ourselves in a depthless world. "We must insist, over and

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[59] Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, "What is a picture of something?", *Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2011*, 2011: 100-103

[60] Elad Lassry, cited in Bettina Funcke, "So While in One Sense She Shares a Space with the Animal, in Another She Doesn't," in *Elad Lassry*, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zürich: Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier, 2010), 87.

[61] Elad Lassry, "Interview with Ryan Trecartin," *Interview Magazine*, September 2012: 140-144.

[62] Elad Lassry, cited in Christopher Bollen, "L.A. Artworld: Elad Lassry," *Interview Magazine*, December/January 2011: 42.

over," Jameson writes, "on the troubling ambiguities of this new 'hyperspace.'"[63] For Jameson, its most potent effect is the dispositioning of the human subject and the alienation of our bodies. Throughout his writings on the postmodern, he associates this space with the impossibility of getting our bearings, whether that be in the Bonaventure's hotel lobby or, as I have asserted, in Lassry's prolonged perspectival game of a textbook photograph turned film. "Postmodern bodies," Jameson intones, "are bereft of spatial coordinates" and "incapable of distanciation."[64] The depthlessness and superficiality of the postmodern are the "expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities."[65]

This disjunction between the body and its environment—whereby the human subject has trouble marshaling the capacity "to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map its position in a mappable external world"—is not so different from the "age of speed" that spurred Moholy-Nagy to come up with the program of a New Vision.[66] But in the even more disorienting distortions of postmodern hyperspace, Jameson signposts the explosion of this "age of speed" into the computational and "perceptual barrage of immediacy" that is the digital age.[67] From the brute energy of the industrial machine, we have moved on to the imperceptible data flows of the computer, which has "no emblematic or visual power," but whose speed is inconceivably greater.[68] As subjects, we lag behind this transition, still grappling to shed outdated perceptual syntaxes, like "prisoners of ancient orientations imbedded in the languages we have inherited."[69] The body accustomed to the methodical plotting of movements on a perspectival grid is faced with its inadequacy for self-positioning as the "logic of the grid," and its "geometrical and Cartesian homogeneity" of "infinite equivalence and extension," is undermined by the "spatial peculiarities" of the postmodern.[70] Issuing his own call to see the world with different eyes, Jameson writes:

> My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace…in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism.

In the erasure of any authoritative point of view—and of perspective as the dominant code for organizing this new space—there "stands something like an imperative to grow

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[63] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 115.
[64] Ibid. 49.
[65] Ibid. 413.
[66] Ibid. 44.
[67] Ibid. 413.
[68] Ibid. 37.
[69] György Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1967), 9.
[70] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 410.

new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions."[71]

Like the New Vision, Jameson's call to "grow new organs" and update our "perceptual equipment" is an ambition that encompasses many forms of cultural production. Disentangling its relevance to photography, however, I would like to consider how the rhetoric of Jameson's postmodern hyperspace might coincide with the paradoxical space of the photograph as it, too, shifts from an analog to a digital mode of production, occupying an intermediary space that is neither wholly static nor mobile, real nor simulated, perspectival nor anamorphic, but something that oscillates in between these poles. As a shorthand for how we know the photograph is made, the difference between the analog and the digital itself constitutes a default, cognitive constancy for how we mentally map the image. What Jameson is describing in his repeated return to the dislocation and disorientation of the human body in postmodern space is a "problem of figuration" that formally corresponds with this question of how to map cognitively the photograph's space in its amalgamation with the digital. Postmodern hyperspace, I contend, is a space that the photograph has helped to shape and that the digital—as a computational tool that is conceptually and materially rooted in *pattern* and not perspective, flatness and not depth—is now mimicking. From this angle, the photograph is not that "mirror" of the world, or of our seeing, that we have long thought it to be, but, in a reversal of this paradigm, has and continues to collude in manufacturing those symptomatic "mutations" in space that are fusing with the virtual space of the digital. In this mutational genealogy, the space of the photograph offers a precedent for the distortions of postmodern hyperspace. These spaces jointly give rise to the plasticity of digital space as a fundamentally layered space, a variegated mutation of perspectival depth morphing into patterned flatness. Rewritten, recoded, and re-indexed by the digital, the ambiguous space of the photograph creates a new referent, one that is not exclusive to the reality before the camera. It generates some other, singular, composite space, or some other, singular, composite body, that dialectically shuttles between two or more kinds of space, or two or more kinds of perception, holding these multiple possibilities in one image in a fluctuating tension.

Turning to a pair of Lassry's photographic portraits, *Man 071* (2007) and *Felicia* (2008), conveys what such a hybrid space looks and feels like, and the kind of synthetic seeing that we need to practice in order to engage with it. In the fugitive motion triggered by these photographs, we can viscerally perceive the stakes of Lassry's investigation into the "tension that still exists in photographic space." This tension makes us question what we are seeing, but even more, seems to demand that we grow those new perceptual "organs" which the human figures in these photographs already embody with their grafted-on "four eyes." In *Man 071* Lassry appropriates the standard industry convention of a smiling actor's headshot and remakes it into a perceptual problem (fig. 2.6). A smiling, shirtless man is photographed against a shallow blue backdrop with an accompanying blue frame. His face, neck, and upper shoulders are brightly lit, in-focus, and still—all except for his eyes, which appear to pop out at us. He glances off into the distance, just missing our eye line, but the vaguely 3D blur, even dizziness, we come up against in trying to catch his gaze unravels into a kind of "autoscopy": we see our own

[71] Ibid. 38-39.

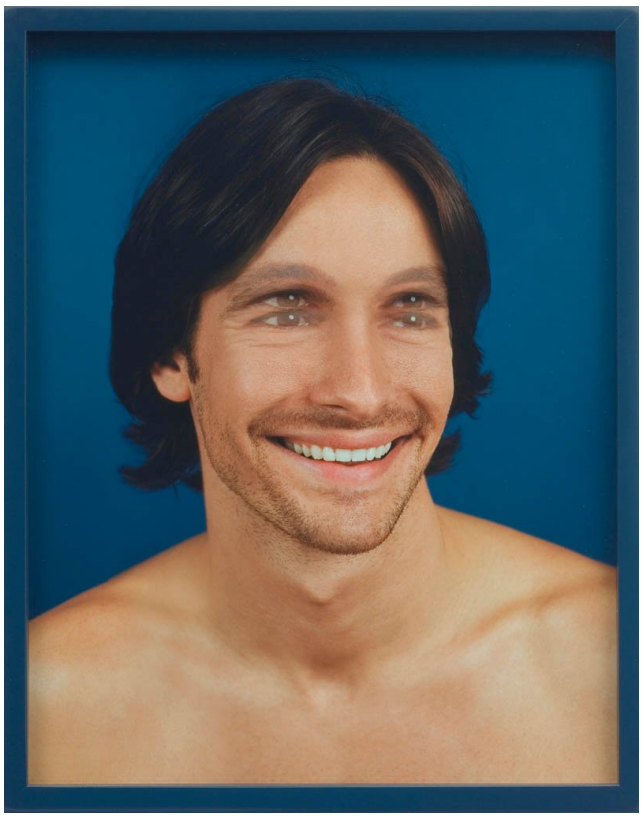

Fig. 2.6, Elad Lassry, *Man 071*, 2007

Fig. 2.7, Elad Lassry, *Felicia*, 2008

eyes trying to focus, trying to attain a sense of perspective. As Akira Lippit has written of Lassry's photographs: "Nothing appears to move, yet the feeling of movement persists everywhere in the image." In the "motionless stir of the still image," looking is made felt "as a visible action. One sees in this image, the act of another looking, the movement of another's look."[72] Vision is doubled and projected outward at us, as the photograph jitters along with the rapid saccadic movements of our eyes, looking up, looking down, blinking to keep up with the picture's fluttering displacements.

Coming face to face with Lassry's photographs precipitates this fidgeting bodily nervousness. We hesitate: is the photograph moving or are we? In *Felicia* Lassry performs the same operation of doubling and multiplying our vision (fig. 2.7). Reminiscent of a high school yearbook photo or publicity shot, the woman's head is tipped slightly downward in a sidelong profile as she smiles shyly at the camera. Wearing a red AIDS ribbon on her white t-shirt, she poses against a fluorescent frenzy of confetti dots. She looks directly out at the viewer, such that, as we move, her eyes seem to follow us. *Felicia* contains more "motion" than *Man 071*—the woman's entire face, as well as the multicolored backdrop, appears to tremor. Evoking the vibrating shimmer of a lenticular print, "noise" permeates the photograph, resonating with a kind of subliminal, visual tinnitus, or the magnified illusion of motion parallax. The principle of mesmerizing displacement that we saw in *Man 071*, however, remains the same. Elaborating on the formal strategies of his work, Lassry notes that he "often plays with flattening a space and collapsing dimensionality."[73] To make these photographs, he took multiple exposures with a large-format, 4x5 camera that he scanned and digitally merged in Photoshop. But this post-production intervention is almost an afterthought. Either of these pictures could have been made in a purely analog fashion, through in-camera processes and then "dodged" or "burned" in the darkroom, lightening and darkening select areas, to further the desired tonal contrasts. When we look at these photographs, there is nothing technically aberrant—or rather, digitally conspicuous—about them. Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, among others, made double exposed portraits with similar "ghosting" effects. Yet Lassry's carefully executed analog-digital portraits turn this trick photo novelty into a postmodern "problem of figuration." They point to the fissures in our seeing as the "cognitive anchorage" of our own collateral knowledge—those constancies with which we stabilize our relation to the space of the picture and of the world—is momentarily unmoored.

Larry's digitally augmented photographs continue the project of Moholy-Nagy's New Vision as a proprioceptive animation of our vision. A "vision in motion" is made manifest through the involuntary somatic movements of our eyes and bodies striving to get a "grip" on the image. We reposition ourselves, again and again—stepping back, to the side, then forward, turning our heads and necks from one angle to another, or tentatively reach out to "touch" the image. In this bind between vision and proprioception, to "see the world with entirely different eyes" is to register the blurring

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[72] Akira Mizuta Lippit, "One, or Several (Blue) Wolves?" in *Elad Lassry*, eds. Elad Lassry and Toshio Shiratani (Tokyo: Rat Hole Gallery, 2012) 131.
[73] Elad Lassry, "Interview with Elad Lassry," *Vogue Italy*, October 21, 2014. <http://www.vogue.it/en/people-are-talking-about/vogue-arts/2014/10/interview-with-elad-lassry> (accessed March 16, 2015).

boundary between different types of space within the picture. Lassry has acknowledged the importance of this active blurring, in particular, between the analog and the digital in his work. "I consider Photoshop and 'ghost' photography as the same thing," he comments. "There is an attempt to go back and forth between something misunderstood in analog to something as yet misunderstood in the digital."[74] Situating his work in this flittering tension between the space of the photograph and the hyperspace of its digital amplification, for Lassry, neither a fetish for the analog as it obsolesces, nor the celebration of the digital as the signifier of the new, are workable extremes in dealing with the photographic medium as it reevaluates its ontological terms. Just as every perspectival picture, as I argued through Gombrich and Gregory, has always held within it an infinite number of latent configurations, the photographic image has always harbored a disarming multiplicity within its seeming singularity. In its "shadowing" of the analog, the digital dilates our analogically tinted vision with this unruly multiplicity. In this respect, as the artist Walead Beshty, in conversation with Lassry, observes, we are "still using analogies to older models" to buffer the staggering speed of the digital. Resorting to a kind of cognitive skeumorphism, the logic of "digital mimicry" is present, for example, throughout Photoshop's desktop "darkroom"[75]:

> Photoshop has a 'ghost' occupying it. I'd say the ghost is the simulation of the analog processes that Photoshop is designed around, its 'curve tool,' etc. These have a certain notion about chemical process built into them, but this is fundamentally a symbolic relation, an abstraction. There is nothing that inherently makes a digital file subject to analog continuities of 'contrast' or 'tonal range.' This is a narrative that facilitate[s] the transition to digital image-making.[76]

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[74] Elad Lassry, "Roundtable: After Materiality and Style," *Art in America*, April 2009: 136.

[75] See Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 309. Rosen defines "digital mimicry" as the following: "My term for the capacity of the digital to imitate preexisting compositional *forms* of imagery is *digital mimicry*. Digital mimicry is not limited to photography or the indexical, for the digital possesses the capacity to mime any kind of nondigital image. However, given the importance of the opposition to indexicality in theories of digital imaging, it may be that mimicry of camera images holds special interest in the short history of the latter."

[76] Walead Beshty, "Pictures Generation Roundtable: After Materiality and Style," *Art in America*, April 2009: 138. See also Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 135-136. In his most recent book Lev Manovich classifies the computer as a "simulation-augmentation machine." Photoshop applications like the paintbrush, eraser, clone stamp, drop shadow, or "dodge," "burn," and "blur" filters replicate the effects of physical tools and phenomena in the virtual "darkroom" or "canvas" of the digital screen. Manovich cautions though, that "what begins as a reference to a physical world outside of the computer if we use default settings can turn into something totally alien with a change in the value of a single parameter." Spanning the spectrum from simulation to augmentation, every photograph "developed" through Photoshop can accumulate multiple layers with infinitesimally adjustable degrees of

For Lassry, this threshold of the digital-analog mimicry divide is the readymade conceptual stage for his eye exercises—or, as he calls them, his "mental images" or "mental pictures." Making analog photographs that look analog, but that are elusively tweaked or augmented with digital tools imitating analog tools, the singularity of Lassry's work derives from this very fine tuning of the viewer's perception. We waver dubiously within this newly multidimensional ambiguous space opened up by the digital. "I [do] not feel it [is] necessary," Lassry shares, "for my photographs to look like what we think of as a digital photograph. However, they rely on heavy digital intervention—apparent to the trained eye, at least—while still referencing and participating in an analog conversation."[77] The "mental images" that Lassry refers to are the products of our own eyes' and minds' participation—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—in this analog-digital conversation. As we go through countless images, of whatever origin, everyday, these pictures "are not filtered so much as they are superimposed, or folded in on another," in our mind's eye.[78] This cognitive compression of one image over the other, or over many others, in an inundating sea of visual information, is where Lassry inserts his "nervous pictures"—with their collapsed histories and slips of the "slightly wrong"—making us stop to register our perceptual gears at work. By instigating this "nervous" circulation of his photographs into our consciousness, Lassry's eye exercises push the viewer to map "how an image can travel, starting with something that you look at then becoming this echo of a mental picture that keeps moving around in your head."[79]

This "nervous" mapping of a "mental image" or "mental picture" as it moves through our heads circles back to the idea of the cognitive map which is so integral to our bodily movement and orientation in the world, and which is given another theoretical twist by Jameson in relation to postmodern hyperspace. Jameson puts forward cognitive mapping as a consciousness-raising aesthetic through which we can broker the mutational distortions of this space and reposition our bodies within it. As subjects we are charged with a "reconquest of a sense of place" by mapping and remapping the construction of "moments of mobile, alternative trajectories." Cognitive mapping is emphatically not a reversion back to "naïve mimetic conceptions of mapping" or a "more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave."[80] Such an anachronistic gesture would be pointless, because "we cannot return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours."[81] Rather, Jameson, framing cognitive mapping as a "spatial analogue" to Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology as "the Imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions

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transparency and opacity. Beyond the cut-and-paste of old-fashioned collage, the program compresses these layers into a seamless composite. The digitized image may initially look like a photograph—offering one view of the world from a pre-given position—but it can steadily mutate into something else.

[77] Elad Lassry, "Elad Lassry in Conversation with Jörg Heiser," in *Elad Lassry*, ed. Alessandro Rabottini (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2014), 7.

[78] Ibid. 7.

[79] Lassry, "Interview with Brendan Fowler," 61.

[80] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 54.

[81] Ibid. 51.

of existence," makes it into a "code" for how we can recoordinate our relationship to a new totality that is emerging as the older one disintegrates.[82]

The political motive for Jameson's aesthetic of cognitive mapping is to rally an emerging class consciousness towards battling the hegemony of late capitalism.[83] Within the present discussion, I put forth that another formative ideology, that of perspective, is itself disintegrating as the analog—and inescapably perspectival—picture of the world that the photograph has entrenched in our minds dissolves into the compressed layers and patterned binary codes of the digital. "Pictorial devices like perspective solve technical problems," as Christopher Wood writes, "that arise when previous devices are no longer considered effective. The evolution of representational devices is presented as a series of resolutions of conflict, of 'conquests.'"[84] The code of perspective, according to Panofsky's seminal text, was a way to systematize modern space as an abstract "symbolic form," rendering it into a historically contingent ideology—an "Imaginary representation"—that today has become an insufficient pictorial device for solving the technical problems that the convolutions of postmodern hyperspace or, as a medium specific parallel, the paradoxes of a composite digital-analog space, are insinuating into the spaces of representation and of the world. Reiterating a guiding thread throughout this dissertation, I argue that it is now pattern—both pictorial and informational—that is the new device infiltrating and taking over the code of perspective.

Lassry's "nervous" pictures, in their strategic recoding of digital patterns over traditionally analog photographs, can help us to visualize the ways in which perspective is being layered under or woven through the digital. It is no longer the master code to decode the space of the picture, but one of several codes we need to know as we revise our expectations and assumptions about those "impossibilities and possibilities that surround pictures." As with the perspectival distortions of Moholy-Nagy's "faulty" photographs or the optical illusion of the Ames room, our own habits of seeing can trip us up when we do not "unbox" our vision from outworn certainties. It is only through cognitively mapping these intensively synthetic analog-digital spaces that we can reorient ourselves within the wider complexities of our contemporary "conception of space." The mutations in the way the photographic medium is being used as it is interpenetrated by

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[82] Ibid. 415.

[83] See Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347-357. Jameson's threads his thoughts on cognitive mapping throughout his writings on postmodernism, applying a figure of spatial analysis to the social structure of a given historical moment. He associates, for example, the first stage of capitalism with the "logic of the grid" and the "geometrical and Cartesian homogeneity" of perspectival space; the second stage with the imperialism of an industrial modernism enmeshed with "the new global relativity of the colonial network"; and the third, late stage with the breakdown of the grid in postmodern hyperspace and the insertion of the subject into "radically discontinuous realities." Cognitive mapping invents new literary and artistic forms to intervene in the collective incapacity for representation wrought by the postmodern spatialization of capital.

[84] Christopher S. Wood, "Introduction," in Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 19.

the digital can stimulate us to grow those "new organs" or "entirely different eyes" as we exercise the equally synthetic mode of seeing that these "mental pictures"—and the unfamiliar spaces into which they invite us—require. Not unlike the human figures in Lassry's photographs and films, we are now suspended between several dimensions, as the once resolutely material world is channeled through the patterned noise of the virtual; our bodies, the measure by which we calibrate our perceptions and projections, have been set in motion by this new digital map of the photograph. In this vein, Jameson suggests that the solution to the problem of postmodern hyperspace could only be found in the creation of "a new intermediary space itself…[one] that opens up historically new and original ways of living—and generates, so to speak, a new Utopian spatial language, a new kind of sentence, a new kind of syntax…then, one would think, the dilemma, the aporia, has been resolved, if only on the level of space."[85]

On the level of vision, of seeing and perceiving, I claim that the cognitive dissonance we experience in looking at Lassry's pictures—or those of other artists and photographers who engage us in this "intermediary space" of the analog-digital divide—can lead us towards acquiring that "trained eye" that Lassry flags as the viewer whose seeing body can detect the digital-analog compounds spun and interlaced throughout the deceptive depthlessness of his work and of the world around us. Exposing the secretly "flippant nature" of the photograph, Lassry cannily stages those jolting switchbacks in our perception "when an image tells you: 'I'm also just a file,' or, 'I'm just pixels.'"[86] This hidden capacity of the photograph for compression—augmented by the digital but already present within the photograph's ambiguous space—gives new meaning to Douglas Crimp's fitting axiom that, "Underneath each picture, there is always another picture."[87] We might say, in our current moment, that underneath each picture, there is always another digital layer—and with it, perhaps, another reality—awaiting to surface as we attune ourselves to the surprising spaces that are opening up within the photograph.

[85] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 128-129.
[86] Lassry, "On Display," 93.
[87] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979): 87.

CHAPTER 3: TABLE/ARCHIVE

Image Search: Picturing the Digital Index

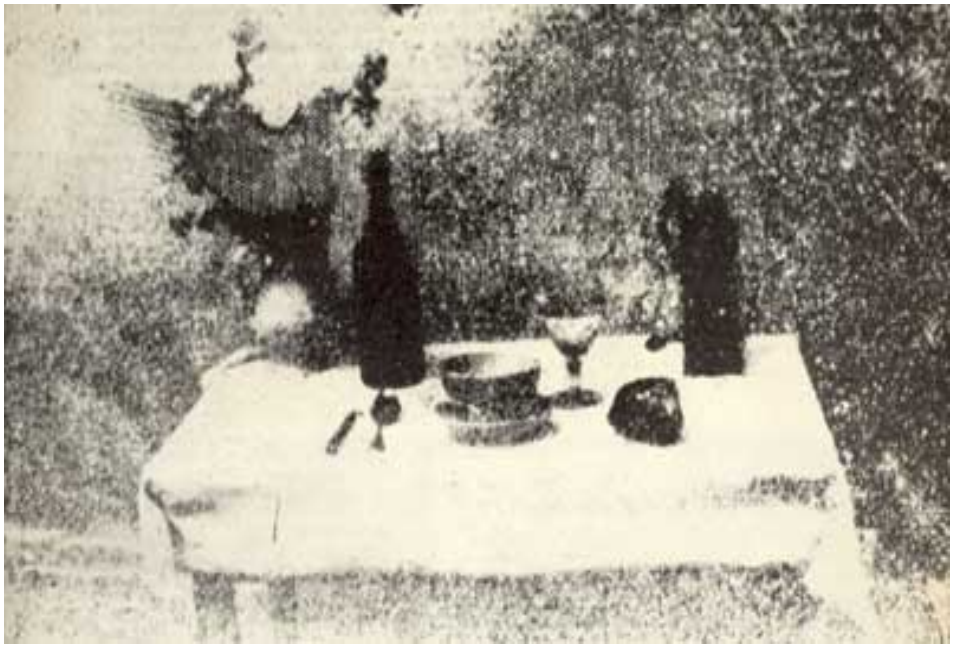

Fig. 3.1, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *Set Table*, c. 1827/1832

After the initial view from his studio window—"View from the Window at Le Gras" (c. 1826), which would officially inaugurate the history of photography—the second picture Nicéphore Niépce made was of a simple table setting. Taken either before or after the window view—but developed later in 1827 or 1832—the original glass plate has since disappeared. Its reproductions show an excessively grainy image, a static-filled etching of splotchy blacks and whites and greys (fig. 3.1). Arrayed on a small table is a collection of everyday items: a bottle, a knife, a spoon, a bowl on a plate, a short-stemmed glass, a wedge of bread, and a jug or pitcher with a hooked handle. To the bottle's left is a larger, rounded pitcher—likely a vase, with the inky plume springing from it a bouquet of flowers. Behind the table lies an irregular wash of light and shadow. There is no real background, nothing to discern in the scant distance beyond the table. The table itself stands level, but with its legs partially covered in cloth, it almost seems to tip forward. Brought nearer to the viewer in this proximate way, it extends an invitation to name, order, and describe the things set before us.

Niépce's lost table debatably presents an apocryphal origin scene for another history of photography. It retrospectively opens onto another view, one that prefigures the photograph as a prime site—a flat surface for display—upon which objects can be laid out for documentation by the camera. This organizing potential of the photograph is valorized by William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Daguerre, who, more than Niépce, are known for popularizing the medium in its first few decades. Talbot's paper-based process and Daguerre's metal-based one lent themselves to different uses: the easy

reproducibility of the former led to widely circulated books and prints, while the luminescent clarity of the latter democratized the portrait. Yet each marveled at the camera's ability to capture, as Talbot praised, "a multitude of minute details," filling the picture with textures, shapes, and qualities which "no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature."[1] Among the sundry "photogenic drawings" in Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* are neat shelves of filigreed "Articles of China" and translucent "Articles of Glass." Daguerre's earliest photographs likewise feature rows of intricate fossils and shells or assorted *objets d'art* carved of stone, wood, and marble posed against draped bits of cloth in jumbled, black-and-white still lifes.

Such faded images appear starkly rudimentary in their composition and subject matter. But they, too, offer themselves up as a kind of fossilized model or pattern for thinking about a pressing promise that arose alongside the emergence of the photographic medium: the desire not just to capture but to archive with increasing precision and comprehensiveness the entirety of the world, both natural and man-made. As the most basic selection found in Niépce's "Set Table" demonstrates, the impulse to describe—to begin listing, grouping, even counting—what we find "inside" a photograph is nearly immediate. Talbot aptly compares the photograph in this fashion to an inventory. It depicts on paper in far less time than it would take to write out by hand a "mute testimony" of things—"however numerous the objects, however complicated the arrangement"—that might act as "evidence of a novel kind" in a court of law.[2] François Arago, in his report announcing Daguerre's discovery to the French public, extols the prospect of this ultimate copy machine. He speculates that the once daunting task, for example, of recording the millions of hieroglyphs on ancient Egyptian monuments—demanding "decades of time and legions of draughtsman"—could be accomplished by a single person with enough plates for exposure.[3]

Testifying, copying, inventorying—in these fantasies of what the medium could yet prove to be and do, the photograph takes on a decisively proprietary dimension. Besides celebrating it as the fabled "mirror with a memory," Oliver Wendell Holmes bestows upon it the extraordinary power to extract the essence of people and things—their "evanescent films" and "effluences"—so that "form is henceforth divorced from matter." "Every conceivable object of Nature and Art," he predicts, "will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their *skins*, and leave the carcasses as of little worth. The consequence of this will soon be such an enormous collection of forms that they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now. The time will come when a man who wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go […] and call for its skin or form." Exchanged as a "universal currency," the shed "skins" of the world thus

[1] William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1968), "Plate X: The Haystack," unpaginated.
[2] Ibid. "Plate III: Articles of China."
[3] Dominique François Arago, "Report," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 17.

photographically seized would one day reconstitute the "great Bank of Nature" as all the "fruit of creation" is peeled from its core.[4]

It is not difficult to detect the acquisitive ethos of an incipient global capitalism in these extravagant accounts. But this "inventory" aspect of the photograph—where it serves as a convenient container for the "afterimages" of things with a greater quantity and frequency—is perhaps an embryonic way of gesturing towards the central concept that would come to determine photographic discourse, that of the "index." As I established in the previous two chapters of this dissertation, the photograph, in its traditional tie to the camera, is bound to the conventions of linear perspective. Complicating this claim, I have countered that the inherent structure of the photograph nevertheless harbors the possibility for inconstancy—or a fundamental spatial ambiguousness—in which it repeatedly falters as a dependable "mirror" or transparent "window" for our seeing. I have bracketed my discussion of the index up till now because the expanded definition of the term that I propose builds upon the breakdown of perspective as the dominant framework for our sense of the limits and conditions of photographic space. This space is crossing over into the perceptually uncharted—and radically mutable—terrain of pattern. Pattern, as I will argue in this chapter, organizes information where perspective organizes space. As the hold of perspective's mastery of space becomes untenable, pattern arises as a new paradigm for how we can grasp the photograph's connection to a world rapidly overwhelmed by information.

This transformation of the photograph from a relatively clear-cut, perspectival view to one that is thoroughly informed (or deformed) by layers upon layers of embedded patterns of information occurs at that intersection where our familiar understanding of the index splits in two. Any photograph, I maintain, insofar as it is made by a camera, retains its status as a trace "stenciled" off the real—regardless of whether or not that "real" looks like what we think it should look like, or if the image has been somehow altered or manipulated. The photograph's equally longstanding function, however, as a visual list or "table" of reference—an index "pointing to" where and what to look at—now deserves bolder emphasis. This need to reprioritize how we conceive of the photographic index is not merely due to the immateriality of the digital and its translation of physical light and image data into code. More importantly, it takes into account the inescapable and voracious presence of the Internet as a dynamically multiplying and magnifying archive of photographic information—a veritable world wide web—linked by "keywords" and "search terms" that is changing the very nature of how we perceive photographic space.

How do we navigate this new space for perception—and the new picture of the world—that the growing store of indexical and indexed images has created? Putting more and more of the world's "multitude of minute details" at our disposal, the archival ambition of photography explodes with the computerized grid of the digital. This chapter draws from the history of the still life genre to reformulate the index as a grid-like table for descriptive classification. In the evolution of the photographic still life from its cataloguing of nature's patterns and forms in the work of Karl Blossfeldt (b. 1865-1932), to the mimicry of the screen's entropic logic by artists Daniel Gordon (b. 1980) and Michele Abeles (b. 1977), I show how an infinity of information displaces the order of

[4] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 80-81.

vanishing point perspective. Shifting from one infinity to the other, as viewers we are continually challenged to interrogate and remake the known order of the world around us.

Prior to the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century, the table—in its double sense as a surface for display and as a system for schematizing facts and figures—had already been integrated into science and art as a reigning metaphor for thought and knowledge. In *The Order of Things* (or, *Les mots et les choses*, literally, "Words and Things"), Michel Foucault famously begins his preface with an image of disorganization that highlights our modern world view. He describes a passage from a Jorge Luis Borges story that imagines an ancient Chinese encyclopedia of animals divided into seemingly arbitrary categories: among them, "belonging to the Emperor," "embalmed," "sirens," and those "that from a long way off look like flies."[5] From this completely foreign and capricious manner of taming the "wild profusion of existing things," Foucault goes on to proclaim that the Classical Western *episteme* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries occupied itself, by contrast, with an "exhaustive ordering of the world."[6] At the center of this taxonomic project is the table.

As a model for thinking, the table aspires to a positivist enumeration of all that can be deemed seeable and sayable. It inherits this dream from the pre-Classical era's obsession with resemblance. Following that principle, everything in the world—like a chain, "immense, taught, and vibrating"—is a microcosm of some larger whole.[7] The search for meaning becomes synonymous with excavating the "buried similitudes" that run throughout this interlocking network of analogies. To know a thing entails attaching a sign or name—a signature—to the thing signified. Joining "nature and the word," language partakes in this "world-wide dissemination of similitudes and signatures."[8] It brings together animals and plants, minerals and stars, depositing them onto an even plane of descriptive knowledge. This textualization of nature's plenitude is further refined through the Enlightenment rationalization of the table. Distributing and hierarchizing the aggregations of things inscribed within the "book of nature," the table generates a syntax for their arrangement. The raw materiality of the world is given shape through words, made visible by language: "the table of the signs" becomes equivalent to the very "*image* of the things."[9]

Establishing a domain of legibility, the table is therefore the locus where epistemology and vision, knowing and seeing, meet. Imposing a "general grammar" upon the chaos of the world, it assigns each and every discoverable thing a unique position within this vast representational grid where distinctive traits and characteristics can be made apparent through exercises of matching and grouping, isolating and analyzing. Beyond its status as an epistemic figure, then, the table institutes this crucial method of comparison. According to Foucault, there are two main types of comparison: that of measurement and that of order. With the comparison of measurement, one starts with the

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[5] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv.
[6] Ibid. 74.
[7] Ibid. 19.
[8] Ibid. 35.
[9] Ibid. 66.

assumption of a totality that can be parceled off into units. Something may be smaller or larger in size, or more or less in quantity, but to measure always refers back to a common unit. With the comparison of order, there is no such presumed whole. To order is to move from one term to the next in a serial passage from like to like, apprehending the simple within the complex, placing terms in a succession of identities and differences. In this dual "proof by comparison," the divinely stamped "interplay of similitudes that was hitherto infinite" is subjected to a concrete, empirical finitude.[10]

Photography arrives at the flourishing end of the Classical *episteme* and its full-scale tabulation of the world's disorder into a *taxinomia universalis*. A harbinger of the accelerated production and circulation of knowledge and goods in the industrial age, the medium appears with its unprecedented ability to translate and pictorially index the material world into an actual image, an iconic trace. With the camera, the epistemological goal and ideal of the table gains a perfect tool—not just for automatically reproducing perspective, as we saw in earlier chapters, but for this exact purpose of naming, measuring, and ordering the heterogeneity of the world in a systematic comparison of parts and wholes, unities and multiplicities. The photograph excels at this breaking down of things into their constituent parts, grabbing hold of fragments of reality for our perusal. In this regard, the image of the world that the photograph indexes, cutting and sectioning it off from some larger whole, is always a detail—a "bit" or "piece" of information—awaiting its insertion into the comparative order of an all-encompassing table of signs.

While Foucault delineates the value of the table as a founding structure for modern knowledge production, his concerns do not lie with the specificities—or the complications—that the photographic medium introduces into that production. And yet, the doubling of representations and things, language and image, that accrues around the table is certainly applicable to photography as a new technology. The "marriage" of science and art that pervades the rhetoric about the medium formalizes its indexical capacities squarely within a table metaphor. On the one hand, photography is seen as a kind of drawing, transferring the mimetic faculty from man's hand to that of the machine. On the other, eschewing all taint of labor, it is the pure revelation of nature itself. For the first time nature holds up a "mirror" to itself, disclosing its innermost designs unmediated by man's fallible interventions. The medium materializes at a historical moment when the epistemological drive of the table fuels the technical drive to mechanize and fix the images of the *camera obscura*, which had existed for centuries before without such an imperative. The table and the photograph thus combine to produce and solidify, as Svetlana Alpers writes, "knowledge that takes the form of a picture."[11]

In her book *The Art of Describing*, Alpers charts the art historical consequences of this picturing of knowledge through the trope of the table. Although she only peripherally touches upon photography, read alongside Foucault, Alpers helps to lay the theoretical grounding for a rethinking of the photographic index as a table. The table, of course, is generally an opaque, horizontal surface, as opposed to the transparency and verticality of a mirror or window. Along these lines Alpers makes the strong claim that Leon Battista Alberti's famed model of the picture as a window—a "framed surface or pane situated at

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[10] Ibid. 55.

[11] Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 12.

a certain distance from a viewer"—implicates a complementary set of expectations.[12] It is the optimal format for a theatricalized art staked around a central perspective with its accompanying markers of depth, scale, and proportion. Alpers's interest, to the contrary, lies in seventeenth-century Dutch painting with its plethora of still lifes, portraits, and landscapes. The absence of "action" in these works supports what she calls a "descriptive mode" of picture-making. This other strain of painting insists on a microscopic observation and portrayal of the world's denseness and variety, as if the viewer were examining a map or a collection of specimens under a probing eye.

The still life, like the table, has a long history of uses and conventions that predates its photographic assimilation. Most pertinent in Alpers's treatment of the topic is her polemic against the narrative subjugation of the genre. Under this rubric, the virtuosic attention to detail that characterizes the still life is reduced to its iconography. Fading flowers, skulls, or hourglasses represent human vanity and mortality. Other still life emblems conceal allegorical messages beneath their superficial sheen. Against this effort to interpret their "meaninglessness," Alpers argues that these images "do not disguise meaning or hide it beneath the surface but rather show that meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in—however deceptive that may be."[13] In their dazzling imitation of nature (*bedriegertje* in Dutch for "little deception," and *nature morte* in French for "dead" or inanimate nature), still lifes feed this "taking in" of the world through the eye. The consummate genre of consumption, they reflect the transience of earthly abundance but are themselves a luxury, a "liquid investment like silver, tapestries, or other valuables," to be bought and hung on the wall.[14] With the still life, knowledge not only takes the form of a picture; to picture the world becomes a way to possess it.

The possession of the world through an image—or, as Holmes prophesied, to seize its "skin" in our hands—is the province of the photograph. But the picture as a table gives an entirely different tenor to this proprietary undercurrent of representation than the picture as a window. As competing models for a photographic organization of the world, the table and the window promote two distinct models of viewing. Arguably, one of the persistent seductions of perspective as a "symbolic form," is the implicit mastery over the world it confers upon the subject. Everything in the picture is scaled and oriented toward the human eye, which replaces the all-knowing eye of God. One-point perspective creates its illusion of three-dimensional space by keeping the subject's idealized, monocular eye outside "looking in." Where all lines converge into an imaginary depth inside the depicted scene, the subject remains an external bystander. As a mechanism for the control of space, perspective depends on maintaining this formal distance so that the viewer can correctly take in—and rule over—the world of the picture.

This impassively surveying viewer is not the same one intended for the still life. In *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson contextualizes the genre within an everyday "culture of the table." Echoing Alpers on still life as an "anti-Albertian" art, he writes:

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[12] Ibid. xix.
[13] Ibid. xxiv.
[14] Ibid. xxii.

> Instead of plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye, [still life] proposes a much closer space, centered on the body. Hence one of the technical curiosities of the genre, its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table. Instead of a zone beyond one finds a blank, vertical wall, sometimes coinciding with a real wall, but no less persuasively it is a virtual wall, simply a cutting off of further space, like the outer boundary in medieval maps of the world. The further zone beyond the table's edge must be suppressed if still life is to create its principal spatial value: nearness.[15]

Like a perspectival projection, still life immerses the viewer in an illusory realism. Unlike perspective, it accomplishes this effect not through distance, but closeness. The still life does not chiefly organize space through the rationalized, homogeneous space of perspective. Rather, it favors the more variable units of bodily gestures, particularly "those of the upper body, the torso and arms" with their capacity for laying out and moving things around on a table. What results is a "proximal space," full of gravity. The eye engages in another type of measurement, a qualitative lingering over "the textures of things as part of their being, inseparable from their weight."[16]

Drawing the distant near, the small into close range, the still life reconfigures the subject's relation to spatial extension. Viewers stop short in front of a space in which critical depth cues have been eliminated. We do not "look into" the picture, as a view, but are solicited to get physically close to it, as if it were a thing; nearness here becomes a synecdoche for "touch." This reading of the still life as a tactile or haptic art, though, is only a partial, and inadequate, explanation for the genre's subversion of the picture as a window. It adheres to the mimetic illusion that the contents of the still life are things to be used—surrogates or substitutes for what they represent—inhabiting a realistic space accessible within an arm's reach. I assert that of utmost significance is not this triumph of tactility over distance, the hand over the eye, but the disappearance in the still life of the concept of *infinity*. Infinity, as embodied in the picture by the vanishing point, serves as the lynchpin for the "deep" space of perspective. While all still life paintings, as Bryson remarks, presume a mastery of perspective, "perspective's jewel—the vanishing point—is always absent."[17] The still life's most potent attack against the restrictions of perspective lies in this removal of the projective infinity of the vanishing point. Without it, space disaggregates and scatters. There is no predetermined order within the pictorial field.

As we saw with Filippo Brunelleschi's groundbreaking proof of perspective in Chapter 1, the vanishing point, ideally aligned with the human eye, is the key to the formal and symbolic system of linear perspective. As a stand-in for the unknowable and divine, the secular "discovery of the vanishing point," Erwin Panofsky clarifies, is "the concrete symbol for the discovery of the infinite itself."[18] Before perspective's

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[15] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 71.
[16] Ibid. 72.
[17] Ibid. 71.
[18] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 57.

codification of the vanishing point, the conception of space as an infinite dimension—receding along unchanging, mathematical intervals—did not exist. In antiquity, "the totality of the world always remained something radically discontinuous."[19] Surfaces were filled with overlaps and juxtapositions, a collage of bits and parts assembled along uneven lines and planes. The viewer of these pictures is far from the empowered "master of the universe" of linear perspective. In this sense, the vanishing point has an eminently pragmatic purpose. It acts as an internal index, a deictic placeholder. It commands: "look *here*." Directing and fixing the subject's point of view, it reduces the incomprehensible immensity of the world into a knowable, comprehensible, and conquerable thing.

Without the vanishing point's ordering of the world, space as we know it in the picture comes undone. Where and how then can we focus our attention? This question returns us to the "descriptive" mode of the still life and its strategic figuration of the nearness of the table. As a material object, the table itself is an integral motif within the genre. On its shallow "stage" other objects are placed and arranged, often in a seemingly haphazard order. In the canonical Dutch still lifes, tables overflow with stuff of mixed qualities and quantities. The picture is not an open window onto human events that are happening in some parallel reality. Despite its association with *momento mori* and ephemerality, the still life belongs more to the here and now, coincident with the viewing subject. In its excessive verisimilitude, it eradicates a sense of anteriority between seeing and seen. The still life pushes everything in the picture forward—almost too close, without extension—toward the viewer. We are not afforded a prior position to situate ourselves to take in the work from afar. In the still life, "all that is seen is already a pictured universe," as Brian Rotman observes. Insistently present, the picture itself—not some elsewhere or else-when—is what we see.[20]

This idea of the pictorial plane as a flat, table-like surface, on which the world is inscribed, defies a mastering look and mobilizes, I contend, a *working* one. Besides delimiting the spatial parameters for the still life, this working view brings us back to Foucault's table of knowledge. Within that taxonomic space, the things of the world are imported onto the table and known through the descriptive "signatures" of their images. Knowing is activated by comparison, not by isolating a single view of the world, or a single perspective. The table gathers the world's details, its many views, and many qualities, into a readable and orderable archive of information. Notably, in the Dutch context, perspective, as Alpers points out, translates into something more like "aspect." "Rather than referring to the representation of an object in respect to its spatial relationship to the viewer," it refers "to the way by which appearances are replicated on the pictorial surface." Perspective in this guise is about seeing the world as "an assemblage or aggregate of partial aspects," with the awareness "that world is itself but part of a larger whole."[21]

In this simultaneous role of display and classification, the table serves as the indispensible support that carries the myriad details of the world forward, up close, into the "proximal space" of the viewer to be studied, dissected, and reproduced. Converted

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[19] Ibid. 44.
[20] Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 41.
[21] Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 51-52.

into this working surface, the table itself can be seen as a site of facture for the making of a picture. The word "facture" usually connotes the style in which an artist executes the surface of a painting: its brushwork, color, finish, etc. Yet its etymology, deriving from the Latin *factura*—from *facere*, "to make"—has broader meanings having to do with the workmanship of a piece of metal, the fashioning of bodily appearance, or the general creation of a thing. Where the vanishing point order of perspective is not the main operative in a picture, I put forth that it is this process of facture that comes into focus. As I will shortly address, photography engenders another set of considerations about facture in a world shaped by industrial, and subsequently, informational, processes of production. For now it is important that we adjust the frame of our vision towards this additive understanding of perspective. The picture as a table archives the innumerable gestures and actions, the "infinite attentive glances," involved in the labor of looking and inscription.[22]

Indeed, it is through this lens of facture that the conjunction between the still life table and the taxonomic table becomes most clear. The visual richness of the still life—the exotic flora, lobsters, feathers, parchment scrolls, ribbons, and so on—is undoubtedly about the observant eye capturing, and carefully replicating, the sensual splendor of the world. But, as we have seen, because the still life lacks depth, its space can be readily subsumed into the diagrammatic space of the taxonomic table. The spatial nearness of the still life could be read, in this respect, as part of the Classical table's panoptic cataloging of the world. The still life similarly distills the world's crowded miscellany into a sealed, timeless space. Flowers may be wilting or in hothouse bloom; an orange from Spain set beside porcelain from China; shells manufactured or gathered from the sea. The source and authenticity of these disparate objects is not the point; neither is the order or disorder of their depiction. Reality is not what is on the table, but the working through of our perceptions of it. What the still life really depicts is this power of technique to "outstrip the limitations of the natural world."[23] As a means to learn about the world through its representation, still lifes, in this light, are basically "technical" images. Through them, our perceptions are retooled into a picture of knowledge.

This "working" look that the still life inspires is precisely geared towards knowing the world through its facture. Moreover, each thing in the world has its own nature, its own mode of making. The task of the artist is to unravel this nature through testing the intrinsic materiality of a thing. Alpers describes the still life's habitual clutter as a symptom of this "practice of opening, in order to reveal to our sight, the making of the objects":

> Wood is shaped, paper curled, stone is carved, pearls polished and strung, cloth is draped, hides (as vellum) are treated to provide smooth cover for a book. Several materials betray their multiple natures: glass is solid and shaped, as in the overturned goblet, but it can contain liquid or sand and it reflects light even as it offers us a view through its transparent surface; metal is imprinted in coins, fashioned into links of chain, sharpened to form a knife blade…[24]

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[22] Ibid. 85.
[23] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 105.
[24] Ibid. 104.

Within the space of the still life, materials are transfigured into polished, constructed, skillfully made things. Even food is subjected to this "squeezing" and "molding." The lemon, a favorite motif of the genre, is everywhere cut and peeled into graceful spirals, its mottled skin "there swelling, loosened from the flesh and sinuously extended." All objects are exposed not only by "flaying them, but also by reflection: the play of light on the surface distinguishes glass from metal, from cloth, from pastry."[25] The descriptive art of the still life fastens upon these multiple surfaces in order to hone *techne*, or craft. The artist's scrutiny of the world is transferred, through the picture, to the viewer. To paint an apple red in a still life is to imitate the red of a real apple. But the glinting warmth of a painted apple teaches us to see red, just as the bright symmetry of a painted lemon sliced in half may compel us to pause at its pulpy division of sun-like wheels.

In this painstaking observation and registration of the world's details, the still life behaves like an informal classification system. In this case, it does not categorize the objects within the picture, but rather the modes of facture those objects allow. What is remarkable about this self-conscious depiction of facture within the still life is that, formally, the genre itself follows the axioms of cutting, dividing, and multiplying. Where the taxonomic table measures and orders, the still life gives us slices and fragments of the world seen from various aspects and angles. By uniting the operations of these two kinds of tables—the one that divides and systematizes, and the other that magnifies and multiplies—we can finally turn to photography and its specific mode of facturing the world for us to see. Through photography, actual traces of the world are brought near, revealed, and enlarged. The "nearness" of the table, I argue, becomes a very real function of the medium's powers of magnification.

For Holmes, again, one of the great strengths of photography lies in its capacity to accommodate the "infinite complexity which Nature gives us": "In a [painting] you can find nothing which the artist has not seen before you; but in a perfect photograph there will be as many beauties lurking unobserved, as there are flowers that blush unseen in forests and meadows."[26] The camera avails itself as a magnifying glass, an instrument for mediating how we pay attention to the world. The issue of scale returns in a different register than that explored in Chapter 2. There, we saw how distortion occurs when our ingrained expectations about how perspective organizes the size and distance of people and things within its illusory "room" or "box" are upset. Here, we move from seeing the world through a depth view to seeing it at an infinitely variable scale. With the magnifying capacity of medium, the "table" of the photograph becomes a descriptive surface filled with a potentially limitless amount of visual information.

The work of the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, in particular, illustrates the revelatory strangeness of this magnification process. Blossfeldt took over 6,000 photographs of plants over the course of thirty years. In 1928 he published a selection of 120 plates as *Art Forms in Nature*, or *Urformen der Kunst*. A professor at the Berlin Arts and Crafts School, he taught a regular class on "live plant modeling." Seeking a solution to the miniscule scale and fragility of his models, he improvised a camera with a one-meter long bellow system that could magnify a plant sample 3-45 times its actual size. Isolating a detail from the whole plant, Blossefeldt uniformly photographed his

[25] Ibid. 91.
[26] Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," 77-78.

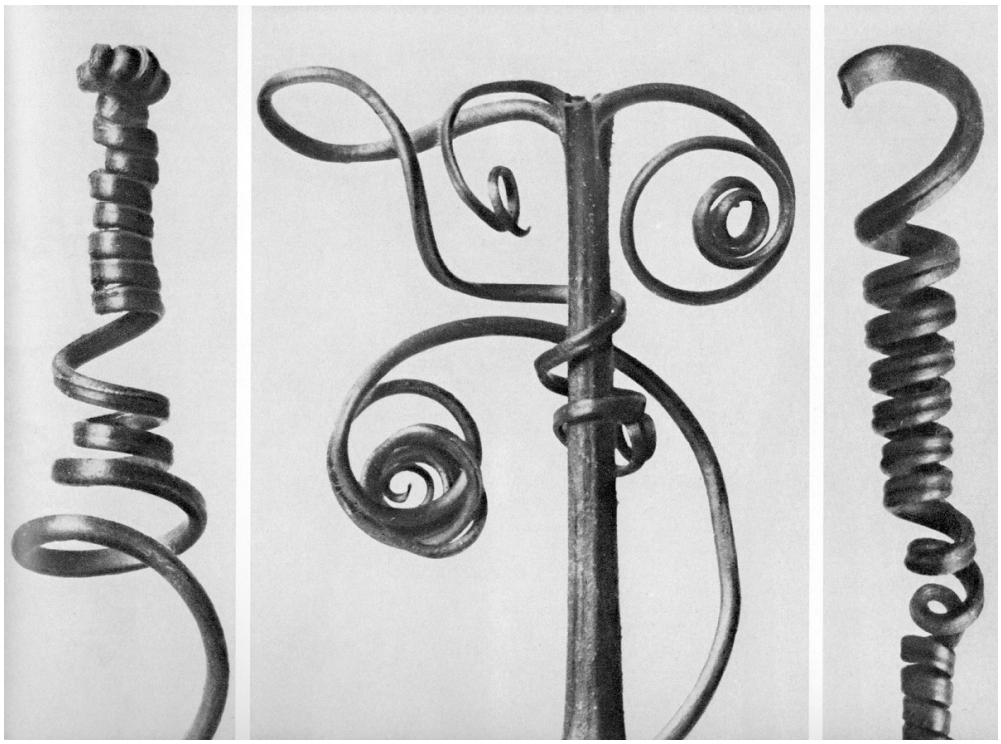

Fig. 3.2, Karl Blossfedlt, “Plate 53: Cucurbita, Pumpkin Tendrils 4x Magnification,” *Art Forms in Nature*, 1928

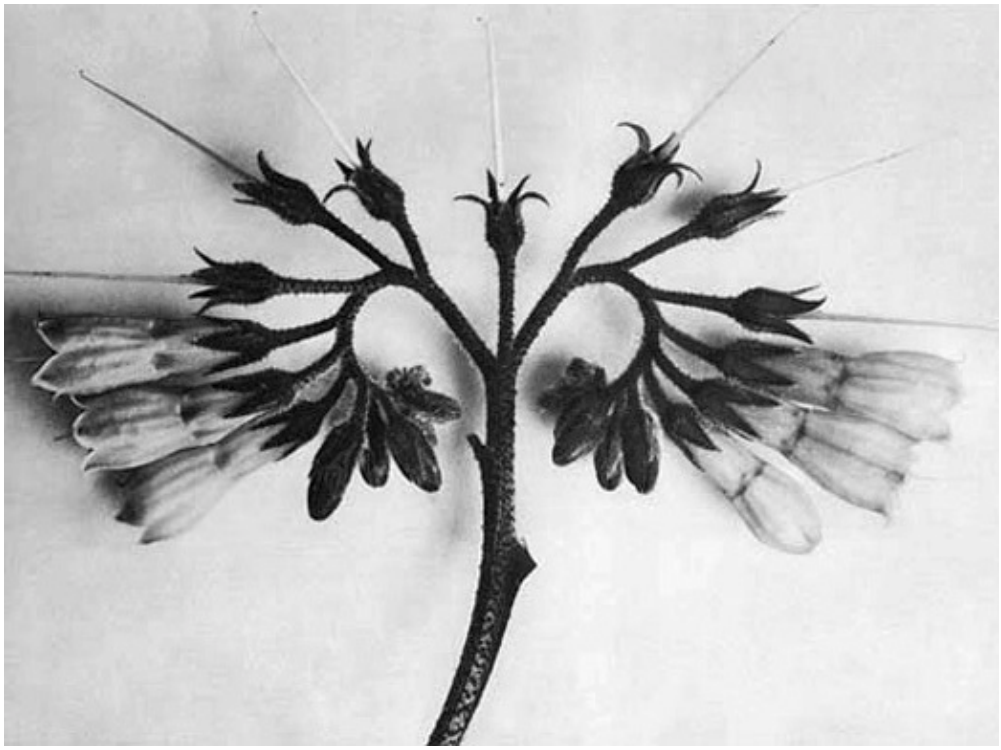

Fig. 3.3, Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 88: Symphytum officinale, Comfrey Blossom-wheel 8x Magnification,” *Art Forms in Nature*, 1928

specimens against a neutral grey or white backdrop. Whatever aesthetic value they would eventually come to have, his plant photographs are first and foremost these rigorously executed technical images, a working archive for pedagogical instruction. At the same time, they are spare photographic still lifes—bits and pieces of "dead nature" exhibited on a table.

No two photographs in Blossfeldt's visual plant "glossary" are the same. Choosing just one pair of images for comparison evinces his meticulous method of documentation. In the first image, "Plate 53" from *Art Forms in Nature*, a triptych of pumpkin tendrils magnified four times becomes a stiff tangle of curlicues (fig. 3.2). The three clippings, each with their own unfurling line, are cut off at the bottom of the frame, so that they rise like towering stalks out of nowhere. In a second image, "Plate 88," a comfrey blossom-wheel is magnified eight times (fig. 3.3). Its sepals and stamens fan out from a heart-shaped center. On either side of the main stem, blooms hang like a skirt of ruffled trim. While the comfrey is magnified twice as much, it takes up roughly the same amount of space as the triptych of tendrils. Laid flush on the page, its composition accentuates the symmetry of the single sprig, whereas the tendrils are sampled from three different views to emphasize a diversity of type. In other images from the book, specimens are shot in profile to show off the texture of spiky thorns and burs; or the camera is positioned aerially, above the plant in a bird's eye view, so that a flower's head, stigma, style, and petals flatten out like a multi-pointed star floating in a shadow-less space.

To go through the plates in Blossfeldt's book is to see analogy as an instrument of knowledge at work, comparatively mining the world's "buried similitudes." Page by page, detail by detail, the natural world unfolds in a sequence of curved geometries, anthropomorphic physiognomies, stretching capillary veins, and coiled globes of pollen and seed. Because all the images are printed in black and white, many of the specimens do not necessarily look like flowers or plants, but could be mistaken for extremely fine iron castings, twisting lengths of wire, architectural flourishes, or exquisite jewelry work. Startling affinities come to the fore between things found and things made. "The oldest forms of columns pop up in horsetails; totem poles appear in chestnut and maple roots enlarged ten times; and the shoots of a monk's-hood unfold like the body of a gifted dancer," writes Walter Benjamin in "News about Flowers," his 1929 review of Blossfeldt's book. By magnifying these formerly invisible connections between art and nature, Blossfeldt, Benjamin commends, has done a "great stock-taking of the inventory of human perception that will alter our image of the world in as yet unforeseen ways."[27]

Throughout his writings on photography, Benjamin invokes Blossfeldt as an exemplary agent in the discovery of an "optical unconscious." While an "inventory of human perception" would seem to mean the same thing, these two formulations have slightly different valences. Where an inventory indicates a relation to quantity—an enumeration of things—the unconscious has more to do with quality, or a bringing into consciousness of the unseen and unknown. Blossfeldt's work effectively accomplishes a synthesis of these two terms, presenting us with a photographic inventory of the

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[27] Walter Benjamin, "News About Flowers," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-30*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 155-156.

unconscious of nature. Accounting for that which exists but has not yet been perceived, it points towards another idea of infinity—an infinity of pattern and information—as an inextricable feature of the photographic mode of picturing the world. Within Blossfeldt's copious archive of magnified plant parts, we see the inexhaustible proliferation of pattern as the underlying structure for nature's processes of self-facture. In addition, we start to see how these patterns and forms might be used as blueprints for the inexhaustibility of the industrial machine; or, conversely, how the growth of the industrial machine purposefully encourages a systematizing vision of these patterns and forms within nature. The impetus for Blossfeldt's photographic innovations was in fact to teach students how to integrate organic forms into their plans for iron fabrication, woodworking, and textile design. By manifesting the chain of continuity between art and nature through his photography, Blossfeldt generates a typology of patterns for channeling nature into industry, transmuting its "unconscious" into a material repertoire.

Given this highly practical purpose for his work, it is not implausible to mistake the plants in Blossfeldt's photographs for man-made or artificial objects. At the height of the turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau or *Jugendstil* movement, artisans and artists borrowed *ad nauseam* from plant and floral motifs. Lamps and doors and gates and chairs were manufactured to appear as if they had sprung from the soil to be absorbed by industrial materials. A neo-baroque revival of looping leaves and flowers crept across facades and interiors, reveling in the rhythmic repetition of all-over patterns. The convoluted tendrils of the dominant *Jugendstil* line, Benjamin notes, "conjoins in fantastic montage—nerve and electrical wire," while "the vegetal nervous system" of the plant body intervenes "as a limiting form, to mediate between the world of organism and the world of technology."[28] In a world overtaken by an accelerating technological drive, the turn to the organic was a means to sterilize the shock of the new through an ornamental camouflage. By repressing technology into these elaborate patterns, *Jugendstil* waged a battle "to sever technologically-constituted forms from their functional contexts and turn them into natural constants."[29]

It is against this sweeping "naturalization" of technology as the formative ground for industrial modernity that we must consider the overarching aim of Blossfeldt's work. Translating the "book of nature" into an actual pattern book for mechanical reproduction, Blossfeldt employs the "table" of the photograph to support this systemic indexing of the traces of nature. Through his strategy of variable magnification, each plant and plant part is standardized and "stamped" onto the photograph's two-dimensional plane. Equalized into this informational document, the photograph becomes a weightless commodity for circulation. Blossfeldt's work demonstrates how the photographic medium stands at the hinge of this epistemic shift from the positivist table of analogies to an immaterial table of information, which obeys a morphological principle of infinite mutability and exchange. Where the index of the photograph once exclusively meant a fixed trace—a guarantee of a physical connection with the world—as soon as it enters into this industrialized grid of capitalist tabulation, it becomes a unit of information, a detail to be filed away, compared, and further circulated.

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[28] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 558.
[29] Ibid. 557.

Acting as this circulating archival table, the photographic medium lets in an infinity of information into its picturing of the world. As the industrial repurposing of Blossfeldt's photographs makes evident, pattern, and not perspective, is the formal system that prevails behind this picture; it is the ground upon which the organic and synthetic, the natural and the technological, can become ambiguously intertwined. Like the "working" surface of the still life, the "table" of the photograph maps out the changing materiality of the world and its emergent modes of facture. Pattern, by definition, can refer to a model to be copied or imitated, or to the repetition of elements in the elaboration of form. I would like to underscore this latter definition in our revised understanding of the photographic index. The photograph abstracts the endless details of the world and indexes them as patterns of information, magnifying these fragmented cross-sections of reality for our intensive examination and exploration. The world becomes thoroughly *informed*—shaped, and reshaped, made, and remade—through photography. The ongoing expansion of the photographic index as a table for both descriptive display and archival classification reveals this spreading ground of information as the new "nature"—the constitutive material—of our technologized world.

In the next section of this chapter, I will examine how two contemporary artists, Daniel Gordon and Michele Abeles, picture this new nature of informational multiplicity. Like Blossfeldt, they exploit the ambiguity of the photographic index as it exists somewhere between trace and information, referent and reference. As a portal to the "optical unconscious," the photograph ostensibly helps us to see more, making the invisible visible, or the smallest things large enough to apprehend. But magnification is not the only technique through which the medium can do this. It also inexorably multiplies, giving us more and more to see in a flood of too much information. This dialectic between "too much" and "too close" is the logic of the computer screen, a grid that combines the picture as table and the picture as window in disorienting ways. The traces of information that it infinitely multiplies and magnifies leads viewers into a new territory for knowing and looking at the world as the photograph intersects with the virtuality of the computer's digital screen.

With the absorption of the Internet into our everyday lives, it would seem that Holmes's dream for the future of photography as a "universal currency" has come spectacularly true. A repository for an "enormous collection of forms," a library where everyone can find what they "desire to see as artists, or as scholars, or as mechanics, or in any other capacity"—this description could easily apply to a Google search with its instantaneous return of relevantly ranked texts and images.[30] Although the computer was not conceived as a visual medium, the standardization of the graphical user interface in the 1980s has made the Internet's stack of open windows into the calling cards of the information age. Encircling the globe in an ever-widening net of contact and transmission, sharing and communication, the existing trail of the paper archive is being swallowed up in an era of "big data" whose velocity and volume are beyond human, and even technological, management and control.

What role can photography play within this burgeoning infinity of unmasterable and unknowable information? If the medium's ontological promise is to capture and

[30] Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," 81.

make visible the "multitude of minute details" that "lurk unobserved" in the world, what sort of picture can reflect the current reality of informational overload? How—or can—knowledge still take the form of a picture? In his article on the camera as a reproductive machine, John Tagg addresses this issue of over-accumulation. He cites Allan Sekula's authoritative work on the archive, in which he states that the "fundamental problem of the archive" is this "problem of volume." For Tagg and Sekula, the camera as an archival apparatus is inseparable from "that other great nineteenth-century invention, the upright file."[31] The file cabinet as a proto-computer "holds out the possibility of storing and cross-referencing bits of information and collating them through the particular grid of a system of knowledge."[32] In this early attempt to rationalize the ballooning volume of the photographic archive—the bits and pieces of paper it perpetually spews forth—the photographer, as well as the viewer, takes on the "the status of a detail worker."[33]

Tagg's camera-as-file-cabinet is another figure for what, throughout this chapter, I have articulated as the photographic index as a table. This filing metaphor serves as a valuable counterpoint, though, for it suggests the supplementary problem of storage and retrieval. As the photographic table migrates onto the computer screen and hooks up to the colossal "filing cabinet" of the Internet, a composite space emerges. This space mutates into something far beyond the picture-as-table or the picture-as-window, altering the parameters by which we organize our world view. The Internet and the computer are relational databases that can exponentially transfer, combine, and recombine information measured in "bits" (binary digits) and "bytes" (a string of bits). Our access to this patterned code remains the word and image-based interface of the digital screen. Yet, the space of the screen is itself an unknown quantity. Screen space is essentially an infinitesimally malleable grid—a flat, metrical plane of illuminated pixels or "picture elements." The ascendance of the computer screen as the primary support for the photographic image marks the definitive transition from perspective to pattern.

The still lifes of the artist Daniel Gordon locate themselves in the interstices between photographic space and screen space—between a real paper archive and the virtual vortex of the Internet. Fully embracing the status of a photographic "detail worker," Gordon begins each of his works with a Google image search. He types a word or a combination of words into the search bar with its tiny magnifying glass icon on the top right corner of the browser—a feature that is ubiquitously present on every file, document, and window opened on the computer. Gordon's keyword choices range from the topical contents of his photographs—"pineapple," "vase," "leaf," "conch shell"—to less tangible things like "late afternoon" or "dots." He prints these digital files onto paper, rips or cuts them into the desired shapes, and then glues these rough-hewn forms into a three-dimensional collage that he photographs with a 4x5 or 8x10 analog camera. Installed on a table, the entire arrangement is dismantled for reuse in later compositions. Gordon refers to his studio as a "physical manifestation of the Web," and his cut-and-paste gestures as a "caveman Photoshop."[34]

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[31] John Tagg, "The Archiving Machine; or, The Camera and the Filing Cabinet," *Grey Room* 47 (Spring 2012): 33.
[32] Rosalind Krauss, cited in John Tagg, "The Archiving Machine," 28.
[33] Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 58.
[34] Daniel Gordon, Artist Lecture, California College of the Arts, March 31, 2015.

Knowing the labor intensive backstory behind Gordon's photographs does not diminish, but rather enhances, their hallucinatory effects. The steps that the artist takes to make his sculptural assemblages follows the well-trodden modernist tradition of collage or *papier collé*, with its pasting of mixed media (newspaper, wallpaper, sketches) onto sheets of paper or canvas. This technique is the indisputable antecedent to Gordon's own, and the still life genre gives him another ready-made subject matter for his work. But the tidy insertion of his pictures into this art historical lineage is tripped up by the actual experience of looking at them. With a collage the viewer can distinguish the discrete textures between layered media, quickly picking up on its anti-illusionist message. In a classic still life, the table displays its bounty of sumptuously detailed objects for the viewer to contemplate. Gordon's pictures do not afford either of these viewing positions. By re-photographing layers upon layers of paper, he doubly compresses the space of the picture into a digitally inflected *horror vacui*. At first glance, his photographs do not look like they are depicting a real space at all, but a virally decorative invasion of the computer screen.

In *Skull and Seashells* (2014), Gordon strews the *vanitas* tokens of the title across the "table" of the photograph (fig. 3.4). A split skull—half bone white, half electric blue—sits off center of the picture's horizon line. This line is obscured by a flurry of zigzags, mosaic squares, zebra stripes, and other clashing patterns. A smattering of orange and grey shells lie below the skull. We could play the game that Niépce's table invites: here is a skull, some shells, five and a half vases, a cabbage, a bouquet of sunflowers, a drooping fern. Yet this perfunctory counting and naming does nothing to help make sense of the picture, with its melee of colors, shapes, and sizes in unlikely combinations. A few of the shells are nearly as big as the skull; blue lemons are mixed in with oblong, pill-like ones; and some of the vases seem to be in the midst of a slow-motion shattering. Real and fake shadows cast reverberating, wildly colored halos. Objects in the foreground are both oddly large, such as the shells, and oddly small, like the lemons. Some things appear to float, while others seem anchored by a selective gravity.

All the cues for depth, texture, color, size, shape, proportion, etc. that would help us to situate things within a knowable space are randomized. We are denied our privileged entry point through a vanishing point perspective, and must parse through the picture for those telling signs that might unravel the modes of facture behind this weird riot of forms. Yet the greater question is not about the things in the picture, but how the space that contains them is made or can even exist. Although Gordon's still lifes are doggedly analog in execution—shot with a large-format camera, printed on paper, and not Photoshopped after the fact—the affirmatively real space in which they are staged somehow seems impossibly, luridly fake. His photographs trigger the queasy sensation of disbelief that marks the meta-still life of the *trompe l'oeil*, or the "trick of the eye." Rematerializing virtual information as a physical trace, and oscillating back and forth between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, Gordon's photographic practice revolves around these performative gestures that better frame his work within this subset of the still life genre.

Where the typical still life allows for a minimal organization of depth—through the low ledge of the table upon which objects are perched and placed—the *trompe l'oeil* yields no such concession. It tips the "table" of the picture perpendicularly forward so

Fig. 3.4, Daniel Gordon, *Skull and Seashells*, 2014

Fig. 3.5, Daniel Gordon, *Still Life With Pineapples and Oranges*, 2015

that it lies parallel to the viewer's line of sight. There is no space behind the picture to penetrate; we look at the surface of the picture itself. The things represented within the *trompe l'oeil* are not only close enough to touch, they seem to protrude or pop out at the viewer. Well-known *trompe l'oeil* still lifes consist of velvet or wood letter boards upon which scraps of paper, pendants, keys, and other small knickknacks appear pinned or tucked behind grids of ribbon. The scraps are rumpled or frayed at the corners to heighten the effect of being appended to the picture's surface. In these *chantourné* or "cut-out" paintings, an illusory frame is frequently incorporated into the space of the picture. Framed within a frame, the *trompe l'oeil* is a picture that cunningly pretends to be something else—the real thing—but is just a picture within a picture, co-opting the detritus of the everyday to provoke a "realist hallucination."[35]

The peculiar spatiality of Gordon's photographs seems to fall somewhere within this verticalized field of the *trompe l'oeil*. The semblance of horizontality inherited from the still life is interrupted by his graduated stacking of paper cut-out "dummies" in an erratic forwards and backwards within three-dimensional space. In another of his photographs, *Still Life with Pineapples and Oranges* (2015), this effect of indeterminate verticality is all the more pronounced for the comparative restraint of the picture's contents (fig. 3.5). A cascading backdrop of scribbled zigzags frames a modest selection of fruits intermingled with decorative vases. The same confusion of scale, proportion, light, and texture that we saw in *Skull and Seashells* sets some elements in the picture afloat, while others rest precariously on their patterned pedestals. The tension between the horizontal and vertical, the backwards and forwards, is another characteristic of the *trompe l'oeil*, which upsets the rules of perspective in coordinating its axes of space. Everything in a *trompe l'oeil*, writes Jean Baudrillard, "is in suspense, both objects and time, and even space."[36] Unlike the carnal density of the still life, filled with things of weighted volume, the negligible ephemera of *trompe l'oeil* induces a brief but intense vertigo. The genre initiates a game of perceptual doubt by "miming and outdoing the effect of the real."[37]

Baudrillard's analysis of the *trompe l'oeil* buttresses his idea of the simulacrum—that hyperreal shadow world of empty signs with no referents. Gordon's photographs could be read as simulacra—of still lifes, of photographs, of paintings, or of sculpture—but their stubborn corporeality as photographs of photographs of indexed photographic information refuses this total cutting off from the real. Of greater interest is Baudrillard's insight that, within the formal rules of the *trompe l'oeil*, "depth is inverted" and, with this inversion, the picture is decentered *forwards* toward the viewer. "Another universe," he writes, is "hollowed out": "no horizon, no horizontality, [the picture becomes] an opaque mirror held before the eye, and there is nothing behind it."[38] The vanishing point, the crown "jewel" of perspective, is folded into the utter flatness of the picture's surface. In this destruction of the hierarchical *mise-en-scène* of perspective, our eyes' focus does not

[35] Jean Baudrillard, "The Trompe-l'Oeil," in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 53.
[36] Ibid. 56.
[37] Ibid. 58.
[38] Ibid.

converge in the represented space before us, but wanders this way and that, here and there, bouncing the labor of our seeing back at us.

To look at Gordon's still lifes as *trompe l'oeil* is to experience this bouncing back as a momentary spark of weightlessness. This weightlessness, I submit, is the perceptual byproduct of our visual registration of the artist's incredibly time-consuming processes of facture. While this may seem counter-intuitive, in his photographs Gordon constructs a synthetic dimensionality that confuses the index as a trace of something before the camera, and the index as a vehicle for circulating information. The photograph becomes a simulation within physical space of the pixelated duplicity and manifold layers of screen space. A *trompe l'oeil* frame of the highest order, the screen flattens all media into the vertical plane of its display monitor. Behind its "opaque mirror," it hides the materiality of endless flows of information. It is these flows, and their commanding patterns of facture, that undergird the elusive permutations of Gordon's still lifes. Like Blossfeldt, the major subject of Gordon's work is a perceptual inventory of the textures, shapes, and patterns of digital information, transplanted from their "native" environment online into real space. With each of his still lifes, Gordon creates a picture from a collage of contingent referents. The so-called "decisive moment" of his photographs lies in the many decisive moments that have passed before the many cameras whose images have been dispersed across the Internet. Gordon re-collates this digital dissolution of worldly photographic time and space into a single picture.

This "weightless" effect of the digital is what we "see" in the baffling spaces of Gordon's still lifes—just as what we see in a classic still life is the material "weight" of light reflected on red pigment that makes a painted apple gleam. The spotted blue banana in *Still Life with Pineapples and Oranges* may once have been the spotted blue shadow behind the pot of ferns in *Skull and Seashells*; or the cyan apples the recut and crumpled parts of the skull. Physically enacting the interchangeability of digital "details" made up of disintegrated bits and bytes, Gordon's process ensures that any number of elements from one picture may surface in a layer of another. The artist mimics in real time, in real space, this moving around of the files of information that proliferate on our computer screens. As he notes, "a lemon was probably a peach which was before that an apple and before that an onion. All these things get reused over and over again."[39] Indexing the Internet's index of images, Gordon's aesthetic of reuse incorporates the digital's multiplication of contingency within the picture; his work simulates the potential of the digital image to generate limitless images from any part of itself.

Turning from Gordon's work to that of Michele Abeles, this digitally "informed" space of the photograph opens up for the viewer in Abeles's pictures through a similar experience of weightlessness. Where Gordon downloads and synthesizes a voluminous stream of photographic information into an avalanche of paper layers, Abeles enlists a limited economy of real life materials to evoke the compressive layers of the computer screen. In her 2011 series *Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*:, Abeles shot seven photographs featuring a recurring cast of mundane items. The pictures are titled after the things in them: "Red, Rock, Cigarettes, Newspaper, Body, Wood, Lycra, Bottle"; "Pitcher, Paper, Arm, Scuba, Lycra"; "Plant, Hand, Paper, Fly, Table, Lines, Numbers"; and etc. As a whole, these titles accurately report each of the picture's contents. But what they fail to do is to grant

[39] Gordon, Artist Lecture, California College of the Arts, March 31, 2015.

Fig. 3.6, Michele Abeles, *Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White*, 2011

Fig. 3.7, Michele Abeles*, Arm, Plant, Bottles, Wood*, 2011

the viewer any consistent sense of how the space in the picture operates, or how the things in this space can occupy it in the exceedingly bizarre way that they do. The deadpan inventory of the titles widens the rift between words and things—between what we are told we see and the unusual arrangement of things on the "table" of the photograph before us.

For instance, *Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White* (2011) is one photograph from the series that gives us a number of "keywords" to organize the picture (fig. 3.6). The first item, the "leaf," seems to float on top of the photograph's surface. Abnormally large, it is unattached to anything that might hold it in place. It begs the question as to where it is in relation to the viewer, to the other things in the picture, and even to the plant from which it was taken. The next item listed in the title, the "grid," is a fence of diagonal black bars quartered off in such a way that a lattice of diamonds reverberates from its center. Curiously, it casts no shadows on anything else in the picture, but acts as an intermediary screen for the "ladder." The ladder is a flimsy aluminum one with a green plastic seat upon which a naked man is resting. Behind the man and the ladder is a long strip of lined paper, slanted and upside down—the "black" and "white" of the title. On one side of the paper are the numbers 1 thru 4, which measure the leaf, the man, and the ladder by some unknown scale system. A bar of translucent pink tape extends from the bottom right quadrant to the bottom left one. The location of this tape—is it on the grid? between the man and the ladder? stuck to some other, unseen surface?—remains irresolvable.

Like Gordon's still lifes, Abeles's photographs in her *Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*: series are all shot with an analog camera, with no digital manipulation or Photoshop interventions before or after. Despite this veneer of straightforwardness, their mode of production and their careful titling conceal strategic slippages of sense. There are things in each of them that Abeles does not name—things such as the sheets of plastic Perspex and the colored lighting gels that add extra, occluded layers to the photographed arrangement that we do see. Most glaringly, in *Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White*, what is omitted from the title is the "man." While Abeles's photographs are often categorized as studio still lifes, her inclusion of the human figure more appropriately categorizes her work as an amalgam of the still life and that other classic genre of the nude. The bodies in Abeles's pictures are invariably anonymous and exclusively male. Citing how she does not feel comfortable with "treating women as objects," she settled on men who responded to her Craigslist ads for the project, enlisting them solely for their body parts—arm, leg, torso, hands—as if they were objects like any other. In justifying this motley collection of the cheap and the generic, Abeles explains that she chooses objects for their "blank quality." "This blankness frees objects from heavy symbolism," she says, "I treat humans the same as the objects to emphasize a merging of the two." Formally leveling the difference between the organic and the synthetic, the human and the non-human, Abeles strives to empty out a space in her pictures where "there's no hierarchy."[40]

This concentrated leveling of people and things is a decision that Abeles links to the perceptual effects of the Internet: "I wanted to recreate some of the visual and content-related confusion of the Internet. The mishmash of how we see in that space and

[40] Michele Abeles, "Doom and Gloom," interview by Roberta Tenconi. *Muse* (Fall 2011): 140-142.

make meaning through connections of what we choose to look at."[41] Both Abeles and Gordon turn to the Internet as inspiration for the "material" of their work. But for Abeles—as the subject-less thread of the series' title hints—there is an undeniable feeling of "emptiness" that accompanies this interaction. The human body in her photographs is another severed constant, a displaced unit of measurement, for our incomprehension of the non-space of the Internet. The "new nature" of our information saturated world can be partly defined by this equalizing and leveling of everything—plants, humans, paper, numbers, colors—into the paratactic flatness of the screen's computational grid. Parataxis, or the arrangement of elements side by side, is one way to imagine the infinite volume of the virtual archive, where a traditional hypotaxis of terms (as in the measured order of the Classical table of knowledge, or the pyramid of linear perspective) is impossible. And, and, and, and, re: re: re: re:—the "index" of things in the titles of Abeles's photographs, in their necessary elisions, alert us to what *cannot* be seen and said, to all the details and layers that slip through the worldly chain of "similitudes and signatures" that is breaking under the weight of too much information.

In trying to orient ourselves to the paratactic, non-hierarchical space of Abeles's pictures, as viewers we must reimagine our own position in this world. How can our bodies, bound to the gravity of the real, negotiate and interact with this "hollowed out" zone that is a photographic simulation of the perplexities of screen space? Abeles's pictures are a magnified and intensified version of the misshapes and misplacements of Gordon's flat paper layers in his *trompe l'oeil* still lifes. The photographic "table" in Abeles's pictures has also been tilted forward toward the viewer; things and people seem set adrift from the rules of perspective. And yet, in her deliberate use of the human body, Abeles's pictures pose significant scalar challenges that eclipse the problem of figuring out how the physical space before the camera is constructed. She explicitly rejects those ingrained structures of reference—including the referential scale of our bodies—with which we mentally arrange and order, or facture, the world in our heads.

This mental "facturing" of the world as we try to orient ourselves to the unfamiliar spaces within the photograph is another way to understand the act of perception itself. As Katherine Hayles has written, perception can be thought of as the incessant processing of sensory information as we sift through the "signals" and "noise" around us. Significantly, this process pairs pattern with randomness, order with entropy. In historicizing the intersection of man and machine, Hayles turns to cybernetics as a "relational epistemology" of embodied control and feedback. She makes the following connection between perception, information, and pattern: "Perception does not reflect reality directly but rather relies on transformations that preserve a pattern across multiple sensory modalities and neural interfaces."[42] The translation of information into perception is understood as the recognition of "patterns analogically related to events in the world." In other words, we seek out pattern rather than content to make meaning. Just as language depends on difference, the communication of information is a "probabilistic act in a probabilistic universe, where…messages signify only through their relation to

[41] Ibid. 142.
[42] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 98.

other messages that might have been sent."[43] Beyond its aesthetic and formal connotations, pattern, then, organizes, even as it is co-extensive with, the randomness of the world.

Hayles's discrete use of the term "information" draws upon the work of Claude Shannon, the mathematician credited with founding the field of communications theory in the 1940s. For Shannon, information is by default digital. In his book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, co-written with Warren Weaver, Shannon gives a definition of information that exceeds its positivistic value as a mere "detail":

> The word *information*, in this theory, is used in a special sense that must not be confused with its ordinary usage. In particular, information must not be confused with meaning. In fact, two messages, one of which is heavily loaded with meaning and the other of which is pure nonsense, can be exactly equivalent, from the present viewpoint, as regards information…this word information in communication theory relates not so much to what you *do* say, as to what you *could* say.[44]

For Shannon and Weaver, information as a measure of probability makes it a digital mode of communication. "The conception of information," they continue, "applies not to the individual messages (as the concept of meaning would), but rather to the situation as a whole, the unit information indicating that in this situation one has an amount of freedom of choice."[45] Any unit of information requires at least two terms, a choice between two variables. Yes or no, 0 or 1, open or closed—these elementary units of possibility together create a "bit," or "binary digit." Shannon and Weaver pose information as this algorithm of possibility that allows for the selection of a message: "The greater this freedom of choice, and hence the greater the information, the greater is the uncertainty that the message actually selected is some particular one. Thus greater freedom of choice, greater uncertainty, greater information go hand in hand."[46]

With this alternate definition, information is not that which reduces randomness—ordering the world into a sayable and seeable table of words and things—but that which is dependent upon uncertainty and entropy in order to make meaning at all. Therefore, when I say that the photographic index as a trace has become an index of information, I am arguing that what the photograph now indexes is a structure of pattern and randomness. More than ever before, we need to accept the photograph as a contingent thing. As the "table" of the photograph becomes a digitally "informed" space, we must read it paratactically through the code of pattern *alongside* the code of perspective. When looking at Gordon or Abeles's photographs, what we see are units of possibility—not just a random snapshot, but a truly randomized space—that asks us to change how we perceptually process the world. This attempt to remake or reorder the world through the picture is not simply about taking up a more "interactive" position. To understand the

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 8.
[45] Ibid. 9.
[46] Ibid. 19.

picture through the lens of pattern, and not meaning, does not translate into a relativistic project. Like the traditional still life, these photographs are, in a way, already "meaningless." Their content, again, is not what is of interest. It is the patterns—the informational structure—in which that content is communicated. The widespread avowal of a newfound interactivity that accompanies the malleability of the digital image—so prevalent in new media discourses about the "digital utopia"—is not what I am rehearsing here. Instead, I advocate for a more attentive attitude towards what the photograph can and cannot show, what it *does* say side by side with what it *could* say, as these paradoxical possibilities collide within the picture.

In a second image from Abeles's *Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*:*Re*: series, *Arm, Plant, Bottles, Wood* (2011), this algorithmic logic of rearrangement can be seen in full force (fig. 3.7). Abeles could have titled this picture "Leaf, Pot, Red, Mirror, Paper," or "Green, Blue, Skin, Pink, Shadow, Plastic," etc. As with *Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White*, however, she moves forwards to backwards, naming what is in the picture layer by layer, even though the objects themselves all seem flattened onto the same plane. In the "middle" of the picture, a man's elbow juts out at a sharp, right angle that renders it into a fleshy, geometric object. What would normally be a stabilizing point of human identification becomes an awkward pictorial decoration. The arm is just an arm, but flipped sideways, it appears disproportionately massive, a mutation of scale as well as gravity. Besides the disorientation of the arm, we might note the inconsistent reflections scattered throughout the picture. Behind the arm and the plant, there are three bottles: one blue, two green, turned sideways. If we let our eyes wander to the silver table that reflects them—shrink-wrapped, still, in plastic, with its Ikea barcode sticker visible—a fourth green bottle appears, also turned sideways, levitating above the others. Where is the referent attached to this floating bottle? The reflected bottles behind the arm are topped by the leaves of a potted plant that itself seems to fade in and out, "ghosting" like the missing bottle. The wood at the top of the picture abruptly cuts off, hanging on one end. Is it made of cardboard? Of wood-patterned plastic? Of natural wood? Is it real? Is it fake? Which parts are real and which fake? How can we tell?

Where foreground and background, up and down, right and left are unstable: this is the opposite of the fixed placement of objects and things furnished by vanishing point perspective. Abeles throws out this established order and capsizes the picture. She blends the signifiers of different spaces—physical space, digital space, and photographic space—into one space, so that each one interferes with the effects of the other. Building up and flattening, assembling and disassembling, she triangulates and layers the experience of how we interact with these different spaces. For Abeles, intrigued by the "idea of images going offline" or "AWOL," her photographs do not just mimic the multiple Internet windows on a computer screen collapsing into one another.[47] This digitized *trompe l'oeil* effect is supplemented by the additional suggestion of the gestures we make to navigate this space. In her upturned compositions, where we are never fully sure what is on the "table" of the photograph, Abeles evokes our interactions with the touch screen: the pinched zoom we deploy to magnify a detail; the tap that brings

[47] Abeles, "Doom and Gloom," 142.

windows to the front; and the scrolling up and down or swiping left to right in a "sort of infinite space" that everything can "slide across."[48]

And yet, despite their "keyword" entry points, none of Abele's photographs physically engage viewers as interactive agents. We do not touch or zoom, swipe or scroll to manipulate anything within the picture. The photograph is still an analog photograph, made with a camera, chemically processed, and printed on paper. In its optical and spatial paradoxes, her photographs do, however, go beyond the idea that the photograph is a document of a world that we recognize as our own—one that we can possess, take in, or make sense of in a one-to-one match. By making a real life space seem immaterial—by suspending its laws of form, gravity, texture, and orientation—Abeles disrupts the perceptual and pictorial codes with which we have become accustomed to reading the photograph as "proof" of the world. In so doing, her photographs do not fit into the rules and ideals that linear perspective have imposed onto how we can interpret the photograph's flood of information. Where the structure of perspective supposedly ensures that everything is made neatly visible within the geometric transparency of the grid, the structure of the computer screen as an electronic grid of information erects a "virtual wall" against this naturalized transparency. Inserting mutations of both pattern and perspective into her pictures, Abeles makes her photographs "noisy" with randomness. Bringing too much information too close, they lead us deeper into the "probabilistic universe" of our online and offline realities.

On this issue of mutation, Hayles offers the insight that mutation itself is vital to any informational system: "Mutation is crucial because it names the bifurcation point at which the interplay between pattern and randomness causes the system to evolve in a new direction. It reveals the productive potential of randomness…The randomness to which mutation testifies is implicit in the very idea of pattern, for only against the background of non-pattern can pattern emerge."[49] Both Gordon and Abeles, in their work's reshuffling of pattern and randomness, show us how the indexical archive of images that the photographic medium has amassed is fracturing off at this mutational "bifurcation point" in which the meaning of the index, along with the meaning of the archive, are evolving in new directions. The media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, in a similar vein, observes that the "paper" memories of the old archive have become "hyper-indexical" rather than strictly referential. "What separates the Internet from the classical archive," he writes, "is that its mnemonic logic is more dynamic than the cultural memory in the printed archive."[50] From the paper memory of the photographic archive, documenting a singular event in time and space, to the computer memory of the digital archive, the emphasis switches from inscription to regeneration. The digital archive is not as much about storage—the filing cabinet metaphor—but about how information is stochastically

[48] Michele Abeles, "Recoding Images: A Round Table Interview with Michele Abeles, Sara Cwynar, Jon Rafman, and Travess Smalley," *Mousse*, Issue 43 (April-May 2014): 241.
[49] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 33.
[50] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 139.

generated and regenerated through computer memory. "The aesthetics of fixed order," Ernst concludes, "is being replaced by permanent reconfigurablity."[51]

This "random access" principle is vividly portrayed in Abeles's work as multiple orders of sense that clash and do not sit easily beside each other. Where the photograph as an indexical trace used to imply a gap between then and now, today it seems to be demarcating less of a temporal, and more of a spatial, break in sense and memory. There is little continuity within the space of Abeles's pictures; while they technically capture one space at one moment in time, they are disjointed ciphers whose layers seem to leak into one another. The "signals" they send only make partial sense—the "message" we see cannot be reduced to assigning a word or description, a "keyword," to what is in the picture. Through them the photograph is distinctly figured as a space for displaying information as a structure of uncertainty. The mirror at the origin of Brunelleschi's proof, tautologically reflecting the perfect illusion of perspective, is overturned by the table-window of the computer screen. When we look at this screen, as when we look at Abeles's or Gordon's photographs, it does not position us as fixed, perspectival subjects. Evacuated from this previously sovereign position, we are thrown into a universe where, like the floating body parts in Abeles's photographs, we are made to inhabit the contradictions of a space whose logic we have yet to figure out. Within this hyper-informed space, everything is being constantly re-named, re-classified, and re-organized as information. In this way, even as their photographs remain diligently analog, Abeles and Gordon inject the virtual grid of the computer screen into their deliberately illogical compositions. They confront us, as viewers and subjects, with a system of space in which our perceptions are increasingly "interpenetrated by information patterns."[52]

Should these pictures be called "photographs," or are they, too, something else? The entrenched notion of the photograph as an indexical document, a truth-telling window onto the world, is not jeopardized by photographs like Abeles's and Gordon's. That other discursive function of the photograph survives intact. But the model of the archive as that which orders rather than disorders sense—and the photograph as that which confirms rather than confuses our knowledge of the world—no longer holds. Vilém Flusser, in his influential text *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, provocatively claims that the photograph carries with it the "last vestiges of materiality" as a "post-industrial object." "[Photographs] are a connecting link," he posits, "between industrial objects and pure information."[53] As the "mirror with a memory" is rewritten by computer memory, this transition that Flusser anticipates—of the photograph as a synthesis of two technical *epistemes*—is taking place around us. More and more, the infinity of perspective is disappearing into the networked infinity of the digital screen. Beyond the limited grid of perspective, this worldly infinitude that the photograph has cumulatively helped to picture is inviting us into a new game of looking, with a new beauty at stake to discover.

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[51] Ibid. 99.
[52] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 13-14.
[53] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 51.

CHAPTER 4: STUDIO/WORLD

The *Punctum* Retouched

Fig. 4.1 (…/…)

In an entry on "Ornamental Cookery" in *Mythologies*, first published in 1957, Roland Barthes writes about the food photography in the women's magazine *Elle*. Each week features a full color spread of a highly impractical culinary concoction. Within this "dream-like cookery," one finds "golden partridges studded with cherries," "faintly pink chicken chaud-froid," "frothy charlotte prettified with glacé fruit designs," "multicolored trifle," "shavings of truffle," and so on. Mundane foodstuffs are disguised for maximum novelty: "sticking shrimps in lemon," "chiseled mushrooms," or "serving grape-fruit hot." These extravagantly fanciful dishes—seemingly at odds with the budget and consumer habits of *Elle*'s primarily working-class readership—are never shot in close-up or in detail, but from an artfully high angle. Where the photograph captures a reality that exists in front of the camera, but is untouchable or perhaps impossible—parading before us "objects at once near and inaccessible"—its aim is not, it would appear, to picture the world as is, but to point towards something or somewhere *else*, just outside of or beyond

the world we know. It is as if, Barthes observes, everything that we do see in these photographs has been coated and glazed, even buried, in "alibis."[1]

The subtle yet seductive incongruousness of these photographs—along with the other artifacts of mid-century French mass culture that Barthes idiosyncratically catalogs in his book—make up the everyday substance of what he calls "myth." Barthes defines myth as a language, a type of speech, or a coded message that can freeze, rob, fabricate, and empty out meaning. Aside from the fairy-tale cuisine of *Elle*, he reflects on the mythical character of things as unrelated and diverse as soap powders and detergents, the "Roman-ness" of movie actors' wigs, margarine, Einstein's brain, and the prosaic magic of plastic "free-wheeling through Nature" as it reshapes "buckets as well as jewels."[2] He explains that he "resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn," and "wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in [his] view, is hidden there."[3] By exposing how thoroughly artificial products and realities were being "dressed up" in an unquestioned "naturalness," Barthes endeavored to trace out a submerged pattern or hidden picture—a unifying principle beneath it all—that might unmask the true face of a reality that was not as intelligible or palatable as it was made to seem to be.

This tendency towards the "decorative" or "ornamental" that Barthes identifies in almost every domain of popular culture undoubtedly summarizes the visual and rhetorical strategies of the advertisement and entertainment industry. The world is superficially packaged in a certain way, made spectacular and desirable to entice the viewer as buyer. Barthes's particular objects of critique, however, have the vintage patina of an era when the dividing line between nature and culture, fantasy and the real, as well as the role of the critic versus the consumer, were more decipherable and neatly demarcated than they have become in our digitally driven and informationally volatile media environment. Every click on a webpage or tap of our smartphone screens can usher us down a potential rabbit-hole of misinformation and misrepresentation. Yet Barthes's larger project of uncovering the workings of myth is still relevant today. Not for the same goal, I assert, of demystification, or for translating the double-speak of "what-goes-without-saying" into an ideologically cleansed view of reality. Rather, I am interested in how the "naturalness" of the photograph has endured as a collective myth.

Indeed, throughout this dissertation I have tried to show that a large part of this apparent naturalness—or the transparency and truthfulness that we have come to assume from the photograph—derives from the camera's systematic reproduction of the realist tenets of linear perspective. Examining photographers both canonical and contemporary, I have put their work in dialectical contrast with each other in order to outline an alternative history of photography as a medium that can generate profoundly ambiguous spaces alongside and within recognizable perspectival ones. The dominant metaphors of the mirror and the window have given way to the constructive models of the grid, the map, the table, and finally, as I would like to put forth in this chapter, the studio. The studio, from the Latin *studium*, for "study" or "pursuit," is a room specifically designed

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[1] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 78-79.
[2] Ibid. 97-98.
[3] Ibid. 11.

for a withdrawal from the outside world. In the interior workshop or workspace of the studio, representations of the world can be taken apart and reassembled into new forms. While these forms may at times resemble existing realities, more often we are left to guess at how they have been put together, what they mean, and where we, as viewing subjects, can position ourselves in relation to them.

Like the makeshift and provisional space of the studio, then, the ambiguous space of the photograph can similarly provide a vital space for creative exercise and experiment. But it can also serve as a controlled space for set-building and play-acting, for lighting, staging, and recording—as with the imaginary meals in *Elle*—the illusions of capitalist commerce. The photograph is indispensable in naturalizing these unreal realities. It vacillates constantly between art and reference, décor and document. A picture of people, places, and things in the world, it is at the same time an object that enters the world as information and commodity. Shifting my analysis from the ways in which the building blocks of linear perspective—such as depth, scale, and a vanishing point infinity—have been deconstructed within the picture, I now consider the photograph itself as an ambiguous object. We have seen in the preceding chapters how ambiguity *within* the image can cause us to hesitate over what we are looking at. We grow uncertain about our perceptions, aware that there may be two or more possible interpretations. Likewise, according to Barthes, the function of myth is not to lie, but to mislead or distract: "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing; it distorts."[4]

Thus myth, like an alibi, is a practice of indirection. The viewer is led astray, prompted to exchange one term for the other—presence for absence, there for here, this for that, the fake for the real, or vice versa. Within this play of substitution and reversal, it can be hard to tell which version of reality, if any at all, is "true." This is the "irreality effect" that is so rampantly experienced when we encounter the photographic image today, whether in person, in books and magazines, or online. The point-and-click snapshot of yesterday, chemically processed and printed on paper, has become enmeshed with the multi-layered virtuality of Photoshop's "digital darkroom"; the interactive display of the computer screen; and the morphing indexical archive of the Internet. Even photographs untouched by these factors circulate within this expanded analog-digital field. What the photograph is—as an object that can move, at ever faster speeds, through this partially dematerialized world—has become a question of where and how it directs our attention.

I offer in this last chapter an attempt to follow the various directions in which the photograph as an ambiguous object can lead the viewer. Using Barthes's contradictory positions and thoughts on the subject as an inspiration and challenge, I read the work of three studio-based photographers—Katja Novitskova (b. 1984), Sara Cwynar (b. 1985), and Lucas Blalock (b. 1978)—who insert their photographs into this new game of looking. The world pictured through the lens of their studios appears to occupy a loophole in space and time. I argue that their photographs act as decoys for our perception in a world where what we see is not what we get. Attracting our attention as one thing, as we get closer or look further, they can suddenly flip or switch into something else. What exactly do these pictures reveal—or conceal? How can we trust the

[4] Ibid. 129.

image, or what (we think) we see? To begin exploring these questions, I turn to Barthes's idea of the *punctum*.

"If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it," Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*.[5] Published two months before his death in 1980, *Camera Lucida* (or *La Chambre Claire*, "The Light Room") is a reflection on the nature of photography composed during Barthes's period of mourning for his recently deceased mother. It is through looking at photographs of his mother—those of her as a young girl, and those taken before her death at 85—that he comes to appreciate the medium as something other than a propagator of bourgeois capitalist myth. This is its prevailing "nature" that he advances in essays like "The Photographic Message" (1961), "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), and "The Third Meaning" (1970), and throughout *Mythologies*. In these earlier contexts, the photograph is responsible for manufacturing "pseudo-truths." It gives the impression of a "natural being-there" of anything placed before the camera, rendering a brand-name ad for canned tomatoes and packaged pasta, for instance, the epitome of "Italianicity."[6] The photograph in *Camera Lucida*, on the other hand, becomes mythical in a different sense: it produces in the viewer (here, Barthes) a genuine enchantment. It is not a "copy" of reality, but an "emanation": "a *magic*," he says, "not an art."[7]

Numerous photographs punctuate the short text of *Camera Lucida*, which is divided into two parts. All of them, other than a few exceptions (Niépce's "Set Table" being one of them), are of people. We see portraits by Richard Avedon, August Sanders, and Robert Mappelthorpe, and street scenes by William Klein, André Kertész, and Alfred Stieglitz. There are three photographs by Nadar. One of them is captioned "The Artist's Mother (or Wife)." This is the first photograph included in Part Two of the book, which departs from the focus in Part One on the more public face of the medium. Barthes prefaces his deeply elegiac text with the qualification that photography—in its countless journalistic, vernacular, and artistic uses—is unclassifiable, since it involves the "vast disorder…of all the objects in the world."[8] Sifting through this disorder, he guides the reader through why he likes some pictures and not others, or why some images move him while others he deems merely "interesting." Part Two relocates Barthes's desire to grasp this indefinable "essence" of the photograph—"to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself'"—into an account of an evening spent alone sorting through pictures of his mother, unable to find a satisfactory likeness of her amidst all these photographic traces.[9]

That is, until he comes across the "Winter Garden Photograph": a faded picture of his mother at age five with her brother in a conservatory. Barthes describes the image with care. Yet it is the portrait of Nadar's Mother/Wife that accompanies his description. Calling Nadar's portrait "one of the loveliest photographs in the world," he proclaims that

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[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 99.
[6] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 22-23.
[7] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88.
[8] Ibid. 6.
[9] Ibid. 3.

it "contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer."[10] He bestows this same praise on the Winter Garden Photograph, but he does not show it. The unidentified woman in Nadar's photograph looks out at the viewer in a pensive but direct stare; her hair and face are a luminous white against the blackness of the cavernous armchair in which she is sitting. One hand is propped up to cover her mouth, so that we cannot see her full expression. Between these two photographs—that of the old woman and that of his mother as a young girl—Barthes is overwhelmed by the "truth" of photography. Far from a "pseudo-truth," the photograph, he concedes, gives us the "necessarily" and not the "optionally" real thing before the camera. Whatever that thing may be, as soon as it has been photographed, it can be encapsulated in the single phrase, "That-has-been."[11]

For Barthes, this is the *punctum*. Much in the same way that he defines myth, he defines the *punctum* through a metonymic chain of associations. The meaning of the term, and how he applies it to expound on the "truth" of the photographic medium, changes throughout *Camera Lucida* with the changing qualities of the photographs he contemplates. Before concluding that the *punctum* of every photograph is "Time," he establishes it as a detail within the photograph and as a method for looking at photographs. *Punctum* is Latin for "point," "spot," or "little hole." In the first sense—the *punctum* as a detail—something within the photograph "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces" the viewer. The effect of the *punctum* is to "prick" and "bruise," like a wound "made by a pointed instrument."[12] In the second sense—the *punctum* as a method—whatever the viewer is affected by reveals more about the viewer than the photograph itself. If the *punctum* is a detail, "to give examples of [the] *punctum* is…to give [oneself] up," Barthes notes.[13]

As a method for looking at photographs, the *punctum* therefore emerges out of the activity of searching photographs for that instant of self-revelation—the "touching" detail—that allows us to recognize what we are looking for, which up till that point remain unknown or obscure. Not every photograph has a *punctum*, and what touches one viewer may not touch another. (This is why Barthes does not share the Winter Garden Photograph. He insists, "It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'…in it, for you, no wound."[14]) In this respect, the *punctum* appears to be a purely subjective thing, privately selected and felt. I would like to veer away from this initial, if justifiable, reading, though, and suggest that the *punctum* is a myth that Barthes tells, to himself and to the reader, about the "truth" of photography. Rather than revealing the essence of the photograph through some detail marked as "that-has-been," the *punctum*, I contend, comes to designate a structure of *mis*recognition about what is actually in the photograph. It acts as a lure that tempts the viewer, as it does Barthes, to put something there which may not be there, but that we come to believe, or imagine, is there.

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[10] Ibid. 70.
[11] Ibid. 77.
[12] Ibid. 27.
[13] Ibid. 43.
[14] Ibid. 73.

A theory of the *punctum* based on this process of misrecognition—of not quite seeing clearly what is in front of him—is curiously what Barthes practices throughout *Camera Lucida*. We see this vague myopia already in Part One in his commentary on a portrait of an African American family from 1926 by the Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee. A man and woman stand behind a seated matriarch. They pose formally and smile faintly at the camera. Barthes finds the image of mild sociological interest until he notices the details of the standing woman's dress. He is struck by the low belt that she wears, urging him to spot, further down, her "strapped pumps" which, for him, in their "dated fashion," evokes a "great sympathy" and constitute the picture's *punctum*.[15] Several pages later, after talking about a number of other photographs and their *punctums*, he returns to this image. He changes his mind and announces that it was not the woman's pumps that moved him, but that the "real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing":

> …for (no doubt) it was the same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry…I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny).[16]

Barthes arrives at this conclusion without looking back at the photograph. But if we were do so, it would be obvious that the woman is wearing a pearl, and not a gold, necklace.

Where is the gold one that Barthes remembers? Why does he encourage the viewer that to pick out the *punctum*, it is best not to look too closely at a photograph, but "to look away or close your eyes"? This hazy stance seems at odds with his claim that the *punctum* is some telling detail that resides in this, and no other, photograph. In her article "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," Margaret Olin does the admirable detective work of tracking down this missing "slender ribbon of braided gold" in another family portrait in Barthes's autobiography-in-fragments, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The gold necklace is worn by his Aunt Alice, for whom he felt "saddened whenever he thought of her dreary life" as an "old maid."[17] The "sympathy" Barthes feels for the woman in Van Der Zee's photograph seems to have its source in the sympathy he felt for his aunt, inducing him to trade one woman's old-fashioned strapped pumps for the other's gold necklace which he replaces over a string of pearls. The *punctum* that "wounds" Barthes drifts somewhere in between these two pictures. It comes in and out of focus, disappearing and reappearing, transplanted from one photograph to another.

For Olin, this latent seeing that Barthes performs throughout *Camera Lucida* illustrates an ongoing interpretive slippage that proves that what is most valuable for him is not the "moment of illumination," between the camera and the subject, but the

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[15] Ibid. 43.
[16] Ibid. 53.
[17] Ibid.

"moment of identification," between the viewer and the photograph.[18] In short, Barthes is more invested in thinking about how the photograph makes him feel than in investigating how his free-floating affective entanglements might be clouding his vision and filling the picture with barely perceptible or invisible embellishments of memory and projection. Unlike the Barthes who wrote *Mythologies*, suspicious at every turn of the photograph's ability to fake a "natural being-there" of objects, the Barthes of *Camera Lucida* elevates the photograph to a "certificate of presence." "Photography never lies," he avers, "it does not invent," "it is authentification itself."[19] In these hyperbolic declarations, he willfully conflates the photograph, or the picture of a thing, with the referent, the thing itself. What he sees is not the photograph, but the things—and more to the point, the people—in the photograph. Barthes becomes a "true believer" of photography by virtue of this relational cathexis: "For every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents."[20]

And yet, it should be evident by now that we cannot take Barthes completely at his word. Whatever his convictions are about the essence of photography at any given time, he is really writing about the nexus of feelings—and the corresponding analytical attitude—aroused by the things and people he sees in the photograph. A pasta ad or a food spread in *Elle* provokes a bemused detachment, while the Winter Garden Photograph floods him with a reverent remembrance. Barthes transmutes the raw material of the photograph, its mute serviceability as a vehicle of representation, into a de facto "language" or "type of speech" to write his own myths about the place and purpose of photography in mediating our relation to the world. Whether it is made into an alibi for a commercial product pitch or an alibi for his grief over a lost relation, the photograph is privileged for harboring or disclosing a truth—either a critical truth or a personal truth — that is somehow lodged within it, waiting to be extracted or chanced upon by the sufficiently vigilant or receptive viewer.

What is the importance of Barthes's "missed" looking for a reading of *Camera Lucida*? Can his idea of the *punctum* hold? What if nothing were to be put in the place of something, just as Barthes misremembers a gold necklace over a pearl one, or uses Nadar's portrait to fill in for the absence of the Winter Garden Photograph? Olin radically hypothesizes along these lines that Barthes did not reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph because no such image existed. She maps out a web of visual and textual concatenations that connects Walter Benjamin's description of a portrait of Franz Kafka at age six in a winter garden in "A Little History of Photography," to photographs of Barthes himself as a child, to a picture of his mother as a toddler (holding an identical pose to the one in the Winter Garden Photograph) with her brother and their grandfather in the photograph entitled *La Souche* ("The Stock"), which he does publish in *Camera Lucida*. The Winter Garden Photograph, if we are to accept this conjecture of its putative nonexistence, would be a figment or composite of these disparate representations seen or read at different stages of Barthes's life that he collages together to come up with the pretense that the *punctum*—and the truth—of all photography is that it fixes an

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[18] Margaret Olin, "Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," in *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 51.
[19] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.
[20] Ibid. 85.

undeniable moment in time, supplying proof that "*the thing has been here*."[21] But what these instances of Barthes's "mistaken identification" manifest is that the "thing" in question may not have been there; that "here" is somewhere else; or "that-has-been" never was.

I have dwelled on these inconsistencies in *Camera Lucida*, aided by Olin's astute reading of the text, because Barthes's extremely compelling theories on photography have become inextricable from photographic discourse. The issue at stake is not that we should discount these theories, but that, intentionally or not, Barthes falls into the trap of seeing-*through* the photograph. He professes to know that the photograph is just a picture, beholden to the rules of linear perspective and the cultural codes that exploit this two-dimensional illusion, but he does not, in the end, subscribe to his critical evaluations of the image. Unlike my emphasis on the capacious duplicity of this spatial paradigm and its potential for creating a productive ambiguity, Barthes's last word on photography maintains its utter clarity as a faithful reflection of the world. In the same way that he confuses the "moment of illumination" with the "moment of identification," he confuses the photograph's status as an index, or a trace, with its status as an icon, or a likeness. Through his idea of the *punctum*, he mythologizes an exceedingly affect-laden fantasy of *indexicality* as the true nature of photography. For the *punctum*, when "undressed" from Barthes's mythical narrative about its discovery, is simply another word for the index and its two basic operations: to trace and to point.

On this unspoken link between the *punctum* and the index in Barthes's thinking, Olin elucidates how his frequent displacements of the *punctum* nevertheless undermine the central place of the index as the basis for his theory of photographic truth:

> The fact that something was before the camera when the photograph was taken is no longer unproblematically the source of the photograph's power…To the reader of *Camera Lucida* it should matter little whether [the Winter Garden Photograph] existed or not. The fictional truth of the unseen Winter Garden Photograph is powerful enough to survive its possible nonexistence…But the fact that it does not matter has consequences for any theory of photographic indexicality. To raise the possibility that these images do not exist, and to realize how little their existence matters is to cast this founding concept into question. The fact that something is in front of the camera matters; what that something was does not. What matters is displaced.[22]

In Olin's assessment, what does matter is that the photograph activates in Barthes a succession of "identificatory relationships." It is a node in a "community of photographs" that "links his family to a series of strangers." The photograph becomes a stand-in for an absent being, which reminds Barthes of his affinity with another relation or acquaintance, and so on. When a photograph "touches" Barthes, it is because he recognizes in it an entry point into the "delicate sphere of human relations."[23]

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[21] Ibid. 76.
[22] Olin, "Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," 66.
[23] Ibid. 68-69.

While this relational "index" of Olin's is persuasive, I would like, in my own re-reading of Barthes's displaced *punctum*, to foreground his deliberate myth-making around the photographic medium. Throughout *Camera Lucida* he uses the *punctum* as a "cover" for collapsing multiple pictures—and registers of relationality—into one. The photographic index, reformulated by Barthes as the *punctum*, does not just trace one moment in time. Neither is it just a point of "contact" between the object and its photographic trace. Moving him back and forth between the past and the present, it is a trigger that awakens him to the brute contingency of his reality. "Why is it," he is incited to ask, "that I am alive *here and now*?" Through the index-as-*punctum*, Barthes awakens to himself as a *mortal* subject. Significantly, this awareness of the fragility of his existence depends on the tenuous connection to those absent others who have been made visible again by the photograph's "mystery of concomitance" in the world to which he currently belongs.[24]

Barthes's awakening is not sparked by one "decisive" image or moment, but through the studied and time-consuming process of bringing many bits and pieces—the "part objects" of many things and people—into the "light room" of the photograph's imaginary space. There, he cobbles together an alternate version of reality that he naturalizes as "that-has-been." The photograph becomes a studio for the reworking of memory. Although he does not relate it to the studio, Barthes also employs the *studium* as a term in *Camera Lucida*; he uses it to signify the field of connoted meaning around a photograph. As a counterpoint to the *punctum*, the *studium* consists of the "blah-blah" of cultural convention, as he puts it, from which the singularity of the *punctum* breaks through.[25] However, if we are to read the *punctum*, as I have been proposing, as a myth that Barthes deploys to misdirect our attention, the *studium* is more like the backdrop, or the stage set, for the mythical enactment of the *punctum*'s punctuality, its fated arrival. Instead of pinpointing a discrete moment in time, the *punctum*, in my revised scenario, creates an elision—a small omission or loophole, a sort of blind spot—in the *studium*. This hole is not a point of revelation—opening onto the past, as Barthes purports—but a point of occlusion—obstructing our point of view. Something in the picture seems off. We return to it, unsure of what we see. The ultimate effect of the *punctum*, I submit, is to displace the viewer, disorienting us in the "here and now." Even as Barthes avows that he sees one thing in the photograph, what he describes is the process of trying to locate where and when he stands—with all the missteps in memory and perception that this engenders—in relation to what he thinks (or wishes) he sees.

To rethink the *punctum* as this index of indirection, pointing us away, and not towards, the "intractable reality" of that-has-been, is what the photographers I will discuss next accomplish in different ways.[26] Like decoys, their photographs delay the course of our perceptions, leading us off-track and forcing us to return to get a better look at what is in front of us. Barthes becomes acutely conscious of his mortality by looking at old photographs of family and strangers. The photographs I will examine, by contrast, address us as spatially mobile subjects—both physically and, with intensifying force, virtually—that must negotiate the ambiguous figures arising out of the photograph's

[24] Ibid. 84.
[25] Ibid. 55.
[26] Ibid. 119.

ambiguous space. We are drawn into the photograph's dynamic dualism, its two-faced capacity to stay the same yet change as it "works" on us in time. How can a picture change before our eyes? A closer look at Figure 1, at the start of this chapter, can help us to see how this is possible.

Among the optical illusions that fall under the category of ambiguous figures are those that seem to reverse spontaneously the longer we look at them. Such figures are best known as line drawings, but they can exist as three-dimensional objects that are photographed to achieve the same illusory effects. The figure I have chosen above, the "Boring Figure," was featured in the 1930 article, "A New Ambiguous Figure," by the psychologist E.G. Boring. Boring adapted it from a 1915 drawing by the British cartoonist W.E. Hill, but proto-versions had been published as "puzzle-pictures" on turn-of-the-century German postcards.[27] I have left the figure uncaptioned and untitled to allow the viewer to "linger over" it, as Barthes recommends, to see how, or if, any details in the picture, *punctum*-like, stand out. While not a photograph, the details in the drawing are crucial pivot points for our attention. They determine what we see—and do not see. Moreover, these details are more slippery than one would think.

Naming the different parts of the picture is probably the best way to begin "seeing" it. A woman is shown in profile. She is wearing a fur shawl or coat, with a billowing scarf over her head. A decorative feather, curled at the end, sticks out from the dark fringe of her hair. She is looking downwards, her gaze directed away from us. If we focus on the lines of her face, we see a protruding chin, and the single, dainty ellipse of an eyelash. Does the woman you see wear a neck ribbon? Or does that dark slash of a line just between her shoulders look more like a frown? The woman's jawline is sharply angled—but does her jaw rest above or between the fur cloak? As we move farther up, the woman's ear, depending on how you see her, can turn into an eye, and the tiny slip of her nose into a wart. The original title of Hill's drawing was "My wife and my mother-in-law," accompanied by the tease: "They are both in this picture—Find them." As you continue to look, one woman transforms into another—an old woman into a young woman. The young woman is shown three quarters from behind, her face turned towards the left; the old woman is shown three quarters from the front, her nose and chin jutting out prominently. If you cannot see the two figures, replace one term for the other: an eye for an ear, a chin for a nose, and a ribbon for a mouth.

The ambiguous figure of the old woman/young woman serves as a visual echo of Barthes's substitution of Nadar's portrait of his Mother/Wife for that of the Winter Garden Photograph—an image that stirs him to recognize his mother in the young girl. As in those photographs—but here, in an almost comical fashion—the Boring Figure abruptly reveals another dimension nested side by side within the image. Along with other classic ambiguous figures such as the duck-rabbit, the Rubin vase, and the Necker cube, the figure of the old woman/young woman is studied in the psychology of vision to demonstrate the phenomenon of multistable perception. In our visual processing of ambiguous figures or images, there is no predicting when or if the "aha!" moment of perceptual reversal occurs. Once it does, each image that we do see remains stable—it is

[27] Edwin G. Boring, "A New Ambiguous Figure," *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July 1930): 444-445.

either an old woman or a young woman, with neither one dominating or canceling the other out—flipping between the two options.

Boring writes that the old woman/young woman is of special note because its ambiguity is not due to a figure-ground reversal nor our orientation towards the image. Within the picture, "the two alternating figures interpenetrate each other spatially." Both take up the "same region of the total field."[28] Due to the lack of a clear-cut line between the two figures, the validity of either is thus thrown into question. The picture poses an epistemological dilemma through its perceptual multistability. While the reversals of ambiguous figures can go on indefinitely (is it a duck or a rabbit? an old woman or a young woman?), I would like to query the broader implications of this phenomenon for the belief that any picture can offer a "truthful" representation of the world. The drawing of the old woman/young woman implicitly subverts the singular logic of the picture. Rather than being a perspectivally grounded, mimetic representation of the world—although that is certainly what it can *look like*—every picture is an agglomeration of patterns and designs, arranged to varying degrees of recognizability on a two-dimensional plane. We are presented with two mutually exclusive possibilities in one image. What is remarkable about the ironically named Boring Figure is that, through its sleight-of-hand displacement of key details, it internalizes the act of return within the image itself. Every reversal, each switch of our perceptions, does not generate a new perspective, but it does generate a new *aspect*.

I introduced this idea of the aspect, as opposed to perspective, in Chapter 3 with regard to the Dutch still life. Within that genre, the picture is not organized around a set spatial relationship to the viewer—such as the one governed by central, one-point perspective—but as an assemblage of aspects, with the acknowledgement that any element in the picture is but a fragment of a larger visual field. The Boring Figure shows that neither subtraction nor addition, division nor multiplication, is required to make a whole into a part. Between our seeing of the first aspect and the second aspect—between our recognition of the old woman and the young woman—nothing in the picture changes. What was seen as a whole nonetheless becomes a partial aspect. Put differently, the old woman does not divide into the young woman—she does not become two separate women. One is revealed to be hidden behind, or within, the other. The old woman disappears and reappears as the young woman, or the young woman disappears and reappears as the old woman. This visual chiasmus retroactively points to the incompleteness of our perceptions. The integrity of the picture is undone and remade into something that is intrinsically split and splitting.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in a famous section in his *Philosophical Investigations* on the duck-rabbit, the double-cross, and other "picture objects," calls the kind of looking solicited by ambiguous figures "noticing an aspect" or "aspect-seeing." "I contemplate a face," he writes, "and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently."[29] This experience of a "dawning" of an aspect holds the paradox within it that to see a picture of anything relies not on seeing *per se* but on seeing-*as*: one sees the picture *as* a face (even though it is just lines on a page) or the

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 165.

picture-duck *as* a duck and the picture-rabbit *as* a rabbit. While this insight might seem elementary, it sheds light on the predilection, as we saw with Barthes, of seeing-*through* the picture. We tend to see the photograph as an index over an icon, a trace over a likeness, or vice versa, but this delicate balance is perpetually shifting. A photograph, like the drawing of the duck-rabbit or the old woman/young woman, is a similarly ambiguous picture-object. Every photograph depicts a "real" space within, and as, the virtual space of a picture. Where the myth of perspective is that it gives us an accurate, mathematically constructed analog to the world, the ambiguous figure is conceived as a two-dimensional pattern that affords more than one totalizing point of view. It leaves room for unexpected aspects to appear, creating the very different illusion that the same image is changing.

Wittgenstein develops his notion of seeing-as around this concept of the aspect, which could be further defined as a face, facet, or feature of a thing, in contradistinction to its appearance as a whole. When you see an "aspect" of something or someone, you see a certain side of that person or thing from a given direction. As you change your direction or position—circling around it, getting closer or farther—its aspects, too, can change, since an aspect presents a ratio, or fraction, of the whole. "The concept of an aspect," Wittgenstein explicates, "is akin to the concept of an image. In other words: the concept 'I am now seeing it as…' is akin to 'I am now having *this* image.'"[30] Even a simple triangle can contain manifold aspects. It can be seen, as Wittgenstein enumerates:

> …as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things. You can think now of *this* now of *this* as you look at it, can regard it now as *this* now as *this*, and then you will see it now *this* way, not *this*.[31]

Seeing-as, or aspect seeing, is this product of our reaction to the virtuality of a two-dimensional picture. "What I can see something *as*," Wittgenstein clarifies, "is what it can be a picture of…What this means is: the aspects in a change of aspects are those ones which the figure might sometimes have permanently in a picture."[32] Any and every picture is a collection of aspects; how we see those aspects, which aspects we see, and the range with which we can interact with those aspects, depends on our ability to engage with the picture imaginatively.

As the accrual of deictic markers in Wittgenstein's passage indicates, aspect seeing has a somewhat stilted or delayed temporality built into it. Time passes, is elongated, as we return to the picture and come to see it as *this*, not *this*, then *this*, etc. Unlike a picture that we see within the dictates of linear perspective—in which we are presented with the illusion of a self-contained scene with everything and everyone put in their proper place, including ourselves as viewing subjects—a picture that we are seeing *as* something or other invites us to consider it as a perceptual object made up of partial wholes. By this I mean that to imagine a picture not as a complete whole in and of itself,

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[30] Ibid. 181.
[31] Ibid. 171.
[32] Ibid.

but something that is facing us, and that we are facing, at an aspectual meeting point, is to understand the picture in a renewed sense as in no way fixed beyond the "phase" or "stage" in which we confront it. "What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect," Wittgenstein elaborates, "is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects."[33] Seeing *as* is to see the picture as a relation between ourselves and one of its aspects. For every aspect that we do see, or that faces us, another one is occluded. Like the old woman/young woman, to see the picture at all, we might say, is to see a picture of occlusion.

To think of the picture in terms of occlusion rather than revelation brings us to the figure of the decoy, which, in its ability to appear simultaneously like more than one thing—to hide and show different aspects of itself—is not unlike an ambiguous figure. A decoy is typically a fake thing that passes itself off as a real thing with the intent to entice or trap. As an object, the decoy is commonly associated, for instance, with an imitation duck, painted and carved from wood, that is set afloat in a body of water to attract flying or migrating ducks for hunters lying in wait. Leaving aside the more predatory gamesmanship of its use, I would like to align the decoy, again, with the revised idea of the *punctum* as something that turns us away, and not towards, the real. The definition of the *punctum* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* emphasizes its spatial and temporal specificity—it is "a geometrical point in space" or "a very small division of time"—before landing on Barthes's preferred sense of it as the "essence of a matter of a thing, the most important focus of attention or consideration." If the decoy is something that catches our eye only to distract us from our original course, the *punctum* as a decoy sets in motion this confusion of our natural sense of timing and direction.

In the work of Katja Novitskova, the photograph is utilized as this perceptual decoy to distract and confuse the viewer. In her *Approximations* series (2012-in progress), she culls images of exotic animals and insects—giraffes, penguins, dolphins, chameleons, sloths, flamingos, and spiders—from online Internet searches that she prints on high-resolution aluminum cutouts usually reserved for commercial signage or advertising displays. The cutouts are then installed in white cube galleries or in museums, and sometimes in outdoor parks or plazas. Surprisingly, this transfer from an online to an offline context is not what makes the work eye-catching or captivating. Other than their higher production values, her flat photo-sculptures are no different than the cardboard cutouts that greet you as you step into a department store or mall. While the in-person experience of Novitskova's digital menagerie is unremarkable, it is after these cutouts have been re-photographed and re-circulated online that they "come to life" as strangely ambiguous figures and objects.

When looking at Novistkova's work, the classic game of "What is wrong with this picture?" comes to mind. In *Approximation XV* (2014), we see a pair of nesting barn owls that have been placed in a gallery setting. In the gallery, it would be easy enough to walk around the piece, quickly registering the black easel that props up the two-dimensional cutout such that it seems to be growing out of the floor and standing on its own (fig. 4.2). But if we were to see the work first online or as a photograph, this "reveal"—its identity as a prop—is occluded. We end up with a much more intriguing presentation of partial

[33] Ibid. 180.

Fig. 4.2, Katja Novitskova, Approximation XV, 2014

Fig 4.3. Katja Novitskova, *Pattern of Activation*, 2014

aspects that makes the work seem *less* "real"—or materially rooted and situated—than it is. Within the virtual, two-dimensional display of the computer screen, what is striking about the work is that it *does* appear to be three-dimensional, as if the owls had volume and depth. Their feathers look plumped out and soft, and the head of the owl on the left seems tilted forward, with the owl on the right slightly angled back. Yet even with this added three-dimensionality, we are more likely to interpret the owls as JPEG images that have been cut-and-pasted into a Photoshop file. We presume that they are "fake," or digitally implanted or manipulated, as their offline reality carries back over into the visual ecosystem of an online informational environment.

Novitskova has said that she uses animals in her sculptures because they are instinctively appealing and disarming:

> Animal forms, especially ones with eyes and facial expressions, display visual patterns that activate certain primal reactions in viewers, charge them emotionally, whether they know it's an artwork or not. For me the work is not just the sculpture, but the smiles and stares, the nearly automatic smartphone snapping, the archaic "posing with a trophy" photo-op behavior that often coincides with the work being exhibited. The sculpture triggers all these behavior patterns. It is very obvious with small children.[34]

Novitskova describes her work as if its chief purpose were to create a photo opportunity, where the art is expressly made to-be-photographed and disseminated for the publicity of online likes and shares. The art critic Brian Droitcour zeros in on this "transactional sensibility" of "Post-Internet" art, a moniker under which Novitskova's work is often grouped. Harkening back to Barthes's "dress-up" game of capitalist myth-making, Post-Internet art is "art made for its installation shots, or installation shots presented as art." "The Post-Internet art object," Droitcour indicts, "looks good in a browser just as laundry detergent looks good in a commercial. Detergent isn't as stunning at a Laundromat, and neither does Post-Internet art shine in the gallery. It's boring to be around. It's not really sculpture. It doesn't activate space. It's frontal, designed to preen for the camera's lens."[35] In answer to the question "what is wrong with this picture?" one might quip that Novitskova's work is a gimmick, a neat trick of perspective blown up for attention-getting effect.

While this criticism is indisputably valid, I venture that what is "wrong" with the picture is more interesting if we look at it again. Its *punctum*, or what is notably "off" about it, is its un-real scale, which it acquires when we no longer look at the work in real space, but see it instead in a photograph or on a screen. Novitskova's works are frequently called "life-sized"—but when was an owl as tall as a human being? Part of the reason why the owls seem "fake"—or appear to be digitally imported when they are more properly analog once they have been printed and physically installed—is that our sense of

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[34] Katja Novitskova, "Katja Novitskova in Conversation with Gene McHugh," *Garage Magazine*, No. 7 (September 2014): 208.

[35] Brian Droitcour, "The Perils of Post-Internet Art," *Art in America* (October 30, 2014), http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/the-perils-of-post-internet-art/ (accessed June 1, 2017).

scale readjusts itself and becomes variable when we look at images on the computer screen. In a world that is regularly retouched by Photoshop or CGI (computer-generated imagery), we know that real objects and virtual objects of indeterminate scale can occupy the same time and space. Digital objects have no set scale; they can be seamlessly sized and resized to fit whatever specifications we desire. As viewers that now spend much of our waking lives staring at digital screens, we have become accustomed to this yo-yoing of scale between formats. Novitskova's works act like decoys insofar as, masquerading and "preening" for the camera as photographic objects turned into faux-digital images, they cleverly lead us into this scale-less realm of the computer and the Internet, whose indexical image economy has one foot in the real and another in the virtual as the "ground" of the photograph incessantly flips from one to the other.

Another one of Novitskova's works, *Pattern of Activation* (2014), plays with this instability of the photograph's indexical status when we look at anything on the computer or online (fig. 4.3). The inevitable doubt arises over which parts or aspects of the image were there in front of the camera, and which have been Photoshopped in. An outsized, squiggly red arrow rests on a medium-sized trampoline in front of a white horse that is nearly equivalent in size to the arrow. The setting is once more a well-lit gallery, and the cutout of the horse, like that of the barn owls, seems to be shooting out of the gallery floor. Juxtaposed against the trampoline and the arrow, the ghostly horse looks even more like a hyperreal digital image inserted via Photoshop. The image itself is "analog"—all the objects in it are real and take up space in the world—but nothing about it seems "natural." Work such as Novitskova's that looks good on the computer but not in real life, as Droitcour posits, suggests that the synthetic space of the computer has become the new, default studio—or at the least an unavoidable gateway—for the photographic medium's world-making. As it is reprocessed by the computer into patterned code, the photograph itself is becoming an ambiguous object that asks the viewer to practice a kind of multistable perception in response to it. Novitskova's pictures *are* indexical, they *are* strictly perspectival pictures taken with a camera—but they do not *look like* that. Instead of Photoshopping her work to produce this skewing of the analog into the digital, she simply alters image "carriers." In the work's jump from a real space to a screen space, as viewers, our attention is jarred into a recognition of the photograph's existence within this indexical blind spot. We have to re-scale the world, and our seeing, to the appropriate context. We see vastly different aspects of the work as a result. Novitskova's work, as with Wittgenstein's triangle, calls for us to see the photograph as many things, and in many contexts, at once.

In her commentary on her work, Novitskova does not talk about "aspects" or "perspective," but she does mention "pattern" again and again. The Internet, for her, is a mutating ecology of image and information that necessitates a full-scale adaptation of our habitual patterns of seeing and cognition. As she writes in her *Post Internet Survival Guide* (2010), a manifesto that took the form of a blog, an archive, an exhibition, and a book: "In this world—that is being tagged as Post-Internet—the Internet is an invisible given, like roads or trees, and is used to navigate not just information but also matter and space. The notion of a survival guide arises as an answer to the basic human need to cope with increasing complexity…One has to feel, interpret, and index this ocean of signs in

order to survive."[36] Novitskova's cutouts are perceptual decoys that direct us away from reality and toward the hyper-attention economy of the Internet. Fueled "by the attention of billions of people," images within this "ocean of signs" act as the "material carriers of attention-grabbing intensities." Approaching "art-making as pattern-making," Novitskova aims to help viewers cultivate an "advanced form of pattern processing."[37] To survive in the new visual and sign system of the Post-Internet world, as in real life, is to be able to "size up the situation," "use all your senses," "remember where you are," and "improvise" as we are directed to and fro from offline to online, page to screen, in a multiplication of windows onto worlds that do not concretely exist anywhere but *as* these partial aspects of our split and distracted attention.[38]

Like Novitskova, the artist Sara Cwynar is supremely conscious of the perceptual fallout and attention attrition of living in a Post-Internet world. But, pushing us in the other direction from Novitskova's techno-survivalism, Cwynar envisions the viewer as a chronic, online consumer of images that she wants to catch off guard with the deceptive simplicity of her own photographs which demand to be seen in person, in a gallery or a studio or a museum, to "work" at all. Cwynar's excruciatingly tedious production process mirrors her adamantly pre-Internet ethos. She starts each work by combing through food and lifestyle magazines, eBay, flea markets, encyclopedias, thrift-store albums, obsolete photography manuals, or other printed matter from the New York Public Library's picture collection. Copying or scanning whatever strikes her, she brings these images back to her studio and enlarges them to create enormous still life collages that, almost like billboards, can be up to six feet tall. On top of this archival photographic base, she places hundreds of items that might be characterized as "junk drawer" paraphernalia—rubber bands, key chains, doll house furniture, fake fruit, plastic bits, matches, erasers, dice, paper clips, and other throwaway trinkets—onto its surface. She then shoots the arrangement with an 8x10 analog camera from an aerial angle (standing on a ladder), re-layers, and re-shoots again, before doing final retouches in Photoshop and printing the work as a chromogenic color print.

As Cwynar admits, her process largely consists of "just moving things around in the studio for hours and hours."[39] This obsessive fiddling and readjusting spirals into well over a dozen cycles of digital and analog manipulation and intervention that stretch over several weeks. It is the opposite of the quick turnaround of the Post-Internet installation-shot-as-art. Although she agitates against that trend, the "slowness" of Cwynar's work acquires its novelty, as well as its multi-layered internal logic, from that pervasive context. "I think contemporary art practice lives on the Internet," she states. "Most people experience my pictures through their computer for better or worse. That's why I try to make them so dense you can't really see what you're looking at online, you can't quite

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[36] Katja Novitskova, *Post Internet Survival Guide* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2010), 4.
[37] Novitskova, "Katja Novitskova in Conversation with Gene McHugh," 208.
[38] Novitskova, *Post Internet Survival Guide*, 6.
[39] Sara Cwynar cited in Guy Merrill, "Self Described Hoarder and Still Life Photographer Uses Color to Organize Her Collection of Treasures," *Featureshoot* (July 12, 2013), http://www.featureshoot.com/2013/07/self-described-hoarder-and-still-life-photographer-uses-color-to-organize-her-collection-of-treasures/ (accessed June 1, 2017).

understand unless you experience it in the real world."[40] Cwynar's work is made in a physical studio, and her palpably nostalgia-tinged archive is a paper-based one. But that other shadow studio of the computer—and the clickbait archival vortex of the Internet—is invariably in the background. Where the Internet can randomly equalize and level everything from humans to numbers to images to text into the flatness of the screen's monitor, Cwynar tries to the do same, by hand, meticulously building "a new world on top of the old one." When we look at Cwynar's photos online, or in a book, we are decidedly not seeing the "whole picture"; we are seeing a scaled-down version of an indexical reality that has been drastically scaled and re-scaled by the camera and the computer's multiple reductions.

What might we name as the *punctum* of Cwynar's work, whose scale, once photographed and installed, is about the size of a standard painting hung on a wall? It is neither too small nor too big to walk by and "get" at a glance. Her work *Display Stand No. 64, CONS H. 8 ¼" W. 24" D. 16 ½"* (2014) is a print mounted on Plexiglas whose dimensions are 30x36 in. The measurements given in the title are for the display stand in the picture, which was sourced from a catalog advertising plastic stands. Entering a room in which Cwynar's work hangs, it would look more or less as you see it in Figure 4.4: a run-of-the-mill display stand with layered stacks of Chiclets, Dentyne, Certs, Rolaids, etc. in bright, primary colors that, for some reason, appear a little blurry around the edges. As you move towards the photograph, this cohesion starts to fall apart. What a minute ago seemed to be a normal, vintage-looking photograph of some packs of candy and gum, disintegrates into lots of tiny protrusions scattered across the image's surface. The blur can be partly attributed to the labor time expended on the image: moving and shooting, then moving again and re-shooting sections of these parts, flattening and layering them into the image, then moving around the same objects to other positions that are shot again—yields a massive stacking of photographs of photographs at different points of time and position. If the *punctum* of Novitskova's work—what makes us stop and puzzle over it—is its off-kilter scale, Cwynar's may be its perversely disguised, but insistently present, texture. She not only mixes different scales within the same image; the final picture compacts the excessively protracted temporality of her studio practice. What appears to be a glossy catalog advertisement occludes layer upon layer of embedded bits of arranged and rearranged photographic "junk."

Looking at Figure 4.5, a detail shot of the same work, gives a better sense of this covert texture field that appears as you get closer to the photograph. Like that other children's game of "hidden pictures," in which you search for objects tucked into the lines and curves and shades of a recognizable scene—the row of Chiclets in the bottom foreground of the photograph is studded with incongruous objects like matches, tiny scrabble pieces, dominoes, a yellow clothespin, pencils, a group of aluminum smiley faces above another group of yellow pushpins, as well as other photographs such as of the woman, in the center, posing in a pink dress suit, and two playing cards featuring female nudes, slightly smaller, below her and to the far right. None of these objects are appropriately sized within the context nor in relation to each other. They are all much smaller, or much bigger, than they would be in "real life" (the matches are the length of

[40] Sara Cwynar cited in Maurizio Cattelan, "Show Your True Colors," *Muse* (August 11, 2014), http://www.musemagazine.it/sara-cwynar/ (accessed June 1, 2017).

Fig. 4.4, Sara Cwynar, *Display Stand No. 64 CONS H. 8 1/4 W. 24 D. 16 1/2*, 2014

Fig. 4.5, Sara Cwynar, Detail, *Display Stand No. 64 CONS H. 8 1/4 W. 24 D. 16 1/2*, 2014

Fig. 4.6, Sara Cwynar, Detail, *Display Stand No. 64 CONS H. 8 1/4 W. 24 D. 16 1/2*, 2014

the playing card; the happy faces are bigger than the matches, etc.). The only thing that holds them together is that they are well camouflaged within a color-coded whole. The "blur" we see from afar is also that blur experienced when faced with an image that is partially 3D. Parts of the image seem to be drifting out towards us, as if tempting us to reach out and touch them. Many of the objects cast faint shadows; but the shadows are pointing in different directions, agglutinating, again, the passage of time contained within the work's making. Cwynar relishes this do-it-yourself Photoshop. "I want everything in my pictures to be intentionally unpolished," she notes, "filled with mistakes, and tactile: the opposite of a clean, commercial image."[41]

To take just one step back from the work—to put a little more distance between yourself and its overwhelming details—reveals even more aspects hidden behind others. In Figure 4.6, a "medium shot" of the work versus the "close up" of Figure 4.5, the details that we notice change, and the ones we saw before recede as more of the whole comes forth. In the upper left corner there is a clump of standing, light teal candles; toward the top middle two turquoise forks; and to the far right, a postcard of flowers. There are tea cups and saucers, baseball cards, admission tickets, steel washers, and more noticeable than before, two iPhones with the Apple logo above one of the nude playing cards, as the anachronistic and the contemporary are clustered side by side. Where Novitskova dramatizes the un-real scale of the digital through her animal cutouts, Cwynar internalizes this variability of scale into the photograph. Cwynar's main gesture towards displacing and disorienting the viewer is by evacuating a coherent position from which to look at her photographs. When we get close, we see one thing; when we are far away, we see another. At any point on this spectrum of proximity and distance, the picture reorganizes itself and looks slightly like something else: more like a picture, or less and less like one and more like a hodge-podge of multicolored detritus. A shop window stuffed with too many things, *Display Stand No. 64, CONS H. 8 ¼" W. 24" D. 16 ½"* advertises Cwynar's photographs as decoys that, in their over-accumulation of textural distractions one on top of the other, have too many *punctums*, too many points of attention that "prick" us, pointing us here and there.

By pausing on the "texture" of these images, I invoke a quality that is not, of course, intuitively associated with the photograph. Whatever semblance of depth it may offer up, the photograph is forever two-dimensional: it is a picture printed on a piece of paper or illuminated on a screen. To speak of a photograph's texture—as both Novitskova and Cwynar's works elicit—is to pick up on the inchoate sensation that these images do not *stay* flat. They hover somewhere above and beyond that familiar threshold of the photographic image accepted solely as a legible picture of the world. More than this, their works are ambiguous picture-objects that call out for our embodied sense of touch. In our daily lives, when we reach out to touch something—such as produce at the market, or to test the heat of running water—it is to prove, by getting closer to an object and substantiating its qualities with our bodies, that the thing we are about to buy or experience matches up with what we expect and desire. This is something that sight, with its in-built spatial distance between subject and object, cannot fulfill. But in an age when

[41] Sara Cwynar, cited in Siobhan Bohnacker, "Emerging Photographer: Sara Cwynar," *The New Yorker* (September 4, 2013), http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/emerging-photographer-sara-cwynar (accessed June 1, 2017).

the advertising catalog, and much else besides, has been transplanted online, to "touch" something we see in this new Post-Internet setting is no assurance of anything except that it has been successfully subsumed, by way of its image, into a virtual platform or format. What kind of "touch" are we pursuing when we operate the touch screen of the computer or iPad or iPhone—so discreetly alluded to in Cwynar's *Display Stand*—to get a better "look" at an image? What is causing the "texture" of these photographs—or the impression of a fleeting and raised dimensionality—in our eyes?

In his book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, published in 1979, the visual psychologist James J. Gibson highlights texture as an essential feature of his theory of ecological optics. Seeking to oppose the theory of central perspective and its privileging of depth and distance for how we see and organize the world, Gibson classifies the human subject as an animal among other animals whose bodies are in continuous locomotion, interacting with the layout of a worldly, terrestrial environment. He postulates, though, that as modern, literate subjects, we spend a lot of our time looking *at* things in a flat and frontal orientation. Following the hegemony of perspectival optics, we have become "so accustomed to looking at a page or a picture, or through a window, that we often lose the feeling of being *surrounded* by the environment":

> We lived boxed-up lives. Our ancestors were always looking around. They surveyed the environment, for they needed to know where they were and what there was in all directions. Children pay attention to their surroundings when allowed to do so. But we adults spend most of our time *looking at* instead of *looking around.*[42]

Gibson's theory of ecological optics in many respects evolves a more nuanced version of the theory of constancy scaling introduced in Chapter 2. But it is also a pointed rebuke. That theory, if we recall, maintains that we respond to perceptual cues—whether in the picture or in the environment—which help us to map cognitively what we are seeing. We recalibrate depth, scale, and proportion based on the perceived (or misperceived, in the case of the optical illusion of the Ames room) distance between ourselves and what we are looking at. Gibson rejects this belief that our minds, as if they were congenitally analogous to computers, are performing such feats of calculation. Externalizing this supposed mental activity, he looks outwards towards the infinite variability of the environment's "optic array." He attends to the murkier qualities—the "margins, borders, contrasts, ratios, differences and textures"—that proliferate within this array.[43]

The perception of these more obscure qualities of the environment is by necessity dependent upon a viewing subject capable of looking around, or one that is mobile in the most basic sense of being cognizant and alive. When our bodies or heads or our eyes move, what we see changes, and with every change, an aspect, or face, of something that we were seeing a moment ago recedes as another aspect of that thing, or indeed an aspect of some other thing, comes to the fore. Rejecting the metaphor of perspective as the projection of a central ray that illuminates a scene, Gibson likewise favors occlusion as

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[42] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1985), 203.
[43] James J. Gibson, "Ecological Optics," *Vision Research*, Vol. 1 (1961): 258.

the primary operating term in his theory of ecological optics. For Gibson, the shift in aspects as we look around at the world is a property of what he calls the "occluding edge," which he defines as "an edge taken with reference to a point of observation." Comparable to the horizon line in the classical perspectival system, the idea of the "occluding edge" is nonetheless unique in that it presumes a subject in intermittent motion, starting and stopping, coming and going, along a path, and not a position, of observation. "All displacements and turns of an observer's body, or of an object," Gibson writes, "brings about a change of occlusion."[44] The occluding edge is that line or boundary, itself subject to the changeability of our mobile paths of observation, which conjoins what we see as it ebbs away or fades into what we do not see—or, what we do not see becomes what we do.

In the movement from a perspectival to an ecological optics, the reversibility of certain structures of perception—and the ambiguous figure as that which captures this reversible nature of the picture when seen *as* an aspectual image—is part of my greater proposal for thinking through our relation to the contemporary photograph as an object that is, in myriad unfamiliar ways, inhabiting the optical and indexical paradoxes of a Post-Internet and post-digital visual ecology. When we come across the work of Novitskova or Cwynar, the photograph, again, depending on where and when we look at it, occludes or reveals a different "face" of its identity as a thing in the world. Where perspective from its origins has been a system that revolves around a structuring occlusion—excluding the entirety of the world that does not fit into its single-point projection—its founding myth is that it shows us the world in the most complete, transparent, and ordered manner possible. While I do not discount the world-making value of this myth, its power, along with the world it has made through the photographic medium as one of its most valuable tools, is being rapidly absorbed into this other, informationally rich, computational environment where the boundaries, margins, and contrasts between one thing and another are more blurred than ever. Gibson, in outlining his theory of ecological optics, was trying to parse how we see the ambiguity of things in the physical world; I am attempting to point to how we see a world now equivocally populated by entities and objects—at once real and virtual, circulating within and through the same space—that have a picturing of occlusion as their main aesthetic imperative.

A seeming contradiction in terms, this picturing of occlusion can itself take many forms. Furthermore, it is very much a problem of texture. Even the notion of an "occluding edge" summons a surface, a ridge or a fissure, to be touched. In general, the texture of a thing can be thought of as the pattern or structure that characterizes its surface; concurrently, it can be thought of as how that thing's internal parts are arranged and put together—or how it is materially factured by nature or man—to produce certain qualities as distinguishable as the warp and weft of cotton versus silk, wood versus plastic, rough versus smooth, etc. How does this facturing of texture relate to occlusion? Gibson, in expanding on the concept of the occluding edge, recounts an experiment in which a film of "photographs of a randomly textured paper were taken frame by frame, and successive frames were modified by careful paper-cutting." The texture of the paper cutouts slowly transforms as the film strip is sampled forwards and backwards, reversed

[44] Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 308.

in parts, arrested, and then played again, such that "no contour was ever visible on any single frame." The results of the experiment showed that observers, in watching the film:

> …without exception, saw one surface *going behind* another (or *coming from* behind another) that was always concealing (or revealing) the first. Deletion always caused the perception of covering, and accretion always caused the perception of uncovering. The surface going out of sight was never seen to go out of existence, and the surface coming into sight was never seen to come into existence. In short, one surface was seen in a legitimate sense *behind* another *at an occluding edge*.[45]

What viewers perceived in this filmic display is the hidden and unhidden taking up space within the same environment. The image's transition from one state to the other—from small to large, foreground to background—is not about a calculation of distances between what we see and what is there. Although things may also overlap in our perception of depth in a perspectival projection, the rules of perspective impose a hierarchy of what is and is not visible according to size, scale, importance, etc. A theory of vision organized around the variegations of pattern and texture, and not the geometry of perspective, however, registers the contingent slippage between different states of visibility—an incremental deletion and accretion of the seen and unseen—against the persistence of a perceptual ground that undergirds this reversible transformation of structure.

At this point I hope it is becoming more clear, or at least appreciable, why the picturing of occlusion is pertinent to contemporary photographic practice as it intersects with the digital restructuring of the ground of our everyday visual environment. I have argued throughout this dissertation that the logic of the digital as it overtakes the photographic medium is precipitating a progressive shift from perspective to pattern within photographic space and, more broadly, in the way we envision the world. As I noted in the last chapter, the formal tendency towards parataxis over hypotaxis (or the arrangement of things side by side, one after the other, instead of in a subordinating hierarchy of terms) is a symptom of this development. We can see this one-after-the-other phenomenon at work in Novitskova's and Cwynar's jumbling of scale and textures within their multi-platform, multi-sited, and multistable photographs. Each time we look at their photographs, something changes in how they look *to us*, as if they were rearranging the order and priority of their constituent parts. The evocation of texture in these works—of their having a surface that is not fully *flat*—results from a graduated accretion and deletion of their photographic ground. With each change in format or display substrate—from online to offline, from analog to digital—or even from where we stand proximally in relation to them, they produce an optical densification or attenuation of pattern that I would identify as a distinctly digital texture. Beyond the pixelated blur of the computational grid, this is a texture that has occlusion woven into it. The photographic ground of these works interchanges, in uneven patches, with a digital ground to create, within a single frame, a patterned interweaving of the seen and unseen so that it always feels like we are *not* seeing something, as if parts of the picture were constantly coming

[45] Ibid. 189-190.

into and out of sight. As Gibson writes about the effects of the occluding edge, "what we see is not depth but *one thing behind another*."[46]

What does this layering of occlusion look like in a photograph? In the work of Lucas Blalock, this principle of "one thing behind another" operates consistently within a prolific body of experimental still lifes that appropriate, like Cwynar, dollar-store paraphernalia and oddball domestic kitsch as their content and subject matter. Dish towels and Styrofoam, hot dogs and party favors, sponges and telephone cords, fake beards and cloth flowers, as well as brightly colored scraps of paper, plastic, and cardboard that appear to be the leftover wrappings for other unidentifiable consumer products—abound. All these things are shot in the shallow space of a tabletop set-up, with the objects themselves, like minor sculptures, centrally positioned as uncanny or comical totems. *Untitled* (2013) is one such theatricalized table-top scene (fig. 4.7). Shot at an oblique angle, a sheet of rumpled, candy-cane patterned paper has been folded into an impromptu backdrop for three objects: a container with a plastic pleated orange top, a white cup, and a crystal decanter. The capped container, at first glance, looks clear because "inside" of it is a mishmash of humbug-like candy pieces. But since this mass obscures the container, the cup itself could be made of orange plastic that we are looking "through." Blalock repeats this maneuver "over" the middle cup, and "inside" the decanter on the right, using more oblong samplings of the red-and-white striped paper in zigzagging striations. These clone-stamped samples bleed out at the edges. The upper right curve of the middle cup has been sharply creased like paper, and the globed stopper of the decanter contains a flash of the white cup's rim. On "top" of the trio has been traced the bare outlines of a hooked jug, a wine glass, and a shovel. These thin, black line drawings hover over the arrangement, even as they are contained "within" the photograph. In the far left background a yellowed paperback, half open, floats in the darkness. The shadows within the photograph seem to affirm that the thing is there—but what thing, precisely, and where?

"Inside," "outside," "beneath," "next to," "within," "on top of," "through," "behind," etc.—these prepositional indices of location are awkwardly scrambled in the effort it takes to describe the things in the photograph. In addition, there is the unsettling feeling that these things are themselves in flux, as if at any moment, like a game of musical chairs, they might slip behind each other or slide into a different configuration. Of all the artists in this dissertation, Blalock is the only one for whom Photoshop is an integral tool in his arsenal of photographic "props." He produces his work through the apparatus of what he calls the "assisted camera," which includes the camera (in his case, a large-format, 4x5 analog camera), the physical studio, and the Photoshop software he employs to edit the chemically processed photographs scanned onto the computer. Through the device of the assisted camera, the artist wants to draw attention to "the contemporary bond between the capturing device and the general use of technology to adjust that capture, which sets up a new territory to touch, or make less alien." In line with this preoccupation with touch, he couches his photographic practice as belonging to the "provenance of drawing." As with the mimetic tradition of sketching out a scene by hand, the aim of this photographic drawing—with the camera-computer as surrogate "drawing machines"—is the activity, in his words, of "touching the world through

[46] Ibid. 77.

Fig 4.7. Lucas Blalock, *Untitled*, 2013

Fig 4.8. Lucas Blalock, *Bust*, 2013

describing or copying pictorially. It is an act of bringing closer, into one's sphere of possession, spatially and intelligibly, something other."[47]

This rhetoric of drawing through which Blalock frames his work is a surprisingly conservative one. It echoes Lev Manovich's well-known thesis in *The Language of New Media* that, as the cinema shifts from a predominantly analog to digital mode of production, it is no longer an "art of the index" but reverts to a subgenre of animation or painting.[48] Although Blalock's work, unlike Novitskova's or Cwynar's, does overtly display the "mark" of the artist's (digitally assisted) hand which separates the gesture-based medium of painting from the mechanicity of photography, I would like to suggest that a different brand of touch than the one Blalock cites is implicated here. The admixture of still life photography, Photoshop clone-stamping, and crude scribbling that we see in *Untitled* does not so much resonate with the age-old practice of drawing as it does with the much more practical application of "retouching"—here done conspicuously poorly. Indeed, Blalock has commented that he is interested in subverting the convention of "fixing" photographic images to appear flawless or seamless (removing wrinkles, enhancing contours, lightening or darkening shadows, saturating colors, etc.). This is the foremost task of the commercial retoucher and for which the tools of Photoshop were chiefly invented. By making these "fixes" visible within the photograph in an affectedly slapdash manner, Blalock claims to bring what is meant to be "off-stage" on-stage. His work, by showing the invisible tweaks of a "rotation, resizing, brightening, or the removal of an object," is intended to demystify the use of photography for the business of capitalist myth-making.[49]

And yet, in looking at his heavily Photoshopped pictures, what arguably stands out is not this reflexive pulling away of the curtain drawn over the post-production labors of photographic illusion, but in fact the intensive mystification, through these same digital maneuvers, of the objecthood of what is in the photograph. As already mentioned, the shifty indexicality of what we are seeing baffles our ability to locate where one thing is in relation to the other. The aspects in the pictures (is it *this*? or *this*? not *this*? but *this*?) have been utterly confused. Whereas the *punctum* of the photograph, like an immovable north star of orientation, pinned Barthes to the certainty of "that-has-been," nearly every element in Blalock's picture has been partially occluded. It begs the question of what has and has not—and when and where—been placed on the "table" of the photograph. Figure gives way to ground, ground to surround; the virtual cuts through the actual. The photograph does not testify to the act of bringing the world "closer" through an observant pictorial "touching." To the contrary, in the work's piecemeal mimetic remnants, it comes off more like a purposely half-baked "cover-up job."

Where is the *punctum* in a picture like *Untitled*? Is there one? It is helpful to return to Gibson's idea of the occluding edge in order to answer this question. The illusion of perspectival depth has been obscured, literally, by "one thing behind another." Layers and layers of retouching and digital masking—of partial accretion and deletion—

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[47] Lucas Blalock, "Drawing Machines," *Foam Magazine*, Issue 38 (2014): 207-208.
[48] See Lev Manovich, "What is Cinema?", in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 286-308.
[49] Lucas Blalock, cited in "Techniques in Marriage," interview by Claire Meister. *Mousse Magazine,* Issue 33 (2012): 249.

have been merged into a single image. If in Novitskova's work, the *punctum* is its variable scale, and in Cwynar's, its layered texture, in Blalock's, there are too many things "wrong" with the photograph, or misleadingly placed, such that the affective pull of the *punctum* as that which draws in and directs our attention is spread throughout the photograph. The indexical traces of the photograph have been rejiggered, bit by bit, such that, when gathered together as a whole, what we are seeing makes no sense as a photographic picture of the world, even as it retains a nominal resemblance to one. As an object, the entire photograph becomes a decoy: something that passes itself off as a photograph, but is really something else. But what?

I assert that what photographs like Blalock's, Cwynar's, and Novitskova's are doing, each in their own way, is exposing the flip side of what we have come to believe the photograph to be in the world. These artists demythify, or "unmask," the "face" of the photograph as an index by turning towards us, more and more, its other "face" as a multifaceted icon. These two faces—the index and the icon—are present within every photograph, but their inherent reversibility is what is causing the slip-ups in our perceptual processing of the image as the medium straddles the analog and the digital. While the index and the icon generally intersect—the photograph looks like what is in front of the camera—this automatic equivalence is becoming shaky. Increasingly, the photographic icon does not have to take the form of a perspectival picture. For the artists under discussion, a major component of this indexical demythification entails "unflattening" the photograph—adding that characteristic digital texture that follows from strategically positioning "one thing behind another." Referential coordinates of time and space are left out of the picture. What is kept inside are the gestures of a consciously enacted occlusion, filling the picture with ambiguous borders, margins, edges, etc. As viewers we find ourselves trying to look *around*, and not just *at*, the picture. The *punctum* of these works lies in how they "turn the table" of the photograph on the viewer: they hide the index behind or within the icon, or the icon within or behind the index, so that we see aspects of both, but are never given a full picture of either.

This reversible occlusion is what makes up the digital texture of photographs like Blalock's, in which the explicit showmanship of unveiling Photoshop's digital tools generates, in the same, double-edged move, an imperfect "mask" or "cover" of what has been left in the photograph as an indexical imprint. In *Bust* (2013) what stands beneath or behind the pullulating red-and-white shroud is unknowable (fig. 4.8). Is it a bust? A lamp? A vase? Something altogether more ordinary or bizarre? There is no way to tell what is there, other than the hint of a white base, and, behind it, the shadow (either real or Photoshopped) cast by the thing, which does not appear to match up with its cascading "frontal" view. The "bust" has been so thoroughly retouched, with reams of striped busywork fading in and out of its alternately translucent and opaque folds, that all we see is a tumble of occluding edges. If we could look around this "bust," what would we see? If we were in the same room with it, would we see it at all? Whether we encounter it in a gallery, on the Internet, or printed in a book, this is not a photograph of an object addressed to a viewing subject that might share with it a real, physical space. Rather, we might wonder: how are we going to fit this thing into the world that we know around us?

A photograph like Blalock's *Bust* places us in an impossible—a fundamentally non-locatable—position in relation to the occluded picture of the world that it presents. If a perspectival picture positions us as sovereign, locatable subjects, this other kind of

"demythified" photograph undoes that static illusion. Instead, we are not given a viewing position at all, but must turn and turn again, taking up variable paths of observation, to grasp the multistable thing the photograph has become. To see the picture as a conglomeration of potential transformations in pattern is to accommodate this variance in our own positions with respect to that which we are looking at. Aspect-seeing takes over as a means to contemplate the "faces" of the photograph as it repeatedly reverses at the edges of its unresolved indexicality. We might further ask: what is the "tense" of a photograph like this? The "bust" depicted in the picture is untouchable—it does not tangibly, or in actuality, exist—and yet it can take up space in the world, extending our spatial imaginary, as a photographic object. The indexical claim of the photograph that "this happened"—the inalienable *there*-ness of a thing or event—is overshadowed by the more pressing matter of determining "where" and "what" this is. To reiterate Barthes' original invocation of myth as that which artificially manufactures meaning: "Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made…a conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out."[50]

The unusual "conjuring trick" at play here is the "retouching" of the photograph into something much more fantastical and elusive than its mythical "flattening" as an irrefutable testament to "that-has-been." The photograph is drifting farther and farther away from this former anchoring point of its critical discourse, and entering a territory where "touch"—the touch by which our bodies confirm the real—cannot be bridged. In the work of the artists in this chapter, there is nothing there to touch, yet something has been put into space by and through the photograph. That thing, like the "ornamental cookery" that Barthes dismisses as a spectacle of bourgeois aspiration and frivolity, is frankly a mirage: a thing that is *in* the world, but is not *of* the world in which we move through and live. We might call these ambiguous photographic objects, in the language of the decoy, "real fake things." With their photographs, these artists are not selling display stands, or busts, or exotic animals. But, like the most skilled of commercial retouchers, they have shrewdly transformed the raw image material scraped from the waste-scape of an industrial and Post-Internet commodity capitalism into high-end objects that sell upwards for tens of thousands of dollars on the global art market. The truth value of the photograph in their works has been definitively eclipsed by an aestheticized exchange value. Demythifying one face of the photograph, they remythyify it in turn as a series of creative pictures of occlusion that may hide nothing in particular—or nothing but "dressed-up" nonsense—behind or beneath its ambiguous face.

The foundational impetus of myth is this making of something out of nothing, or nothing out of something—of emptying out, and filling up, a space for the make-believe that fuels the everyday drives of profit and desire, attention and distraction. The photograph as a commodified "truth" is synonymous with its endless mythification. The "truth" that Barthes attached to the photograph as a mythical "that-has-been" is as unreal as the demythified "truth" of the photograph occluded by artistic retouchings. In this vein, Theodor Adorno, in his essay on "Phantasmagoria," aligns the hallucinatory and otherworldly effects of the commodity—and here, for "commodity," I would substitute the "photograph"—with the peculiarly exalted mirage of the "fata morgana," which, like

[50] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.

a myth made real, offers a "mirage of eternity" that is as "consoling" as "that of the Grail itself."[51] As a natural occurrence, the fata morgana arises over the horizon, springing from a real object in the environment but made up of layers of stacked and compressed distortions that can be upside down or right side up. This optical aberration can seem nearer than it is, and, glimmering at a hazy distance, does not remain fixed. Shifting ceaselessly in response to fluctuations in temperature and atmosphere, it can revert from a single, "straight" image into a mesmerizing array and back again within seconds. Adorno warns that the dream-like conflagration of the fata morgana is akin to the illusory appearance of the commodity, which purveys the "absolute reality of the unreal," and "diverts" our attention away "from the fact [it is] beyond reach."[52]

The "truth" of the photograph today has similarly become something that we, as users and viewers, reach out for but that evades the "capture" of the real which the medium once ostensibly guaranteed. This does not mean that the photograph lies, or that it contains no truth. But, like Barthes's displaced *punctum*, the thing we are looking for may be elsewhere, in some other dimension. A passage from Novitskova's *Post Internet Survival Guide* speaks to this risk of mistaking the phantasmagoric effects of the fata morgana for a destination or compass point in casting our movement forward:

> Seasoned explorers, vehemently insisting on what they had seen, set down mountains and islands on their charts where there was nothing but empty sky…Expeditions sent out later to verify these new lands sometimes saw the same fata morgana, further confusing the issue. Only by prolonging their arduous journeys, thereby observing a constant receding of the image, did they prove that the land was not there at all.[53]

The photograph as it expands across multiple virtual and physical platforms momentarily materializes as this complex and confounding fata morgana—an imperfect utopia—between the studio and the world, the icon and the index. While it may point to something real, what it mostly opens onto is a space of potential truth. The "arduous journeys" we take towards that truth, or its possibility, is about understanding the many faces that the photograph can turn towards us. There is no promise, however, that these faces, like our own, will not change as we keep looking.

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[51] Theodor Adorno, "Phantasmagoria," in *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981), 87.
[52] Ibid. 90.
[53] Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), 238, cited in Novitskova, *Post Internet Survival Guide*, 63.

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