

**This Is a Photograph:
Process Experimentation at Century's End**

by A. D. Coleman

"A certain amount of contempt for the material employed to express an idea is indispensable to the purest realization of this idea."

— Man Ray¹

Because this survey's title and theme are clearly intended as contentious, let me contend with it in turn: *This — meaning every image in this exhibit — is, in fact, a photograph.*

As a critic with a particular commitment to photography, I've always cast my net as widely as possible in defining the medium, both to myself and for my readers. If it's made with photographic tools, materials, and processes, or somehow derives from those, I consider it to fall within my purview, finding it fruitful to address such work with a vocabulary drawn from the specifics of photographic practice and a set of reference points grounded in the medium's history. Thus I've looked at everything from holography to photo-realist painting to Charles Ross's "Solar Burns," from Joel Katz's cameras obscurae to Seiji Toda's X-ray still lifes to the "thoughtographs" of Ted Serios, as exemplifying work that relates in important ways to what I'd call *the photographic*.

But that begs the question of what makes an object a photograph. To which I'd answer that if its production involved photographic means and methods in ways that are inherent to them, then by definition the resulting artifact requires definition (at least partial definition) as a photograph. Note that "inherent to them" doesn't imply widely employed for that purpose, or among the dominant forms of photographic practice, or even accepted by other sophisticated workers in the field. It does suggest that what

¹ Man Ray, "The Age of Light," in *Man Ray: Photographs* (New York: East River Press, 1975), p. xv. See my introduction in that volume for further discussion of Man Ray's relationship to photographic process.

results from the use of various combinations of light, lenses, photographic emulsions and chemistry, and light-sensitive surfaces quite possibly constitutes a form of photography, no matter how eccentric and even idiosyncratic that particular application may seem.

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The picture-makers represented in this survey — Heike Bartels, David Berg, Christopher Bucklow, Ellen Carey, Alain Gerard Clement, Susan Derges, Adam Fuss, Christopher Giglio, Jon Kline, Daniel Levin, Amanda Means, Daro Montag, Kunié Sugiura, Cheryl Van Hooven, and James Welling — represent the extraordinary heterogeneity of a turn-of-the-century cohort of practitioners whose involvement in photographic process experimentation builds on the work of the several generations preceding them.

I've used this term *process experimentation* elsewhere to include any and all anti-"purist" tendencies, including pictorialism, directorialism (the staging of events for the camera), photomontage, and photocollage, among others.² Certainly it applies to aspects of the now-widespread revival of discarded and superseded photographic techniques — printing with such "alternative processes" as cyanotype and platinum, for example.³ Here I intend it to define a notable subset of that collective project: exploratory play with photography's actual tools, materials, and processes.

Though it's not the conventional wisdom by any means (at least not yet), the traditions of photography and the diversity of photographic praxis range far more broadly than we find acknowledged in the past and present discourse about the medium. We can blame some of this unawareness on the conservatism of photography's own historians and curators through the 1960s, the most influential of whom — Beaumont Newhall and Helmut Gernsheim — made no bones about their preference for photography as an informationally-oriented descriptive system and their

² In my essay, "The Perils of Pluralism: Thoughts on the Condition of Photography at Century's End," *European Photography* 21:1 (no. 67), Spring/Summer 2000, pp. 10-15.

³ See Lyle Rexer, *The Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old-Process Photography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), forthcoming. This resurgence even has its own "little" magazines; see, for example, the *World Journal of Post-Factory Photography*, edited by Judy Seigel.

disregard, even disdain, for alternative approaches to photographic practice.⁴ As a consequence of their deemphasis of such forms, those curators and historians and critics — and even practitioners — who read the work of Newhall and Gernsheim while taking them at face value assumed that no substantial investigation of other photographic paths had taken place. The trickle-down effect of that we see today: a context in which many assume that, aside from the paradigms represented by the Group f.64 and the New York School, photography has had no significant models of thoughtful praxis — and certainly none that involve process experimentation.

In fact, however, whether narrowly or broadly construed, what I'm calling process experimentation here has a lineage that we can trace back to William Henry Fox Talbot's photograms of lace and leaves from 1836-39, then through the hands-on approaches of the turn-of-the-century Pictorialists and the ensuing photographic inquiries of the Dadaists and Surrealists (including the reintroduction of the photogram and the purposeful application of the Sabbatier effect or "solarization"), and on into the work of Lotte Jacobi, Edmund Teske, Barbara Morgan, John Guttmann, Carlotta Corpron, Frederick Sommer, Henry Holmes Smith, Walter Chappell, Daniel Ranalli, Susan Rankaitis, Robert Stivers, Scott Morgan, Jayne Hinds Bidaut, and countless others. Such experimentation has come from both within and without the medium — that is, from people who considered themselves photographers and practiced that medium primarily or exclusively (Sommer, Pierre Cordier), from others who thought of themselves as artists and worked in diverse media (Raoul Ubac, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy), and even from individuals (August Strindberg, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Christian Schad) who came to photography from areas other than the visual arts.

As a result, virtually every picture-maker represented in this survey has antecedents, precursors, forebears in the medium's history. That this history remains imperfectly annotated does not liberate picture-makers, critics, or historians from the inevitable connection to that past that these images incorporate.

⁴ For more on this, see my essay "Making History" in *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom, Essays and Lectures 1979-1989* (Midmarch Arts Press, 1996), pp. 109-110.

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Because we use photography primarily for descriptive, informational, and representational purposes that depend on the data-gathering capacity of lens-derived imagery, the overwhelming majority of photographs we encounter are images rendered via the intervention of a lens. But, on an elementary level as a picturing system, photography, understood in the literal translation of its name as "light writing," functions as a form of mark-making. As such, photography proves itself analogous in some ways to other graphic-arts media such as etching, engraving, painting, and drawing, but with unique characteristics and possibilities of its own. The light-sensitive surfaces of its various vehicles — polished silver plates (daguerreotypes), emulsion-coated tin sheets (tintypes), emulsion-coated paper, plastic, glass, and other substrates — are accessible to diverse methods of image production. Some of those approaches were discovered over a century and a half ago; others have a more recent origin. Yet in all cases they manifest several common characteristics:

- * They emerge from the specific and distinctive characteristics of the particular photographic tools, materials, and processes utilized, and depend entirely on those for the results.

- * They thus represent inherently photographic methods of image production, resolve as photographically generated images imbedded in photographic objects, and therefore demand precise identification as photographs.

- * That, in turn, requires us to consider them first and foremost as photographs in any interpretive and critical analysis of them.

Whether those who originate these works call themselves artists or photographers doesn't really matter, in this context. In virtually all cases their work expands on earlier experiments undertaken by people who considered themselves photographers, joined sometimes by others who thought of themselves as artists. (It stands to reason that the play with photographic equipment and chemistry from which such new techniques arise would come primarily from those with a deep grounding in

the medium of photography.) The resulting work thus integrates itself into that tradition of process experimentation while, at the same time, pushing the envelope of photographic practice and also the parameters of our working definition of the medium.

The technique with which the general audience has most familiarity, the *photogram*, finds several exponents here. The photogram, an image made without the use of a lens, at its most basic level involves positioning objects or other physical material between light-sensitive surfaces and a light source, then making an exposure. As previously noted, the process was utilized and first annotated in the 1830s by one of photography's inventors, William Henry Fox Talbot; later in the nineteenth century, Anna Atkins and others used it to register botanical specimens and similar material in cyanotype. Subsequently, in the early years of the twentieth century, Christian Schad, Man Ray, and László Moholy-Nagy rediscovered it and introduced it into the toolkit of experimental photography. They used silver-gelatin materials and did their work in the darkroom, placing small, mostly inanimate objects directly on sheets of photographic paper or film.

Photographers since then have amplified the possibilities of this method in many ways. Here, for example, Jonathan Kline coats sheets of frosted mylar with silver salts, places on them such materials as "smoke, water droplets, dust and my own hair," and makes long time exposures in full sunlight, then prints from the resulting "negative." ("I have been interested in removing as much of the specificity of a photograph's implication of time and place as possible and investigating the nature of what remains," Kline writes. "This has been very liberating and has allowed me to think of the image as a 'field' and to record traces of events at the edge of visibility and consciousness."⁵) Adam Fuss positions objects — sometimes live (snakes, rabbits, even a baby) and sometimes, as here, inanimate — on sheets of color photographic paper, exposes the paper to light, and develops the results. Kunié Sugiura — echoing the work of Atkins, but also evoking the Japanese art of floral arrangement — organizes precise, intricate patterns of flowers on photographic paper, then selectively tones the resulting prints.

⁵ All quotes from an email from Kline to the author, December 4, 2000.

Also in the terrain of the photogram, Christopher Giglio exposes color photographic material to the TV screen⁶ for his "cathode rayograms."⁷ And Susan Derges submerges sheets of black & white photographic paper beneath the surface of river water at night, positions lights above the water (and above the leaves and branches of overhanging trees), then illuminates the scene briefly — giving us, as it were, a riverbed's-eye view of the world.

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If we consider the photographic negative as a matrix from which photographic prints can be made, then photographers (and others) have long investigated ways of generating negatives by means other than exposing film to light through lenses. For example, the *cliché-verre* method, invented when the dry-plate negative came along in the middle of the nineteenth century, involved scratching a design through the emulsion of an unexposed negative, then making a photographic print from the resulting image. According to Newhall, "the most prolific of the artists who used the cliché-verre process was Jean Baptiste Corot."⁸ Alain Gerard Clement's elegant "photogenic drawings" in this survey utilize that approach.

The late Hungarian photographer Brassai employed a variant of this technique in his "Transmutations" series from 1934-35, inscribing Cubist imagery into already exposed and developed negatives of nude studies; the resulting prints seamlessly blend the photographic and hand-drawn elements.⁹ Others before and since have variously scratched, burned, melted, cut up, and otherwise altered negative material, both exposed and unexposed. Daro Montag, for example, has buried a previously exposed and developed 4"x5" film transparency in the soil from Walter De Maria's installation, "The New York Earth Room." Allowing the chemicals and microorganisms in the dirt to

⁶ Robert Heinecken generated his "Inaugural Excerpt Videograms" in 1981 via a similar process, placing sheets of photographic paper against the screen of a color TV in a darkened room, then turning the television on briefly; the emulsion recorded the image that flashed onto the screen for that instant.

⁷ Giglio here puns on the fact that he's using the screen's cathode rays, while Man Ray called his own photograms "Rayograms."

⁸ Newhall, Beaumont, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 83.

⁹ See A. D. Coleman, *The Grotesque in Photography* (Ridge Press/Summit Books, 1977), p. 149.

interact with it for a period of time, Montag then uncovered it and printed from the results. He has also placed pieces of rotting fruit on developed film, permitted the chemistry of the fruit to affect the photographic material, and used the film thus transformed for printing.¹⁰

But photographers have also employed a variety of materials to manufacture alternative types of matrices from which to print. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, Frederick Sommer used tracers of smoke on cellophane, while Henry Holmes Smith poured Karo syrup onto sheets of glass (he called these "lenses"). Similarly, Daniel Levin alters small sheets of acetate with heat and flame, then inserts them into his enlarger in place of negatives; using cross-polarized filters, he makes monoprints on paper made for use with color negatives — so the colors are reversed in the final version. Amanda Means places flower blossoms in her custom-built enlarger between its light source and its lens, and — using them, in a sense, as organic negatives — projects light through them onto sheets of photographic paper tacked onto an adjacent wall. Also in this show, David Berg uses oil paints to "paint directly on a 4"x5" piece of clear mylar. I paint the landscape in reverse: substituting black for white to create an image in negative . . . [from which I] generate a gelatin silver print."¹¹ And Christopher Bucklow uses a lensless pinhole camera into which, in place of a lens, he's inserted what we might think of as a handmade negative: an image of a human silhouette created by making thousands of pinholes in a sheet of opaque material. The light passing through those holes records the image of this fictive, nonexistent "guest" on the photographic paper at the back of the camera.

*

The activity often called *light drawing* has its antecedents as well. Earlier in the twentieth century, Lotte Jacobi, Gyorgy Kepes, Barbara Morgan, Len Gittleman, and others found assorted ways of registering light events directly on paper, with no intervention by a camera or lens. Pursuing this same branch of inquiry, James Welling

¹⁰ Robert Heineken produced a series of "skiagrams" in 1971 by placing foodstuffs -- french fries, lemon slices, a pork chop -- on photographic paper and making photograms thereof.

¹¹ David Berg, untitled and undated artists's statement.

simply exposes color photographic paper to light under the enlarger — first with a uniform exposure to the entire sheet, then with additional, carefully calibrated exposures to selected areas of the paper — to create dark-toned abstractions that imply a nocturnal landscape.¹² Heike Bartels makes her "Luminograms" by employing a concave rotating mirror to cast light patterns on a wall to which sheets of photographic paper are attached.¹³ And Cheryl Van Hooven, who began by making photograms, now uses a hand-held penlight to make gestural drawings directly onto unexposed photo paper. "The process is a collaborator," she writes. "Although I can control the amount of light, the feathering and movement, although the red safe light is on and I can see the light moving across the paper, the real outcome is an unknown until the image emerges in the developing tray."¹⁴

This acceptance of chance elements is nothing new to all those who work with photography, since the medium deals in many ways with aleatory aspects. Some picture-makers have chosen to repeat and build on the effects obtained from technical errors and/or uses of the technology in non-standard ways. For instance, Ellen Carey's "Pulls" result from initiating and then interfering with the mechanical operations of a specific type of photographic equipment and material: Polaroid 20"x24" cameras and the Polaroid film specially made for it. Like the more familiar SX-70 Polaroid (of which it's an oversize version), this is an "instant photography" system whose mechanisms and built-in self-processing chemistry allow various kinds of manipulation.¹⁵

In some of these pieces — those by David Berg, Christopher Bucklow, Alain Gerard Clement, Susan Derges, Adam Fuss, Jonathan Kline, Amanda Means, Daro Montag, and Kunié Sugiura — we can identify the maker's nominal subject matter.¹⁶ Yet to call them *representational* appears to stretch that term well past its usual meaning.

¹² Welling considers these to constitute photograms, which suggests the areas of overlap between the three primary forms I'm describing.

¹³ Some of these bear a curious resemblance to Berenice Abbott's scientific photos of water and light waves.

¹⁴ Cheryl Van Hooven, untitled and undated artist's statement.

¹⁵ No single photographic technology has evoked more transgression than Polaroid; aside from the taboo subjects to which it's often applied, photographers and artists -- Robert Delford Brown, Lucas Samaras, Les Krims, John Reuter, countless others -- have violated it in every imaginable way.

¹⁶ Though the images of Clement and Bucklow do not of course actually record real objects.

Conversely, much of the imagery gathered for this survey — that by Heike Bartels, Ellen Carey, Christopher Giglio, Daniel Levin, Cheryl Van Hooven, and James Welling — seems to fall into the category we label *abstract*, by which (at least when photographs are concerned) we generally mean that we can't readily distinguish its literal subject matter (if it has any). Their results, while on one level non-representational, also constitute tangible evidence of specific physico-chemical activities.

Thus, while they all exist inarguably as photographs, and contribute to the expanding history of process experimentation within that medium, these pictures — like many other photographs before them, and surely more to come — float in a territory bounded on one side by science and on the other by art. Photography has demonstrated its accessibility to such investigation for more than two-thirds of the nineteenth century and the entirety of the twentieth. Certainly we can expect that to continue as we — and these pictures, and their makers, and the many other vanguard investigations of which they're representative — enter the twenty-first century.

— A. D. Coleman
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