

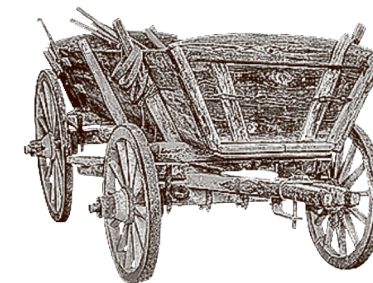
MERCURY

Simon Dybbroe Møller

The tech and computing worlds have always referenced dumb analogue materiality. Our laptops have desktops, windows, folders and a trash bin. Our platforms use skeuomorphic cues to connect virtual interfaces with familiar practices and morphologies. *Mercury* concerns the opposite, however. It considers how we look at the world around us and how we perceive history and our material world through the lens of technological development. Specifically, it ponders how already obsolete or moribund technologies colour our relationship to now.



When we push the button to take a picture with our digital camera, it plays back the recorded sounds of an analogue camera. We hear the swoosh of a curtain shutter, the clonk of a flipping mirror. There is reason to believe, however, that what we practise today is not photography at all, that we are merely performing a ritual with only slight connections to its origin.



If one of photography's defining qualities is its indexical nature and if the indexical is inexorably tied to analogue processes and materiality – then photography is no more. Photographic imagery has never been more ubiquitous than it is now, but as a material process, whereby a lens focuses light onto a substrate to produce an image that is chemically developed and printed, it has gone the way of the horse-driven cart. Photography is no longer clumsy mechanics and messy chemistry. It is no longer wet, grainy, and bounded. Instead, it has become pixelated, infinite, and immaterial. Digital photography is not really photography. It is data collecting rather than picture making. It is the translation of light into hidden number patterns. What it produces isn't a thing but

only code containing the potential to become something else. What we are practising today, then, is an approximation. These are the times after photography – the Era of the Photographic.



Photography as a material form had quite a short life. One could mark the endpoints of its historical moment as spanning from the toxic mercury of the photographic plate to the computer-generated shape-shifting of T-1000 in *Terminator 2*. Early photography was pure alchemy. The first publicly available photographic process, daguerreotypy, used poisonous mercury fumes in the development process – that nervously lively element we now find in the components of our photographic hardware. This was back when “quick” was used to describe things that were alive, not just those that were fast; when mercury’s nervous presence led it to be nicknamed quicksilver.

One of the peculiarities of the daguerreotype was that it appeared either as a positive or negative, depending on the viewing angle, how it was lit, and whether a light or dark background was reflected on the metal plate. The only way to do it justice would be to describe the photograph in its entirety from one angle – then from another. Equally, the only way to do the condition of the Photographic justice would be to describe it in all its many states.

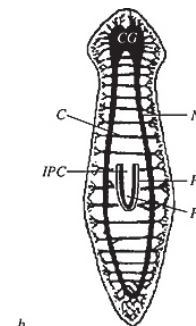


The Estonian-born Baltic-German biologist Jakob von Uexküll proposed that different organisms perceive the world in distinct ways and are thus subjects of their own specific environments, their *Umwelten*, their own peculiar bubbles. Uexküll described the differences between animals according to their visual space: “[T]he world as seen through the eyes of a fly must appear considerably cruder than it does to the human eye.” Uexküll suggested that organisms inhabit their world at different rhythms, within their own subjective temporalities, and proposed the use of photographic techniques as a means of recording these variations. Jochen Lempert’s photograph *Untitled (Fly)* is not simply the camera accommodating for the movement of the fly

but also a rendering of how the fly and the camera perceive their worlds and interact. We look for traces of the tool in the images of stuff – in the grain, the digital noise, the motion blur.



We know the image well, a hummingbird hovering in mid-air, its rapidly flapping wings frozen by the camera, its luminescent plumage in full focus against a blurred background. This trope of photographs is as much an image of the bird as it is a demonstration of photographic technology and its progress. The quick shutter speed necessary to freeze its movement requires a large aperture, which in turn produces a shallow depth of field, isolating the hummingbird from its world. Beautiful and petit, the hummingbird is a perfect subject, moving rapidly, but also suspending itself in space, modelling for the camera so that it can do its magic. *Untitled (Fly)* is the opposite. In the black-and-white photo, a tiny fly is captured mid-flight, in full focus against a blurred window. The minuscule creature is seen in a world much larger than itself and almost disappears in the grainy materiality of the silver gelatin print. The choice of subjects is oddly reflective of discrete technological and ideological viewpoints. The hummingbird eats nectar; the fly eats shit. The hummingbird is found among flowers; the fly is seen in the lowliest places and is a pest for the lowliest creatures. The hummingbird is colourful; the fly a disdainful monochrome. The hummingbird floats and presents itself; the fly darts this way and that, with an erratic logic.

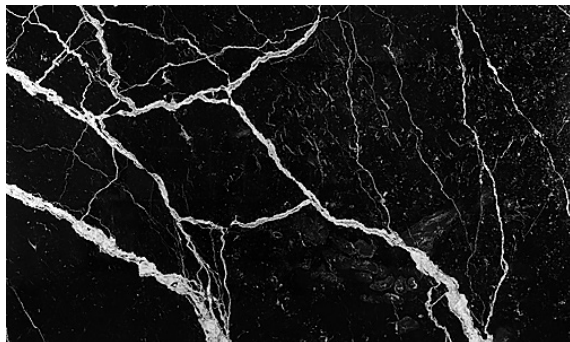


The moment a thing is detached from its roots, freed from its baggage, the moment it transgresses any expectations of accountability, it becomes slippery and without a centre. It can mutate and take on a large variety of appearances. This is photography now. Like the planarian flatworm – the tiny invertebrate capable of reforming its entire physique from slivers of its original body, a creature that keeps all of its old

memories when re-growing its head after decapitation – photography has regenerated into myriad intelligent forms.



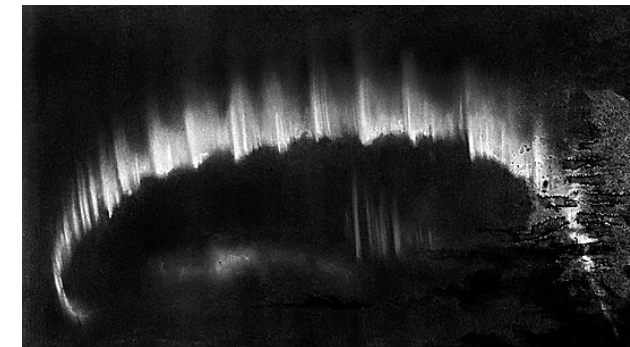
Or maybe photography has become a kind of measuring stick, the mercury in a thermometer, a thing that we – not unlike the log lady in *Twin Peaks* – carry around with us and relate everything to. In the fable *Kafka and His Precursors*, Jorge Luis Borges describes how Kafka seems to have influenced writers who long preceded him, how work from the distant past seems Kafkaesque to us. Barnett Newman once claimed, “The first man was an artist (...) [he] first built an idol of mud before he fashioned an axe.” Many decades later, Aditya Mandayam of Brud made another observation, “The first photograph was the blink.” We now look at everything through photography. When we see a polished piece of black marble, we notice its glossiness. It is so photographic. We look at its white veins, the snail shells, the mussels. This slab of crystalline metamorphic limestone resembles a print made from a damaged negative.



New media are born as a result of technological progress – often spurred on by the economy of the war machine or the relentless pursuit of new revenue by capital – and then move on to colour the way we express ourselves. At some point, media become stylistic tools and finally end up in the cemetery that is called language. This is where analogue photography is now. It has become a filter on Instagram or an effect in Photoshop, a reference point, an abstract term. It has become adjectival.

In the 1880s, the Danish teacher, self-taught scientist, and amateur photographer Sophus Tromholt established a private observatory in the village of Kautokeino, Norway. His goal was to measure and photograph

the Aurora Borealis, a flood of charged particles riding the solar winds and colliding with our atmosphere. Despite his use of the most sensitive daguerreotype process of the time, he was unable to capture even the faintest trace of the dancing light. Instead, Tromholt carefully crafted drawings of the phenomenon. He rendered the rippling curtains of chroma into abstract achromatic form and translated the bright colours of the auroral displays into hatchings of different tones of grey. He transposed drawing, the zero-point of mark-making, into photographic terms, thereby reuniting photography with its etymology of “drawing with light”. These drawings were then photographed and published along with his writings in science journals internationally. To this day, they are mistaken for the first credible photographs of the Northern Lights. In truth, it was the Photographic that granted his drawings the authority of fact. Like a filter, the photographic traces of torn edges, stained areas, scratches, and blurs combined with the vagueness of his sketches to produce a degraded quality that we all recognise as an authentic vintage marker of the Photographic.



The IKEA catalogue with its thin sticky pages looks the same as always. The design and distribution of images and text on the pages do not seem to have changed much over the last 30 years. The catalogue has, however, undergone an almost undetectable but fundamental change. The chairs, tables, and lamps are now computer-generated. They are renderings imitating lens-based photography. They are not photographs; they are Photographic. These images follow the logic of creating a photographic (i.e. truthful) document of something that does not yet exist. Something that will only come to exist if it has an audience.



Authorless and homeless, stock photographs tend to contain mutable, empty, open-ended metaphors to anticipate and envisage a limitless variety of possible uses, intentions and customers. At once highly symbolic and purposely lacking any concrete meaning, the more ambiguous the images, the more profitable they become. They can be applied anywhere and everywhere. Invested with infinite inventories of keywords, phrases, symbolisms, and other metadata, the scenarios within them become part of an endless classification, forming “kinds of pictures”, a range of species of images whose evolution and proliferation depends on their variability, their talent to be adaptable, flourish, thrive, and circulate. As the inventory of these images grows, the stock becomes more specific while simultaneously becoming more generic, messing with age-old tensions at the heart of image production in general – between formula and originality, familiarity and novelty, quantity and singularity.

With 100 million images posted on Instagram every day, one might argue that photography has been reduced to white noise. Most of our snapshots will never be looked at even once, not even by ourselves. They will be stored and forgotten, and then a new memory technology will render the hard drive they are on unusable. Similar to the hypothetical cat in Schrödinger’s thought experiment, these images both exist and do not. Even if the hard drive is still functioning, it seems misguided to classify this sleeping data as pictures. The hard drive is more like the black box in an aircraft and the image data on it, like audio recordings that are only revisited in case of a crash.



Today, we mostly take photographs using our phone, a device named after its capacity to transmit audio signals. A machine made for oral communication. The photographic imagery we produce could be said to be closer to spoken language than to analogue photography. Think of the self-destructing images we use when sexting. The *fæʊtə'græfɪk* develops its own grammars and conventions. It moves fluently, even faster than speech.

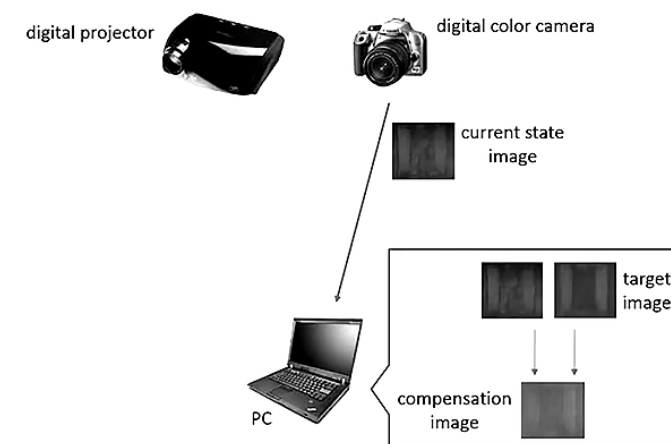
The very first permanent photograph, taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce from the window of his studio in 1826, was the result of eight hours of exposure. In that time, the sun moved across the courtyard, causing shadows to appear on both sides of the exposed plate. This was the

beginning of the link between duration and photography, a foreboding of the Photographic’s Janus-like relationship to beginnings and gateways, to transitions and time, duality, doorways, passages and endings – to the future and the past.



Comparison images for diets, acne medicine, and other cosmetic applications often will have the “before” shot in black and white and the “after” in colour. When we think about the past, we see the world in greyscale, we see it through photographic abstraction. In 1962, Mark Rothko painted his *Harvard Murals* for a penthouse dining room at the university. Contrary to the initial agreement, the curtains in the room did not remain drawn, so that over the years, these delicately hued expanses were continuously exposed to daylight. The murals withered until some areas turned pale white, while others dulled to a muddy black. The paintings were devolving; they became black and white versions of themselves.

A Projector Camera System for Colour Reconstruction



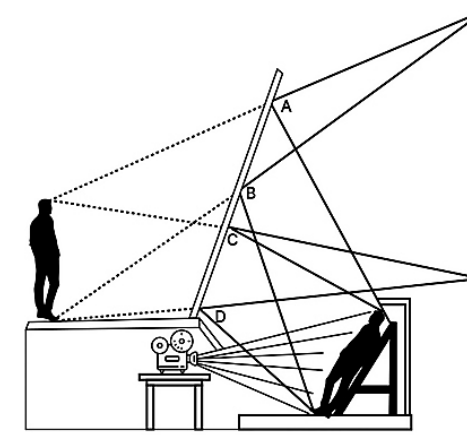
Rothko’s ephemeral alchemy (animal glue-based crimson, whole-egg binding medium, manual mixes of lithol red and ultramarine blue into warm animal glue) made these artworks difficult to repair. After decades in storage, the works got a second life when a team of conservators and scientists developed a novel alternative to conventional restoration. Using a digital beamer, they projected light onto the murals to compensate for the lost colour on a pixel-by-pixel basis. To identify the original colours, a set of contemporaneous Kodak Ektachrome documentation slides were digitally restored and compared to an undamaged painting

from the series, as well as to unfaded segments present on the canvases themselves. The values were then correlated with the surfaces of the murals, yielding a “compensation image”, which is now projected onto the paintings and ceremoniously turned off before the closing of the Harvard Art Museum every day. The canvases are now both paintings and screens.

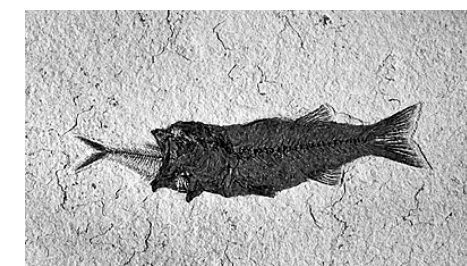
Unlike the faux inscriptions of analogue photography so prevalent in contemporary photographic image-making (social media’s positioning of the present as a potential future past through the simulation of fading, film grain, and scratches), the compensation image *rectifies* the degradation of the object. It allows us the brief sensation of viewing the past in the present, the possibility to see these paintings returned to their former chromatic glory. Here the Photographic is a difference, a threshold between real, historical, degraded materiality, and the idealised and timeless picture. We are familiar with black-and-white reproductions of colourful paintings, but what we have here is the paradoxical reproduction of a black-and-white work in colour. The Photographic is not a tool of truth-telling, but a site of discrepancy and mediation. Isolated, the projection is a figure of transition – a bridge to both an imagined past and a digital future.



Rothko’s paintings are celebrated for emitting their own “inner light”, but here external light both wrecks and rejuvenates it, not unlike face apps that use algorithms to calculate our old or young selves. Something happens in this translation of analogue and digital, this conflation of additive (the red, green, and blue of projected light) and subtractive colour (the cyan, magenta, and yellow of print, painting, and photography). In images produced by digital projectors, fine black lines surround every pixel. This is known as the screen door effect because the lines resemble the gridded mesh we use to protect our homes from insects. While the Photographic gives the world a subtle blur, the sharp edge is the hallmark of the digital. The coded image projected onto Rothko’s hazy fields of paint was born through computational research and calculation. To rid this image of the unwelcome digital markers, the team at Harvard called upon the fuzzy logic of the Photographic. The compensation image is projected out of focus.



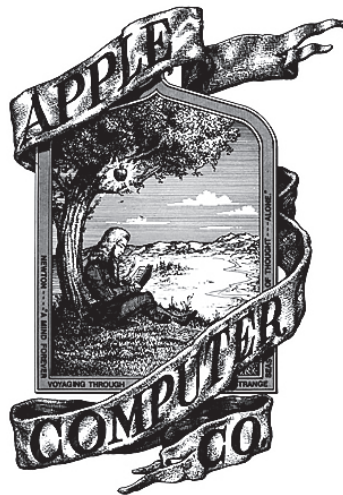
The illusion technique known as Pepper’s ghost was first described by Giambattista della Porta in his 1584 work *Magia Naturalis* under the title “How we may see in a chamber things that are not”. This technique is essentially what allowed a hologram of the deceased rapper Tupac Shakur to perform onstage at the Coachella Music Festival with Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre in 2012. There is, however, one essential difference. At Coachella, the performance witnessed by the audience was a reflection of animated photographs. In Porta’s experiments, it was real objects, animate or inanimate, placed in a hidden chamber beneath the stage, that produced the ghostly presence. Occupying positions before and after photography, both are examples of the Photographic. Photography is undead. It is a corpse reanimated by capital through the application of its very own life force. In other words, the rumours are true: photography died. This is the age of the living dead.



As Edmund Carpenter says, “In its initial stages, every new medium takes as its content the medium it has just rendered obsolete: scribes recorded oral legends; printers set in type old manuscripts; Hollywood filmed books; radio broadcast concerts & vaudeville, TV showed old movies, magnetic tape was used to copy LP records.” A kind of new-fish-eats-older-fish food chain logic similar to that peculiar technique of cooking called engastration – the practice of stuffing and cooking one animal inside another. A turkey stuffed with a goose stuffed with a pheasant stuffed with a chicken stuffed with a duck stuffed with a guinea fowl stuffed with a teal stuffed with a woodcock stuffed with a partridge stuffed with a plover stuffed with a lapwing stuffed with a quail stuffed with a thrush stuffed with a lark stuffed with an ortolan bunting stuffed with a garden warbler stuffed with an olive stuffed with an anchovy stuffed with a single caper. In short, we are living at the stage of digestion and incorporation.



There is something heartbreaking about the way new technologies inscribe into their genealogy the very media they supersede. Take the 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, which was made almost exclusively through slow zooming and panning across thousands and thousands of archival photographs. This attempt to “wake the dead” had such an impact on Steve Jobs that he went ahead and bought the director’s name when applying the method to an effect in iPhoto now known as the Ken Burns Effect.



At the heart of our self-image lies the assumption that the human being is more than the animal and other than the machine. One such machine is the camera. The camera demands to be pointed at something – it needs a motif. That motif is often an animal. In 1794, Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier correlated machine and animal when he wrote that “respiration is nothing but a slow combustion of carbon and hydrogen, entirely similar to that which occurs in a lighted lamp (...) animals that breathe are true combustible bodies that burn and consume themselves”. Seen in this light, the internal combustion engine displacing draught animals in streets and factories during the industrial revolution was a foreseeable and inherently logical development. As a perverse underlining of this continuum, when the car replaced the horse, that industry used animal fat to toughen its tires and tubing and as lubricants for steel components, and it used animal skin to cover its interior. As John Berger points out, animals went from being used

as machines during the agricultural revolution to being used as raw material and later as manufactured commodities during the industrial revolution. Photographic image-making and industrial capital were inextricably intertwined from their inception. Ken Burns’ epic nine-hour film not only inspired Apple’s novel movement effect, it also opened with a voice stating, “General Motors presents *The Civil War*”.



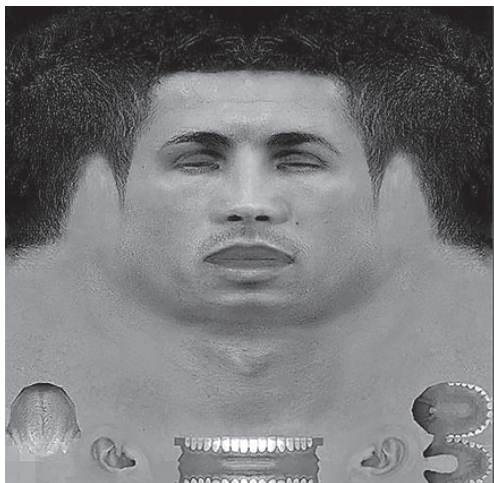
Stone-age cave painters made images of animals using animal fats, blood, bone marrow, albumen, urine and various colourants ground up to powder in mortars made of shoulder bones. A key component of photographic film is gelatin also manufactured from animal bones. The skeleton of a horse can deliver enough gelatin to produce approximately 20,000 films. With analogue photography, we could say that the photo of the animal constitutes Roland Barthes’ idea of photography as inherently tautological – “in the flesh”. Like a seal teddy made of sealskin. Its self-referential equivalent today would be a photograph of a landscape containing titanium, tungsten, gold, or copper, or the so-called rare-earth elements that make up the chips in our photographic machines now. Photography is still crudely material.



In 1996, the National Geographic photographer Charles O’Rear, while on his way to visit his girlfriend in Northern California, pulled over and took out his medium-format Mamiya RZ67 camera, loaded it with Fuji’s Velvia film, mounted it on a tripod, and produced a photo of a green hill before a blue sky spotted with white clouds. A storm had just passed over, and the winter rain had left the area a bright green. He later sold the image to a stock photography agency owned by Bill Gates. In 2000, Microsoft engineers acquired a licence to use it as the default desktop wallpaper for the Windows XP operating system. *Bliss*, as they named it, became the single most viewed photograph of the decade.



When on the highway between cities in late summer, we pass stubble fields scattered with seemingly endless and identical bales of hay. Dots of compressed surplus materiality. We share our attention between the navigation system, the traffic, and the vast expanses of industrialised agriculture. Our perception of these landscapes has changed. The image of the pastoral used to be about the idealisation of the rural landscape in light of progressive industrialisation. Today, these fields seem to conflate the agricultural, industrial, and digital revolutions. Although a result of the relentless culturing of nature, the machines' ability to move incredibly heavy loads, this landscape seems decidedly digital. The hay bales look as if they had been copy-pasted onto the field. They serve as markers of perspective and produce a rhythmical, seemingly endless image. It is an image of compression, without grain, with otherworldly depth of field – a cornucopian image of the infinite space of the digital realm in the age of data harvesting. We know that haybales are essentially condensed waste material that can be repurposed as fodder, insulation or animal bedding. We have read that some scientists believe that we have less than 100 harvests left; we know that resources are finite. A sort of ersatz surplus, the image of plenitude is linked not to the landscape, but to digital image production itself. It signals the automated collection of data fodder after the field has been harvested and threshed. The Photographic is not about picking a flower from the pasture at the right time (Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment"). Instead, it is about harvesting the entire field.



Photography flattens out and rationalises the world. It is a mode of representation concerned with revealing a single aspect of its object,

with understanding a house by inspecting its facade. We know that cultures around the world have had very different takes on how to depict a "whole" object on a flat surface. Native Americans on the Pacific Northwest Coast, for example, made depictions that are strikingly similar to the 3D skins one can now download for gaming characters. In his text *Seeing In The Round*, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter observed that they would "represent a bear, say, in full face & profile, from back, above & below, from within & without, all simultaneously". Something arises from this peculiar fusion of the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional. The more superficial 3D gaming skins do not engage with the flesh; they follow the logic of an animal hide that has been cut open, detached from the body and presented two-dimensionally. These endlessly reproducible texture maps are exchangeable virtual membranes symbolising the interface between organism and environment. Described in the French children's book *Monsieur et Madame Anatomie*, "skin is the elastic sheath that covers the whole body". The 3D skins offer the possibility to choose appearances – like donning a leather jacket. By attempting to skin and rewrap the world in surfaces, they signal early steps into the future territory of the Photographic.



The camera's relationship to three-dimensional space has changed over time, of course. The introduction of the dolly, for example, meant that the camera could start smoothly moving through space. More than replicate our movements, this crude mechanical device helped to separate the camera from the body. Freed from the limitations of human mobility, it could see, as early filmmaker Dziga Vertov asserted, what the human eye could not. These were the early days of independence for the photographic image. The word "dolly", in the sense of a wheeled platform, harks back to a generic term for a lower-class woman or girl, especially a servant. The nickname recalls the image of a maid floating through space, moving objects, and attending to every need. The movements of the servant, as well as the machine, are regarded as effortless, thereby perpetuating, through their conflation, the recurring objectification of the woman as an invisible tool and vehicle.



The dolly is a cousin of the Spinning Jenny, the aggressively photographic industrialised loom, and the Lazy Susan, the revolving table so common in Chinese restaurants. It is also a relative of the potter's wheel, the ancient machine for forming the protean ur-material clay, and the predecessor of a vital production tool for the professional photographer today: the motorised turntable, which allows the camera not only to capture static photos from various angles, but also to produce 360-degree views or digitally scan objects in three dimensions. Photographic visualisation has shifted from the flat to the round. This rotating view mimics the archaeologist's haptic turning of a newly excavated artefact in her attempt to properly understand it from all sides, but one could argue that what it delivers is only distance and surface. This rotation paradoxically does not make the object more object-like, more real; it instead transforms it into a virtual entity, an image.



The video for D'Angelo's millennial hit single *Untitled (How Does It Feel)* is a looped single long shot of the singer, unclothed to expose his ripped upper body, glistening in a black space. While the camera moves around him, capturing the tightening and relaxing of his muscles in ultra close-up, it is also limited to moving within an imaginary frame, defined top, left and right by the dark emptiness of the studio and, at the bottom, by what is presumably his naked crotch. In other words, this is the Ken Burns style panning and zooming into a photographic image that we know from the automated slideshow on our computers,

albeit in 3D. The motif, the actual flexing of muscles, is what makes this product a perfect hybrid between the moving and the still image.

In preparation for the shoot, D'Angelo went through intense physical training. He built muscle to give shape to his skin. In a 2008 interview, his personal trainer discussed D'Angelo's aversion at the time to the idea for the video, "You've got to realise, he'd never looked like that before in his life. To somebody who was so introverted, and then, in a matter of three or four months, to be so ripped – everything was happening so quickly." D'Angelo's subsequent physical and mental decline was documented through police mug-shots, so that we know the famous video was his body's exact peak.



It seems likely that in a few years we will look at the personal trainer as a complete anachronism. Someone who, not unlike the stage designer, still deals with real physical matter; someone who creates images by rearranging real things. The stage designer and the personal trainer transform stuff into images that create momentary illusions – like pouting for a selfie, but with much more effort. Think of Robert De Niro's bloat in *Raging Bull*, Charlize Theron's stoutness in *Monster* and Renée Zellweger's curves in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and their subsequent athletic appearances on the red carpet. Like these actors, D'Angelo built his body for the camera. *Untitled (How Does It Feel)* was a snapshot.



The Canon EOS 5D Mark II, produced for a four-year period ending in 2012, was the first camera to unite professional still photography

and moving image-making capabilities. An unassuming black plastic thing, it cancelled a century-long debate on the qualities intrinsic to photography on the one side and the moving image on the other. Of course, as we all know, a film is just a series of photographs arranged chronologically, making the fusion of the two in this machine seem more like a reunification of twins separated at birth than a daring cross-boundary merger. This machine was both real, applicable progress and an anachronism at heart. What it inadvertently made clear is that we are now somewhere on the spectrum between the still and moving image (and also between flatness and three-dimensionality). The more static images we produce, the smoother our moving image becomes. The still image will soon be a thing of the past.



While the Mark II was released primarily as a still camera, the consumers discovered its superior moving image-making qualities and replaced their cumbersome video and film cameras with this handheld device. To transform it into a full-blown filmmaking machine, they started building intricate rigs so big that it dwarfed the camera itself. Today we live in a world *full* of photographic scaffolding.

The camera is clearly a model of its creator; it is her memory. It is a surrogate eye that captures images for her. It is an automaton or a robot, epitomising the design of its maker. The camera has a body and a brain; it consumes. The camera is created in our image; our legs are like a dolly or tripod and our eyes, like a lens. We identify with photographic equipment; we empathise with it. We think of pelvic floor exercises while choosing our f-stop. We develop Photophobia. As Andrew Norman Wilson says, “we have been conditioned to respond to [techniques from cinema and television] such as the embodied flight of an off-balance Steadicam, a transcendent crane into a computer-generated character’s head, or the shifting perspectives of a multi-cam setup“. As the camera moves, whether virtual or not, we absorb its routines of viewing and being in the world, it’s “realism”, and assimilate its automated and impossible perspectives on time and space. The camera may be modelled on the human physique, but humans also model themselves on the camera, progressively reacting to its changes – think of dilated pupils produced by certain kinds of anti-

depressants or the sensitive, hyperaesthetic and all-inclusive eyesight of people tripping on MDMA. We are tools for the camera to realise a set programme of photographic possibilities. We have moved from the viewfinder to the composite image, from the I to the swarm. At this point, “we *are* informational capital”.



They say that the cormorant is the most ancient bird around, that it dates back to the dinosaurs. Unlike other aquatic birds, it has not developed the oil sheen that would protect it from getting soaked, hence its crucifix-like pose: this is how it dries its feathers in the breeze. What an anachronism, a thing from the past, a living fossil. In his 1989 text *Photography and Liquid Intelligence*, Jeff Wall pointed to the control of chemical fluids in the history of photography and prophesied that there would be a progressive drying-out of the medium through computation. In this sense, “the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory”. Perhaps the wet white T-shirt was the climax of old-world sleaziness, a last spasm of the analogue before our descent into the dry, waxed, weightless and ageless universe of the virtual. Do you remember Sabrina and *Boys Boys Boys*? Can you recall Samantha Fox? The way those singers exploited white cotton and water to produce images of their hefty bodies both concealed and enhanced? This *draperie mouillée* seemed to transcend the slick surfaces of glossy magazines by echoing the fluidity of analogue processing and the stickiness of the emulsion coat of a photographic print.



It is no coincidence of course that early childhood memories mostly involve physical sensations; we were primitive creatures back then. We did not yet know how to analyse and categorise, how to rationalise and discuss. Imagine how in a few years we will reminisce about the laptop. The clunky bodily machines so characteristic of the early 21st century. Our first MacBook Air, for example. The loudness of its fan and the irony of its supposed airiness. But above all, its temperature. The feeling of that burning heat on our thighs, on an already hot summer day. The apparent blandness and unassuming formal qualities of the

Photographic are everywhere, but Photographic materiality has not vanished; it has changed. The irritated skin, the photographic itch we got from messing with the chemicals of analogue photographic production, may have healed, but it has also been replaced by much more substantial ailments.



We were wetter when we were children than we are now. Think about it. All those puddles, the squishing sound of wet woollen socks in rubber boots, the feeling of a freshly soiled diaper, some spit sliding down our little chins. Anything happening at that point in life seemed so much more consequential. This is what we return to in therapy. Analogue photography was the childhood of the Photographic.

It is surely no coincidence that perfectly contained drops of liquid sitting on surfaces of things feature so heavily in digital image-making tutorials. Like the techy garments used in the outdoor sports industry, these images inhabit a landscape of impenetrability and hydrophobia. We know that the perfect water drops on the bright green leaves adorning our computer desktops did not occur naturally. We are dealing with digital image-making here, with ideals. A world where things have borders, a world without entropy, a dried-up universe without decay, the ultimate objectification of the lively.



When we look at assemblies of mannequins in shop windows, the glass resembles the surface of a screen, flattening the frozen figures into a photographic image. Despite their location at the frontage of capital, they cannot be possessed – they are instruments for display. Mannequins are uncanny assemblages of the corpse, the machine, the commodity and the individualised object. Each is inherently rigid yet infinitely accessorisable. The mannequin's standardisation, its silent, pure and simple appearance, gives the impression of allowing any alteration to have an effect, but like the photographic image, it is only seemingly without character or qualities. It is blank but also gendered, racialised, abstracted and weaponised. The variations in style and generic positions hide its adherence to the logic of repetition. Together, this posse of posers peruse the spectator and become characters in

a scene. They are facing the window as we would a lens. The photographic apparatus is a choreographer; it organises the tribe. The mannequins in the window form a group photo, a “team shot”. The logic of the group photo is to insist on the individual while perceiving the whole as a unit. It materialises the image that the group intends to present of itself. As Pierre Bourdieu has said, it symbolises “nothing but the group's image of its own integration.” Each is an individual, yet a line of mannequins is also a collective, a ragtag gang of misfits banded together for the common cause of producing an image.



The first high-resolution photographs of the lunar surface were made by the Ranger 7 lunar probe launched by NASA in 1964. It was designed to perform a hard landing – “hard” meaning that the spacecraft intentionally crashes into the moon – and transmitted more than 4,300 photographs during its final minutes of flight. The site of collision was later named Mare Cognitum, “the sea that has become known”. Five years later, upon the first soft landing, the moon's surface was finally photographed by a human.

COLLINS: Goddamn, that's pretty! This is unreal. I'd forgotten.

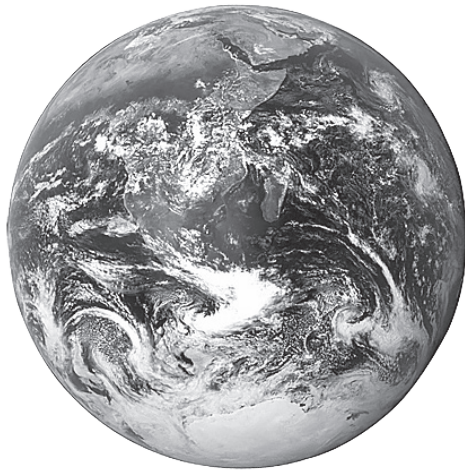
ARMSTRONG: Get a picture of that.

COLLINS: Ooh, sure, I will. (...) I've lost a Hasselblad. Has anybody seen a Hasselblad floating by? It couldn't have gone very far, big son of a gun like that.

ARMSTRONG: It's too late for sunrise, anyway.

COLLINS: Ah! Here it is. (...) It was floating in the aft bulkhead. (...) I got a little horizon. Man, look at that! Fantastic. I have no conception of where we're pointed or which way we are or a crapping thing, but it's a beautiful low-pressure cell out here.

“The Blue Marble” from 1972 was an unplanned snapshot taken by a crew member on Apollo 17. The first complete photo of the earth, it has since become the most wildly trafficked and reproduced image. Within it are all other known photographs, paintings, people and places. Everything discussed here is in this image. The perceptual distance it enabled helps us understand the wholeness of our earth, that it holds nearly everything we can conceptualise. It is mostly shown with Antarctica at the bottom, although the actual view the astronauts had, floating weightlessly in space, was with Antarctica on top.



The Photographic has allowed us to peer into our origins, into the deep field of space. It has allowed us to produce images of the beginning of space and time, of what happened in that first trillionth of a trillionth of a second. With the recent photographic image of the black hole, the blind spot, that exotic space-time realm that had long been beyond our ken, we have accessed the origin of the origin, the beginning and end of all things.



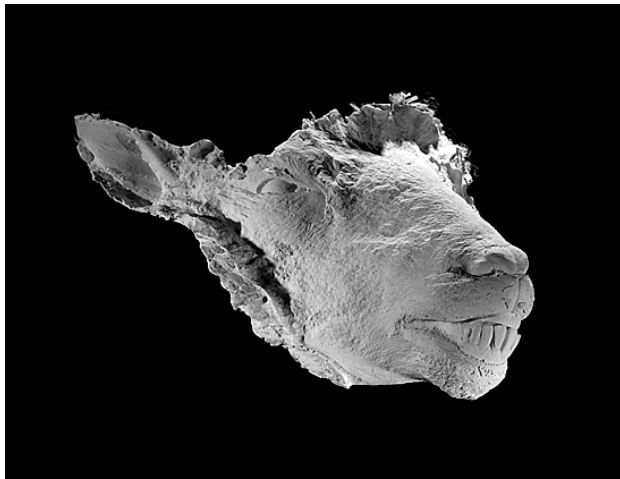
Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *L'origine du Monde* features a direct view of the naked crotch of an anonymous reclining woman. Decidedly photographic in its cropping, it shows the body in close-up and isolation. More than merely a transgressive act, this image was a response to the erotica modernised and circulated by photography, to images in which fantasy and idealisation were stripped back to offer up the female sex, very real and very physical, like an object. Like a dirty magazine, *L'origine du Monde* was passed between men (from the

Ottoman diplomat Khalil Bey to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) and regularly revealed to guests as a kind of party trick. For much of the 20th century, the original painting was lost and supplanted by photographic reproductions so poor that art historian Linda Nochlin described them as seemingly “printed on bread”. These reproduced repetitions rendered the image “literally indistinguishable from standard, mass-produced pornography (...) indeed, identical with it.” Rather than serve to offer a turning point and new origin for painting, the artwork instead was a symptom of the ever-increasing saturation of decontextualised and fragmented images of the body rendered by the Photographic condition. The title of this piece points to a combination of sacrilege, psychosexual drives, and the bare-life of the maternal. Courbet's painting was directed as a vehicle for shock by directly depicting what traditional representational art had always repressed but alluded to, while acknowledging the simple fact that all human beings have been carried and delivered into this world by a female body.



Photography came into the world and split the representation of the body into a set of conflicting representational systems that intercedes and reframes corporeal reality. Photography served in the continued objectification of women, but it has also demystified the body by exposing the bare facts of our anatomies and biological processes. Through extreme close-ups, and internal and external views, photography disclosed the beginning of human life. Birth photography opened up public discussions on the human body and was central to the establishment of sexual education and gender equality. The baby is captured at the moment when it separates from the mother's body – a profane reality that we all have experienced in some form, yet no one remembers. While photography is often spoken of as a document of death, these images conversely mark the emergence of life. This is our origin of the world. What we see here is the reproduction of reproduction.

On 5 July 1996, when Dolly the first cloned sheep was born, the logic of the Photographic and the biological combined, ushering in a litany of concerns about the status of reproduction. A literal realisation of creating a “living replica”, the clone is very often thought of as akin to mechanical reproduction, a sort of photocopy, a Xerox. Just as Walter Benjamin foresaw that photography’s mechanical reproducibility would herald the loss of the aura, there is normalised anxiety regarding the replication of beings, a fear that it will diminish individuality and the authenticity of life itself. Today we speak about cloning for all manner of processes of copying, imitation and reproduction. Cloning has become, as W. J. T. Mitchell says, an “image of image-making itself”. In Photoshop and other software, we use a clone tool to replace information for one part of a picture with that from another part. A whole can be produced from a part just as Dolly was produced from cells from a mammary gland.



According to Alexander Kluge, Antwerp’s legendary wool exchange was where financial capital began. Rather than transfer finished textiles, bales of fibre or even the bodies of sheep, this was a site of speculation. It was where unborn or absent mammals and their potential fleece were bet on and traded, resulting in exchanges with no fundamental value or use. It was entirely driven by the logic of trading itself, a site for the exchange of real and possible images – the promulgation and translation of things into signs that operate outside of their material base. When money later cut ties with the gold standard, value became entirely decentralised, infinitely convertible, and disassociated from labour and things – unmoored. This is where photography is now. It has lost its foundations and is no longer encumbered by its indexicality and materiality. This has allowed it to be everywhere and to become everything. It has become mercury-like. Liquid, protean, mutable, fast-flowing, moving at the slightest touch. Alive. Photography has been replaced by the Photographic.

It seems contradictory that resistance to photographic portraiture – the belief by some cultures that the photograph captures more than just

the surface – is so often ridiculed in Western society. Clearly, when we photograph, we take more than only an image. In Goethe’s Faust, Mephistopheles exclaims, “Six stallions, say, I can afford. / Is not their strength my property? / I tear along, a sporting lord, / As if their legs belonged to me.” Both photography and capital are linked to possession. They both possess what Marx called “the property of appropriating all objects”.

The Photographic is not merely the production, reproduction and dissemination of images, but rather uncanny omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence. To speak about the Photographic is not only a matter of discussing images or habits or data or social interactions. It is not only a matter of chemicals or f-stops or lenses or techniques. The Photographic is a translator and equaliser of all things. It renders all things interchangeable; it is the primary currency. Like capitalism, it is the indispensable tool for how we view ourselves and everything else. We look at everything with photography. We experience, know and evaluate the world as a function of the Photographic. What a weird function of the mind it is that we are now able to translate everything into photographic images at will and process them in our photoshop brain, the ultimate meeting of photography and commerce.

With machines reading images and exchanging them between each other significantly more than humans, our photographic images have become data patterns that are poached like ivory tusks. We are not as Richard Brautigan once wishfully imagined, “watched over by machines of loving grace”; we are the carcasses that the machine has left behind. Or: we are feeding a machine, and the machine eats images.

The Photographic is an analogy machine. In its universe, to quote Walt Whitman, as Kaja Silverman has,

*A vast similitude interlocks all,
All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,
All distances of place however wide,
All distances of time, all inanimate forms,
All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different,
or in different worlds,
All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes,
the brutes,
All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,
All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe,
or any globe,
All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future ...*

Every tradition, body, community, history and fact has been pulled into the orbit of the Photographic, to the extent that the Photographic has become too big to fail. It is photography expanded to such an extent that it no longer has a centre, no core to its being.



The Photographic is undead, abject, and completely uncontrollable ambiguity: slouching across the earth, restless and hallucinatory, a thing with a soul, a body that is rotten but reactive, oblivious to itself, yet driven by unforgiving instinct. How else to describe the elusive body that is the ghost of photography, its panic blossom, the last days of its empire?