



E A C H

W I L D

I D E A

WRITING PHOTOGRAPHY HISTORY

GEOFFREY BATCHEN

EACH WILD IDEA



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E A C H

W I L D

I D E A

W R I T I N G   P H O T O G R A P H Y   H I S T O R Y

G E O F F R E Y   B A T C H E N

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*Not however expecting connection, you must just accept of each wild idea as it presents itself.*

—Thomas Watling, *Letters from an Exile at Botany-Bay*, 1794

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## P R E L U D E

There can be something quite disconcerting about anthologies like this one. Nine essays by a single author are garnered from a variety of sources and presented as a coherent narrative. Congealed each in the moment of its initial publication, such essays usually provide little more than an archaeology of these past moments, a history of the unfolding of history itself. *Each Wild Idea* certainly repeats this model; its chapters incorporate essays already published elsewhere (in academic journals, exhibition catalogues, and art magazines). But this book is not only a record of past publications, for these publications all appear here in revised and/or expanded form, having been brought up to date and often stitched together into broader arguments bearing on photography and the writing of its history. In other words, like the photography they discuss, these essays take up the kernel of an initial exposure and subject it to continual development, reproduction, and manipulation. Written through a process of accretion, they are presented here as works in progress, coming from the past but still in motion, (never) to be completed, and therefore also of and about the present.

The subjects of these essays range widely, from a discussion of the timing of photography's invention to analyses of the consequences of cyberculture. In between there are reflections on the Australianness of Australian photography (another indication of my own historical trajectory), the state of contemporary art photography, and the place of the vernacular in photography's history. In each case, readers are faced with having to determine the relationship of form and history, and therefore of being and identity, a crucial yet complicated spacing too quickly stilled by the formalist and postmodern approaches that continue to dominate photographic discourse. Thus, despite its variety of themes, *Each Wild Idea* is marked by a constant refrain throughout: the vexed (and vexing) question of photography's past, present, and future identity.

A brief note on method would seem to be appropriate. Informed by the aspirations and rhetorics of postmodernism, this book engages the semiotics of photographic meaning.

It assumes, in other words, that the meaning of every photograph is imbricated within broader social and political forces. However, my writing does not want to regard this production as simply a cultural matter, as if meaning and politics infiltrate the passively waiting photograph only from the outside. What is the photograph on the inside, before it enters a specific historical and political context? The question is an impossible but necessary one—impossible because there can never be an unadulterated “before,” necessary because the positing of an originary moment is the very condition of identity itself.

This Prelude, for example, comes before the chapters that make up the rest of this book and yet was written after them. To read it now is to experience a peculiar convolution of spatial and temporal orders, a kind of convolution that constantly reappears throughout these essays. For my interest here is in the way photography is inevitably an “impossible” implosion of before and after, inside and outside. I want to articulate photography as something that is simultaneously material and cultural, manifested as much in the attributes of the photographic object as in its contextualization. Philosophy has a word for all this: *deconstruction*. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, “The sign must be studied ‘under erasure’, always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such. ‘Semiology’ must give way to ‘grammatology’.” The language is difficult to grasp, but so is the agency it seeks to describe. And even when this agency is conceded, one might well still want to ask, So how does this tracing embody itself in and as the flesh of a photograph? This could be taken as the motivating challenge of *Each Wild Idea*.

The essays that follow ponder this question in any number of ways, but they all take their cues from a consideration of the particularities of specific photographs. If nothing else, my discussions should remind us of photography’s wonderful strangeness (inference: you do not have to read theory to encounter the dynamics of a photogrammatology—just look at the evidence of history itself). *Each Wild Idea* is a compendium of such evidence, finding it in everything from a master work by Alfred Stieglitz to a humble combination of baby photo and bronzed booties. I show that both examples incorporate their own singular histories (they are not just in history; they *are* history). The difficulty is conveying this process through a piece of writing. To my surprise, I have often found myself gravitating toward sheer description as a mode of analysis, thus insisting that we look right at, rather than only beyond, the formal qualities of the photograph being discussed. This attention to form has little to

do with a desire to reveal photography's essential characteristics as a medium (the purported ambition of the kind of formalism to which postmodernism has traditionally opposed itself). It is, rather, an effort to evoke directly the lived experience of history, a reminder that history is continually unfolding itself in the materiality of the present—in the presentness of whatever photograph, from whatever era, happens to be before us. Once again Roland Barthes is proved right: "To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it."

All intellectual work is a collective enterprise, and the endnotes to the essays that follow testify to the degree to which my own thinking has always been dependent on that of others. But this Prelude also allows me to thank the many people to whom I am more personally indebted. These acknowledgments in turn reveal the degree to which this anthology is autobiographical in character. The book's shifts in focus and methodology, and the pattern of individuals who contributed to those shifts, speak to my own developing career as a writer of historical criticism, as well as to my current identity as an expatriate Australian working in the United States.

Some of these essays were begun ten years ago in Sydney, Australia. The insights and suggestions of Vicki Kirby considerably improved my early work and still guide my thinking today. The work of Australian artist and writer Ian Burn offered a model of engaged cultural criticism that I continue to try to emulate. More recently I have been particularly fortunate in having graduate students at the University of New Mexico who have tolerated, challenged, and encouraged my work in all sorts of ways; these students have included Monica Garza, Shari Wasson, Nina Stephenson, Patrick Manning, Marcell Hackbardt, Are Flågan, Erin Garcia, Rachel Goodenow, and Sara Marion. I especially want to thank Danielle Miller for fostering a life in which critical writing could be produced. I also acknowledge colleagues at UNM—Christopher Mead, Thomas Barrow, Charlene Villaseñor Black, Elizabeth Hutchinson, and Carla Yanni—who have given me both moral and physical support whenever I have needed it. Tom Barrow in particular has been a constant source of encouragement and assistance.

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Finally, I simply thank all those friends who in various ways have sustained my life while these essays were being written. Their interest and care are what make such writing possible.



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## DESIRING PRODUCTION

*“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”*

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

The King’s advice to Alice, has been taken to heart by those who write the history of photography.<sup>1</sup> The end is apparently not yet in sight, but the beginning is in almost every account identified with the invention of a marketable photographic apparatus and the successful production of the first photographs. Not only does this originary event mark the starting point, or at least the first climactic moment, of their narrative structures; it has come to represent the one common empirical incident in an otherwise unruly and quarrelsome ensemble of photographic practices and discourses. For this reason, the story of the invention of photography has become the stable platform on which all the medium’s many subsequent manifestations are presumed to be founded. (To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, photography’s historians have a vested interest in moving as quickly as possible from the troubling philosophical question, “What is photography?” to the safe and expository one, “Where and when did photography begin?”)<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the circumstances of photography’s invention are commonly used to establish the medium’s continuity with a linear development of Western practices of representation reaching back to, inevitably, the Renaissance. Any questioning of photography’s beginnings therefore also represents a questioning of the trajectory of photography’s history as a whole.

It was on January 7, 1839, in the form of a speech by François Arago to the French Academy of Sciences, that the invention of photography was officially announced to the world.<sup>3</sup> Further enthusiastic speeches about Louis Daguerre’s amazing image-making process were subsequently made to the Chamber of Deputies on June 15 and finally to a combined meeting of the Academy of Sciences and Fine Arts on August 19. It was only on this latter date that the daguerreotype and its camera apparatus were ready to be introduced to an already eager market. Indeed, so eager was this market that within the space of a few months, the daguerreotype had found its way to almost every corner of the globe and infiltrated almost every conceivable genre of image making. Meanwhile, over in England, William Henry Fox Talbot had been motivated by the news of Daguerre’s discovery to announce hurriedly



that he had also been conducting some experiments with a photographic process. His process, significantly different from that devised by Daguerre, was subsequently described in detail on January 31, 1839, in a paper delivered to the Royal Society. After undergoing a few refinements, Talbot's paper-based image and negative-positive method proved even more amenable than the daguerreotype to a wide variety of uses and provided the basic principles of the photography we still use today.

So no one would want to deny that 1839 was an important year in the life of photography, particularly with regard to the direction of its subsequent technical, instrumental, and entrepreneurial developments. However, the traditional emphasis on 1839, and the pioneering figures of Daguerre and Talbot, has tended to distract attention from the wider significance of the timing of photography's emergence into our culture. This essay aims first to establish this timing and then to articulate briefly something of that significance.

In the introduction to his authoritative tome *The Origins of Photography*, Helmut Gernsheim went so far as to describe the timing of photography's invention as "the greatest mystery in its history": "Considering that knowledge of the chemical as well as the optical principles of photography was fairly widespread following Schulze's experiment [in 1725] . . . the circumstance that photography was not invented earlier remains the greatest mystery in its history. . . . It had apparently never occurred to any of the multitude of artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who were in the habit of using the camera obscura to try to fix its image permanently."<sup>4</sup>

Why 1839 and not before? Why, for example, didn't any of the great thinkers of the past—Aristotle, Leonardo, Newton—come up with this idea, even if only in the form of textual or pictorial speculation? This is the question that continues to haunt the history of photography's invention. But how are the medium's historians to engage with it? More to the point, how are we to develop a critical, and, from that, a political understanding of photography's timing? Perhaps the historical methods of French philosopher Michel Foucault may be helpful. Foucault's various archaeologies have, after all, concerned themselves at least in part with a critique of traditional historical ideas about invention and beginnings.

"Archaeology is not in search of inventions, and it remains unmoved at the moment (a very moving one, I admit) when, for the first time, someone was sure of some truth; it does not try to restore the light of those joyful mornings. But neither is it concerned with the

average phenomena of opinion, with the dull gray of what everyone at a particular period might repeat. What it seeks is not to draw up a list of founding saints; it is to uncover the regularity of a discursive practice.”<sup>5</sup>

Following Foucault, we might find it useful to shift the emphasis of our investigation of photography’s timing from 1839 to another, earlier moment in the medium’s history: to the appearance of a regular discursive practice for which photography is the desired object. The timing of the invention of photography is thereby assumed to coincide with its conceptual and metaphoric rather than its technological or functional manifestations. Accordingly this essay will ask not who invented photography but, rather, At what moment in history did the discursive *desire* to photograph emerge and begin to manifest itself insistently? At what moment did photography shift from an occasional, isolated, individual fantasy to a demonstrably widespread, social imperative? When, in other words, did evidence of a desire to photograph begin to appear with sufficient regularity and internal consistency to be described in Foucault’s terms as a discursive practice?

One historian, Pierre Harmant, has already offered a surprisingly crowded list of twenty-four people who claimed at one time or another to have been the first to have practiced photography; seven of these came from France, six from England, five from Germany, one from Belgium, one was American, one Spanish, one Norwegian, one Swiss, and one Brazilian. Upon further examination of their claims, Harmant concluded that “of these, four only had solutions which were truly original.”<sup>6</sup> However, this is not a criterion that is particularly pertinent to an investigation of the desire to photograph. It is, after all, the timing and mythopoetic significance of such a discourse that is at issue rather than the historical accuracy or import of individual texts or claimants. Originality of method, accuracy of chemical formulas, success or failure: these irrelevancies need not be taken into account when compiling a list of names and dates of those who felt a desire to photograph. All that need be deleted from such a list are those persons, and there are many of them, who began their experiments only after first hearing of the successes of either Daguerre or Talbot.<sup>7</sup> These missing figures were often important to the future developments of photography as a technology and a practice. However, as far as the emergence of a photo-desire is concerned, they represent no more than, as Foucault unkindly puts it, “the dull gray of what everyone at a particular period might repeat.”

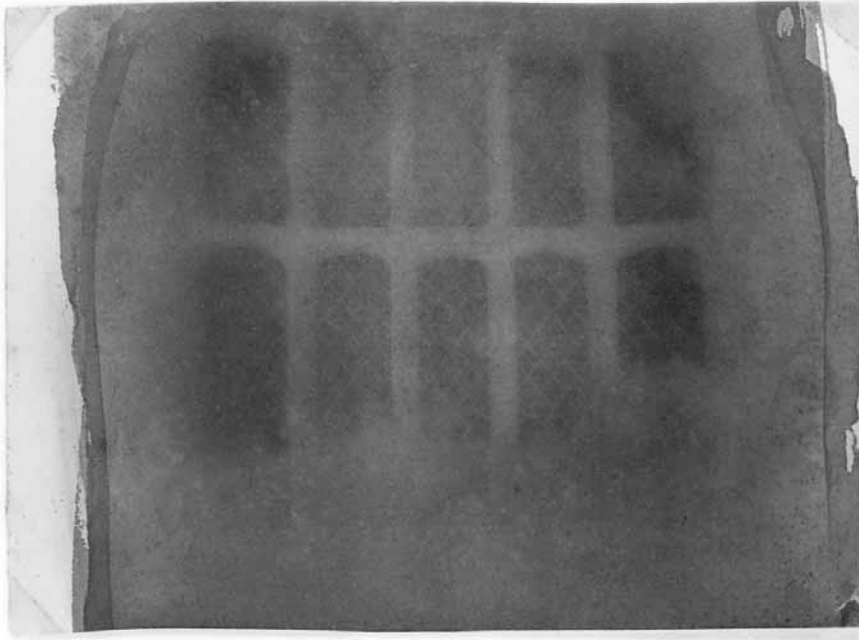
Here then is my own roll call, undoubtedly an incomplete and still speculative one, of those who recorded or subsequently claimed for themselves the pre-1839 onset of a desire to photograph: Henry Brougham (England, 1794), Elizabeth Fulhame (England, 1794), Thomas Wedgwood (England, c.1800), Anthony Carlisle (England, c.1800), Humphry Davy (England, c.1801–1802), Thomas Young (England, 1803), Nicéphore and Claude Niépce (France, 1814), Samuel Morse (United States, 1821), Louis Daguerre (France, 1824), Eugène Hubert (France, c.1828), James Wattles (United States, 1832), Hercules Florence (France/Brazil, 1832), Richard Habersham (United States, 1832), Henry Talbot (England, 1833), Philipp Hoffmeister (Germany, 1834), Friedrich Gerber (Switzerland, 1836), John Draper (United States, 1836), Vernon Heath (England, 1837), Hippolyte Bayard (France, 1837), José Ramos Zapetti (Spain, 1837).<sup>8</sup>

These are the persons we might call the protophotographers. As authors and experimenters, they produced a voluminous collection of aspirations for which some sort of photography was in each case the desired result. Sometimes this is literally so. We find Niépce writing in 1827 to Daguerre—for example, “In order to respond to the *desire* which you have been good enough to express” (his emphasis)—and find Daguerre replying in the following year that “I cannot hide the fact that I am burning with desire to see your experiments from nature.”<sup>9</sup> On other occasions we are left to read this desire in the objects these people sought to have represented—invariably views (of landscape), nature, and/or the image found in the mirror of the camera obscura—or alternatively in the words and phrases they use to describe their imaginary or still-fledgling processes. Davy’s 1802 paper about the experiments of himself and his friend Tom Wedgwood, for example, records their attempts to use silver nitrates and chlorides to capture the image formed by the camera obscura, followed by similar efforts to make contact prints of figures painted on glass as well as of leaves, insect wings, and engravings. The Niépce brothers seem to have been inspired by lithography in their experiments to make light-induced copies of existing images, although from 1827 on, Nicéphore concentrated his energies on the possibility of making “a view from nature, using the newly perfected camera.” This is an ambition also expressed by Indiana student James Wattles, who in 1828 made a temporary image in his camera of “the old stone fort in the rear of the school garden.” In about this same year, French architect Eugène Hubert attempted to produce camera images of plaster sculptures, and in 1833 Brazilian artist Hercules Florence made experimental views from his window.<sup>10</sup>

So the celebrated photographic experiments of Henry Talbot, begun only in 1833, should be regarded as but one more independent continuation of a desire already experienced by many others. Once a technical solution to this desire had occurred to him, Talbot quickly produced contact prints of botanical specimens, pieces of lace, and his own handwriting, then images projected by his solar microscope, and finally pictures of his family home, Lacock Abbey, imprinted on sensitized paper placed in the back of a small camera obscura. By the 1840s he had also made a wide variety of other types of image. Historians tend to regard most of these images simply as straightforward demonstrations of his process. However, some, like Mike Weaver, argue that at least one or two of them “produced a metaphorical rather than purely descriptive account of reality.”<sup>11</sup> I would go even further and suggest that Talbot was an omniverous but never arbitrary image maker; all of his pictures have metaphorical meanings.

A case in point is the series of tiny pictures Talbot made of the inside of the window from the South Gallery of Lacock Abbey. This oriel window is the subject of an often-reproduced image, Talbot’s earliest extant negative, taken in August 1835. As Talbot points out in a hand-written inscription next to this negative (perhaps added when it was exhibited in 1839), the number of squares of glass can be counted with the help of a magnifying lens. And if we take his advice and look more closely, we also see that it is a landscape image, for we can just glimpse the silhouetted forms of trees and bushes through the window’s transparent panes. Interestingly, Talbot repeats this same basic composition in at least five other negatives, some also made in 1835 and others made perhaps four years later.<sup>12</sup> In all six cases, Talbot’s picture shows us nothing but this window; it fills the picture plane entirely, resulting in an abstract blue and white pattern of diamond shapes framed only by the more solid outlines of the latticed window structure itself. (photo 1.1) So why would Talbot make at least six pictures of nothing—of nothing but panes of glass, of a subject with no particular intrinsic interest, either as science or art?

Talbot expert Larry Schaaf implies that a fireplace mantle opposite this window made it an attractive platform for Talbot’s primitive camera, allowing him to make a high-contrast negative in favorable environmental conditions.<sup>13</sup> Talbot had rebuilt this particular room as a potential art gallery after he occupied the family home in 1827, completing the job in 1831. The space featured three bay windows, with Talbot choosing to photograph only the



**1.1**

*William Henry Fox Talbot, The Oriel Window, Lacock Abbey, seen from the inside, c. Summer 1835*

*Photogenic drawing negative*

*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

central and smallest example, at a point where the room has narrowed into little more than a wide corridor. He points his camera directly into the light, directly at that feature of the room that is neither inside nor outside but both. What is particularly interesting about these window pictures is that Talbot makes no effort to describe the space of the gallery itself, as he does in a number of later pictures of interiors (*Interior of South Gallery, Lacock Abbey*, November 23, 1839, or March 2, 1840) and their windows. Nor does he allow the window's light to be cast over something else (implying spiritual or intellectual enlightenment), as he does over a bust of Patroclus in a print from November 1839 or over the objects in *Window-seat*, from May 30, 1840. He instead produces an entirely flat, virtually abstract image, an image that emulates the equally flat and already familiar two-dimensional look of the contact print. It is as if he wants to tell us that this window has imprinted itself directly onto his paper, without the mediation of composition or artistic precedent.

This is soon to become a common pictorial option for Talbot; glassware, ceramic vessels, figurines, shelves of books, and even an array of hats all eventually get the same treatment. In each case, Talbot carefully arranged these tiers of objects out in the courtyard of Lacock Abbey in order to exploit the best possible lighting conditions. In other words, he fakes their setting; he asks these objects to perform as if they are somewhere they are not, as if they were sitting indoors. The images that result employ the aesthetic of modern scientific analysis and commercial display. However, it is also a way for Talbot to emphasize the emblematic over the naturalistic possibilities of photographic representation. But emblematic of what?

Could the window picture be read as an emblem of itself, of the very photogenic drawing process that has made its own existence possible? When you think about it, Talbot has set up his camera at exactly the point in the South Gallery where the sensitive paper once sat in his own modified camera obscura. His camera obscura looks out at the inside of the metaphorical lens of the camera of his own house (which he later claimed was “the first that was ever yet known *to have drawn its own picture*”).<sup>14</sup> He is, in other words, taking a photograph of photography at work making this photograph. In a letter to Lady Mary Cole about her own photographic “experimentalizing,” dated August 9, 1839, Talbot advised her that “the object to begin with is a window & its bars placing the instrument in the interior of the room.”<sup>15</sup> So, for Talbot, a picture of the inside of a window is an exemplary photograph—the first

photograph one should attempt, the origin point of one's photography, the origin of all photography. Where Niépce and Daguerre both take pictures *from* their windows, Talbot makes an image *of* his window. He tells us that photography is about framing, and then shows us nothing but that frame; he suggests that photography offers a window onto the world, but then shows nothing but that window.<sup>16</sup> As Derrida suggests, "The time for reflection is also the chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all senses of that word, as if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, one could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge and the abyss, but could view viewing."<sup>17</sup> This, then, is no ordinary picture. It is rather what Talbot elsewhere called a "Philosophical Window."<sup>18</sup>

But there is still more to this picture. His camera also looks from the perspective of Talbot himself, as if the photographer was leaning up against the wall opposite (literally sitting or standing in the place of the developing photograph). In other words, Talbot's camera obscura acts in place of his own sensitized eye, as a detachable prosthesis of his own body (he himself referred to the "eye of the camera" in his 1844 book, *The Pencil of Nature*).<sup>19</sup> It is a photograph of the absent presence of the photographer. In 1860, George Henry Lewes, in his *The Physiology of Common Life*, suggested that if "we fix our eyes on the panes of a window through which the sunlight is streaming, the image of the panes will continue some seconds after the closure of the eyes."<sup>20</sup> Talbot's serial rendition of his own window demonstrates precisely this afterimage effect, projecting the photographs that result as retinal impressions, retained even after the eye of his camera has been closed.

In effect, this deceptively simple image articulates photography not as some sort of simply transparent window onto the real, but as a complex form of palimpsest. Nature, camera, image, and photographer are all present even when absent from the picture, as if photography represents a perverse dynamic in which each of these components is continually being inscribed in the place already occupied by its neighbor. In Talbot's hands, photography is neither natural nor cultural, but rather an economy that incorporates, produces, and is simultaneously produced by both nature *and* culture, both reality *and* representation (and for that very reason is never simply one or the other).

Talbot offers another, equally complex, articulation of photography in his first published paper on the subject, presented in January 1839 to the Royal Society. The title of this

paper again poses the problem of photography's identity. Photography is, he tells us, "the art of photogenic drawing," but then he goes on to insist that through this same process, "natural objects may be able to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil." So, for Talbot, photography apparently both is and is not a mode of drawing; it combines a faithful reflection of nature with nature's active production of itself as a picture, somehow incorporating both the artist *and* that artist's object of study. With this conundrum in place, he goes on in his text to posit yet another. Never quite able to decide whether the origins of photography are to be found in nature or in culture (as we have seen, his own early photograms include both botanical specimens and samples of lace and handwriting), Talbot comes up with a descriptive phrase that contains elements of each: "the art of fixing a shadow": "The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our '*natural magic*,' and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy. . . . Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change."<sup>21</sup>

Having decisively abandoned empirical explanation in favor of poetic metaphor, Talbot finds himself speaking of the new medium as a quite peculiar articulation of temporal and spatial coordinates. Photography is a process in which "position" is "occupied" for a "single instant," where "fleeting" time is "arrested" in the "space of a single minute." It would seem he is able to describe the identity of photography only by harnessing together a whole series of unresolved binaries: "art" and "shadows," the "natural" and "magic," the "momentary" and the "for ever," the "fleeting" and the "fettered," the "fixed" and that which is "capable of change." Photography for Talbot is the uneasy maintenance of binary relationships; it is the desire to represent an impossible conjunction of transience and fixity. More than that, the photograph is an emblematic something/sometime, a "space of a single minute," in which space *becomes* time, and time space.

In late 1838, Daguerre circulated a subscription brochure soliciting investors in his new invention. His text finishes with a sentence that in its contradictory convolution of language is surprisingly reminiscent of the description Talbot offered a month or two later. In conclusion, Daguerre says, "The DAGUERREOTYPE is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the



power to reproduce herself.”<sup>22</sup> Again, photography is something that allows nature to be simultaneously drawn and drawing, artist and model, active and passive (both, and therefore never quite either). During this same period, Daguerre produced three series of daguerreotypes of Parisian street scenes, each comprising three images of the same scene taken at different times of the day. He made two views of the Boulevard du Temple from the window of his studio in the Diorama building, one at 8 A.M. and the other at about midday. He made at least one more of these same views of the Boulevard du Temple, in this case taken late in the afternoon and showing horses that have moved during the exposure. A journalist writing for the *Spectator* reports in the issue of February 2, 1839, that Daguerre made three similar views of the Luxor obelisk in the Place de la Concorde by morning, noon, and evening light. Around the same time he also took a series of views of the Tuileries Palace, “taken at three different times of the day in the summer: in the morning at five, in the afternoon at two, and at sundown.”<sup>23</sup> These series surely represent a commentary on the interdependence of appearance and time, even as they visualize time itself as a continuous linear sequence of discrete moments. They also showed that photography was, in the way it brought the present and the past together in the one viewing experience, capable of folding time back on itself. In other words, Daguerre again presents photography as a distinctive temporal articulation of what it, and therefore we, see. Indeed, he, like Talbot, seems to be suggesting that the primary subject of every photograph is time itself.

The work of the various protophotographers is by no means the only source for a discourse of this kind. In the few decades on either side of 1800, we can find increasing evidence of a similar set of aspirations and explorations figured in various other fields of endeavor. As early as 1782, William Gilpin, the English clergyman and famous advocate of picturesque theory, had been moved to express some vexation at not having the means to capture adequately the fleeting visual sensations of a river journey he was undertaking. In his *Observations on the River Wye*, he makes the following comment: “Many of the objects, which had floated so rapidly past us, if we had had time to examine them, would have given us sublime, and beautiful hints in landscape: some of them seemed even well combined, and ready prepared for the pencil: but in so quick a succession, one blotted out another.”<sup>24</sup> In 1791 we find Gilpin again wishing for the impossible, this time for the ability to make his mirrored Claude glass “fix” its reflected image: “A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding

before the eye. They are like the visions of the imagination; or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Forms, and colours in brightest array, fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should give any price to fix and appropriate the scene.”<sup>25</sup>

These sentiments would have been appreciated by English painter John Constable. In 1833, for example, Constable published a book on his landscape painting in which, he claimed, “an attempt has been made to arrest the more abrupt and transient appearance of the CHIAR’OSCURO IN NATURE . . . to give ‘to one brief moment caught from fleeting time’ a lasting and sober existence, and to render permanent many of those splendid but evanescent Exhibitions, which are ever occurring in the changes of external Nature.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, Constable sought to produce pictures of this “arrested transience” in the form of a seemingly endless series of painted sketches of the sky. Typical of these, in both pictorial form and the careful empirical exactitude of its title, is his watercolor sketch *Study of Clouds at Hampstead (Cloud Study Above a Wide Landscape, About 11–noon, Sept 15, 1830, wind-W)* (photo 1.2).

At first glance it appears to be a picture of nothing much at all. A thin, horizontal strip of landscape anchors what is an otherwise empty sheet of paper—empty, that is, but for some rapidly applied strokes of paint meant to represent clouds scurrying about in the wind. It is, in fact, a picture of time itself, an attempt on Constable’s part to stop time in its tracks, to make time visible. The attempt can never quite succeed of course, as he implicitly acknowledges through the rapidity and insubstantiality of his paint application and his demonstrated need to paint this same subject over and over again. Time, it seems, stops for no one. The picture is about this too. It is about the man who has painted it, and all the people who stand in his metaphorical shoes to look at it now. To a degree foreign to earlier generations of painters, Constable is interested in representing the reality of immediate and momentary perceptual experience. He deliberately shows us this landscape as it is being seen by an imperfect human eye rather than through the ideal, eternal gaze of God. He depicts what a particular person saw standing in a particular place at a particular time, looking upward at the sky under quite particular atmospheric conditions. The picture not only acknowledges and presumes the presence of this viewer; it puts that viewer firmly in place, inscribed as it were within the very fiber of its being.



## 1.2

*John Constable, Study of Clouds at Hampstead (Cloud Study Above a Wide Landscape, About 11–noon, Sept 15, 1830, wind-W), 1830*

*Watercolor on paper*

*Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was another contemporary of the protophotographers (in fact, he was a close friend of three of them) whose work sought to resolve the “time anxiety” we have already seen expressed by Talbot, Daguerre, Gilpin, and Constable.<sup>27</sup> His poetry sought to reproduce in words the lived experience of seeing nature. Like Constable, he tries to capture the instant of perception, that image that is in the eye for only a moment before it changes forever. And, also like Constable, he has the problem of trying to do so through a form of representation (writing) that immediately becomes permanent and fixed in place. How can his writings reconcile eternal nature (the trace of God) and the instant of its actual perception (the presence of humanity)? How can he convey both fixity and transience in the same passage of prose?

In 1817, Coleridge described this poetic ambition with a strikingly photographic metaphor: “Creation rather than painting, or if painting, yet such, and with such co-presence of the whole picture flash’d at once upon the eye, as the sun paints in a camera obscura.”<sup>28</sup> In poems like *The Eolian Harp* (1795) and *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* (1797) he again compares this “copresence” to the fleeting image stilled by the camera obscura or its equivalent (specifically, an eolian harp, which allows the wind to create its own music, and a leafy bower that projects an image of those leaves onto the ground below). He imagines, in other words, a means of representation that is a direct reflection of nature but also acknowledges the subjective perception of nature experienced by an individual viewer. Stretched out on the side of a hill at noon, he looks upward through half-closed eyes, seeing nothing but “the sunbeams dance.” He becomes, he tells us in *The Eolian Harp*, a living camera:<sup>29</sup>

*Full many a thought uncall’d and undetain’d,  
And many idle flitting phantasies,  
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,  
As wild and various as the random gales  
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!*

Hovering between passive reverie and active thought, the object of Coleridge’s vision is nothing less than his own subjectivity. With a certain wonderment, he feels himself becoming “a Self-conscious Looking-glass,” as he put it in a note many years later.<sup>30</sup> What else

could Coleridge's "unregenerate mind" be shaping here but the equivalent of a desire to photograph, a desire to take his particular, evanescent vision of nature, and, as Talbot put it, have it "fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy"? But he is also fixing himself. Coleridge recognizes that the image he sees is an interaction of nature and his own eye; becoming a camera involves witnessing the spontaneous production of both. In June 1802, Humphry Davy wrote in the *Journals of the Royal Institution* that to copy the images formed by the camera obscura "was the first object of Mr. Wedgwood in his researches on the subject."<sup>31</sup> In November 1802, Coleridge compared the mind of this same Tom Wedgwood to a "miniature Sun seen, as you look thro' a Holly Bush"—in other words, to the visionary copresence of reflection and projection, time and space, viewed object and viewing subject, that makes any camera a potentially *photographic* one.<sup>32</sup>

So we get a sense that the desires, and confusions, of the inventors of photography are shared by many others, that the desire to photograph emerges from a confluence of cultural forces rather than from the genius of any one individual. What a study of this history shows, first and foremost, is that the desire to photograph appeared as a regular discourse at a particular time and place—in Europe or its colonies during the two or three decades around 1800. The inference clearly is that it was possible to think "photography" only at this specific conjuncture, that photography as a concept has an identifiable historical and cultural specificity. Now it might be argued that there had been a number of earlier instances of this photographic desire, like Johann Schulze's experiments with light-sensitive chemicals published in 1727 and Tiphaigne de la Roche's allegorical novel written in 1760. However, what is striking about such possible approximations of photography is how few and far between they are until the 1790s. Much more overwhelming in this regard is the vast *absence*, prior to this period, of talk along the lines I have described. From a virtual dearth of signs of a desire to photograph, the historical archive reveals the onset only in the last decade of the eighteenth century of a rapidly growing, widely dispersed, and increasingly urgent need for that-which-was-to-become-photography.

Indeed by 1839, the desire to photograph was apparently so well established that Arago could confidently assume to speak for all when he claimed that "everyone who has admired these images [produced in a camera obscura] will have felt regret that they could not be rendered permanent."<sup>33</sup> Later that year Arago was again moved to declare that "there is no

one, who, after having observed the nicety of the outlines, the correctness of shape and colour, together with that of the shade and light of the images represented by this instrument, has not greatly regretted that they should not be preserved of *their own accord*; no one that has not ardently desired the discovery of some means to fix them on the focal screen.”<sup>34</sup>

Arago’s assumption that this once-novel desire is now a universal imperative brings us directly back to the question already posed by the quotation from Gernsheim. Why should the ardent desire Arago described have arisen at this particular time, rather than at some prior or subsequent moment in the long history of European uses of the camera obscura, or indeed in the long history of European image making in general? Given that a basic knowledge of the existence of light-sensitive chemicals had been popularly available since the 1720s, why does the discursive desire to photograph begin to emerge only in the 1790s and not before?

It seems a simple, almost trivial question, and yet this matter of timing is a crucial one as far as the cultural *meaning* of photography is concerned. It is no surprise, then, to find that in recent years, a number of eminent photo historians have sought to provide a satisfactory explanation. Mercifully, few of these historians have centered their explanations on the familiar quest for the medium’s first inventor or premier product. Most have instead tried to relate photography’s emergence to contemporary developments in other areas of European cultural life. These have included, for example, various developments in art (perspective, realism, modernism), in science (physics, chemistry, mechanization, instrument making), and/or in social and economic formations (the industrial revolution, the rising dominance of bourgeois ideology, the demand from this class for portrait images).

Who could deny that each of these areas of development contributed to (or is it that they themselves arose from?) the same conditions of possibility from which photography itself was to emerge? However, these explanations still provide only a partial understanding of the significance of photography’s timing. Indeed if we had the space here to investigate each of these explanations in detail, and especially to examine them in relation to the available archive of speculations provided by the protophotographers, we might well find that the evidence of their influence on the sudden appearance of photography is relatively slight. For example, it is worth pointing out that the discursive desire to photograph almost always precedes the scientific knowledge needed to do so successfully. Virtually every account of the

invention of photography begins with an “impossible” idea, which is then slowly but surely brought to fruition in the face of constant scientific difficulties and uncertainties. Despite plenty of opportunities, there are no episodes in which this idea arose directly from scientific experiment and discovery itself. Similarly, the archive reveals that portraiture—so often said by historians to be photography’s primary aspiration—is only occasionally and belatedly mentioned by its inventors as a possible future use for the medium. What such investigations might suggest in fact is that the evolutionary, percussive, cause-and-effect, base-superstructure notion of historical development that underlies many of these explanations is simply not appropriate to the empirical data we have on photography’s emergence.

So how is one to read a desire to photograph against the timing of this emergence? We might well begin by noting the broader implications of this timing, for it soon becomes clear that the epistemological status of all the objects in which the protophotographers want to invest their rhetorical desire—landscape, nature, and the camera image on one hand, and space, time, and subjectivity on the other—is at this same moment in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. Each of these concepts is undergoing a radical transformation, as a nascent modern episteme disrupts the stability of its Enlightenment predecessor. What is particularly interesting about this crisis—this “profound upheaval,” as Foucault wants to call it—is that what appears to be at issue is not just the representation of Nature but the nature of representation itself: “In a more fundamental fashion, and at the level where acquired knowledge is rooted in its positivity, the event concerns, not the objects aimed at, analysed, and explained in knowledge, not even the manner of knowing them or rationalizing them, but the relation of representation to that which is posited in it. . . . What came into being . . . is a minuscule but absolutely essential displacement, which toppled the whole of Western thought.”<sup>35</sup>

An exemplary demonstration of the effects of this displacement is *Letters from an Exile at Botany-Bay*, a small publication written in 1794 by Australia’s first professional painter, Thomas Watling, a Scotsman transported for forgery.<sup>36</sup> Watling himself called his publication “this heterogeneous and deranged performance” and warned his readership, “Not however expecting connection, you must just accept of each wild idea as it presents itself.” Throughout his essay, Watling complains of the difficulty of representing, whether by word or image, the unfamiliar and untrustworthy characteristics of the new landscape to which he

had been exiled. His own derangement appears to be a direct consequence of the strangeness of his perceptions (viewer, viewed, and viewing have become as if one): “Whatever flows from my pen, or is laboured by my pencil, affects, in some degree, the tone of mind that possess [*sic*] me at the period of its production.” As a consequence, it is his surprise at, and uncertainty about, the veracity of his own observations of nature that are the most striking sentiments to be found in his discourse. As Watling laments, “Never did I find language so imperfect as at present.”

In an elegant reading of Watling’s publication, Ross Gibson points not only to the author’s declared hesitations but also to the text’s “uneven” quality as “an unruly and confused dissertation” and to its “enunciative fitfulness.” Significantly, Gibson puts this fitfulness down not to incompetence, but to “the pressures that prevailed upon a creative subject attempting to ‘methodise’ experience at the time of white Australia’s inauguration.” As Gibson points out, the effects of this pressure are inscribed in the very rhetorical figurations adopted by Watling’s prose: “From start to finish a kind of alternating current runs through *Letters*, coursing back and forth between the one pole of expressionist subjectivity and the other of scientific objectivity, between the linguistic figures of metaphor and metonym. . . . His persona thus becomes traumatised; he becomes an effect of his own authorial dilemma.”<sup>37</sup> Gibson sees this authorial dilemma—a dilemma apparently involving Watling’s very subjectivity—as arising on the one hand from the convict’s need to negotiate “an aesthetic crisis that was also inherently theological” and, on the other hand, “as a symptom of the upheaval that was occurring in the history of Western ideas at the end of the eighteenth century.” What makes this example so useful is that Watling’s text encompasses not only a questioning of representation and the objects posited in it, but also of his culture’s prevailing orders of knowledge and subjectivity.

So what do we make of the latent desire that in 1839 will come to be called by the name photography? For contemporary historians informed by psychoanalysis, any pursuit of a desire to photograph “pushes the invention of photography back beyond the nineteenth century,” locating it instead within a conveniently universal narrative about the human subject’s need to protect itself “against the loss of the object [i.e., the always absent real object of desire], and the loss of identity.”<sup>38</sup> Desire, according to this model, is produced in the gap between need and demand. But this kind of explanation, with its continuing emphasis on the



tranhistorical constitution of the *individual* human subject, seems unable to account for the specificity of either the timing or the morphology of the generalized photographic desire described here. Even if we accept that photography operates as yet another process of substitution for a lack, we are still left wondering why it should be this solution, and not some other, that arises around 1800, and not some other time, to fill what is supposed to be a perennial gap in our subjectivity. Psychoanalysis, in other words, seems unable to account for either cultural specificity or historical change.

This is no doubt why Foucault speaks of the profound transformations he sees as taking place around 1800 (“something which is undeniable, once one has looked at the texts with sufficient attention”),<sup>39</sup> not as a matter of individual or even collective desire but as a “*positive unconscious* of knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> As he puts it, “My problem was to ascertain the sets of transformations in the regime of discourses necessary and sufficient for people to use these words rather than those, a particular type of discourse rather than some other type, for people to be able to look at things from such and such an angle and not some other one.”<sup>41</sup> Foucault goes on to make it clear in his later books that any regimentation of what can and cannot be thought at a particular moment in history is as much a question of power as it is of knowledge. Indeed his concept of a “positive unconscious” is soon replaced, via Nietzsche, by the phrase “will to power,” and it is in these terms that he subsequently investigates the emergence of a variety of heterogeneous conceptual and social apparatuses around the turn of the nineteenth century: “I understand by the term ‘apparatus’ a sort of—shall we say—formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. . . . The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge.”<sup>42</sup>

During his investigations Foucault notices that a “strange empirico-transcendental doublet . . . which was called *man*,” “a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible,” is produced as an integral, indeed necessary, component within each of these apparatuses.<sup>43</sup> This being is, he says, a completely new development, “an invention of recent date . . . a figure not yet two centuries old.”<sup>44</sup> Like the viewer

inscribed by and within the gaze of photography, Foucault's "man" "appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows."<sup>45</sup> Foucault's discussion of the panopticon, that now notorious system of incarceration proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, refigures the emergence of this modern subject in explicitly political terms. For the panopticon is an apparatus that, like photography and as the word's French appellation suggests (*appareil*: apparatus, camera), operates according to a certain system of relations between a light source, a focusing cell, and a directed looking. According to Foucault, it is this same system of relations that extends throughout modern society as "an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism.'"<sup>46</sup>

Foucault's emphasis on the workings of the panopticon has frequently been misread as a description of a static, spatial structure designed to allow an oppressive surveillance of those without power by those who have it. In fact, Foucault is putting an argument that is far more complex than this. His interest is in developing a notion of power as something no longer only possessed and exercised by others. Rather, he proposes power as a productive and interconnected field of forces that creates the conditions of possibility for both pleasure and its repression. We are all complicit in the political economy of this field. To that end, he reiterates Bentham's own point that as the prisoner never knows when he is actually being watched, he must assume that it is always so; thus he necessarily surveys and disciplines himself. As far as the exercise of power is concerned, the prisoner is always caught in an uncertain space of hesitation between tower and cell. He is both the prisoner and the one who imprisons; like the protophotographers, he finds himself to be both the subject and the object of his own gaze. "He inscribes in himself the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."<sup>47</sup> The panopticon is, in other words, a productive exercise of subject formation operating such that its participants "are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation."<sup>48</sup> Thus Foucault reads panopticism's reverberating economy of gazes as constituting each of its contributors as a self-reflexive doublet—as both the subject and object, effect and articulation of a netlike exercise of disciplinary power.

We might read photography in similar terms. As we have seen, the desire to photograph is expressed by its pioneers in circular and contradictory terms that are remarkably reminiscent of Foucault's account of panopticism. Think again of the palimpsestic

inscription/erasure of viewer, viewed, and act of viewing that we find enacted in Talbot's early window pictures—or of the first attempts to describe photo-desire, so fraught with problems of nomenclature and articulation, problems that are themselves suggestive of an unresolved philosophical uncertainty. Each of these descriptions maintains a reflexive movement within its rhetoric that comes to rest at neither of the two possible poles (invariably nature and culture or their equivalents) that present themselves. By the early years of the nineteenth century, intellectuals across Europe and its colonies have begun to question the presumed separation of observer and observed, locating all acts of seeing in a contingent and subjective human body. The observer is no longer imagined to be the passive and transparent conduit of God's own eye but now is regarded as someone who actively produces what is seen (and if how one sees determines what one sees, then everyone must be seeing a little differently).<sup>49</sup> To represent this new understanding of the viewing subject, artists and poets had to conceive, as Coleridge put it, “a self-conscious looking-glass” or even “two such looking-glasses fronting, each seeing the other in itself and itself in the other.”<sup>50</sup> The camera obscura alone could no longer fulfill this radical new worldview. What had to be invented instead was an apparatus of seeing that involved both reflection and projection, that was simultaneously active and passive in the way it represented things, that incorporated into its very mode of being the subject seeing and the object being seen. This apparatus was photography.

We are given a sense here of the desire to photograph as something appearing on the cusp of two eras and two different worldviews, something uncomfortably caught within the violent inscription of our modern era over and through the remnants of the Enlightenment. It is surely this palpable sense of not being completely in one or the other that motivates the frustrations voiced by Watling, Gilpin, Coleridge, Constable, and the protophotographers. Some historians have tried to argue that photography was in fact a conceptual effort to reconcile these tensions—to resolve prevailing representational uncertainties and provide a positivist confirmation of an objective and discrete outside reality. Strangely, this desire for a positivist certainty is again absent from the discourse produced by the protophotographers (although it certainly appears as a dominant concern among commentators in midcentury and beyond). Consider again the concept-metaphor that the protophotographers conjure up to relieve their frustration: a mode of representation that is simultaneously fixed and transitory, that draws nature while allowing it to draw itself, that both reflects and constitutes its

object, that partakes equally of the realms of nature and culture.<sup>51</sup> It would seem that the desire to photograph is here being projected—as its own nomenclature will later confirm (*photography*: light writing, light writing itself)—in terms of a will to power that is able to write itself even as it is written.<sup>52</sup> Situated within a general epistemological crisis that has made the relationship between nature and its representations a momentarily uncertain one, photography is conceived in these first imaginings as something that is neither one nor the other, being a parasitical spacing that encompasses and inhabits both.

The desire to photograph would therefore seem, at its inception at least, to involve a reproduction of that same empirico-transcendental economy of power-knowledge-subject that has made its own conception possible. This is a process of reproduction that does not operate only at the level of ideology (the “idea” of photography). Nor are its effects confined to the finished photograph and those depicted in it. For the discourse of photo-desire confirms that we must, as Foucault puts it, “grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects,” and this includes the photographer as much as the photographed.<sup>53</sup> Consider for a moment how the photographer, for whom the camera is, as Niépce put it, “a kind of artificial eye,” is constituted by photography as the prosthetic trope around and through which the complicitous economy of photo-desire necessarily turns.<sup>54</sup> This conjunction of photographer, image, and camera produces more than just a surface reorganization of power; it is productive of a total symbiotic assemblage such that “power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth.”<sup>55</sup> To put this Foucaultian proposition simply, if photography is a mapping of bodies in time and space, then it is also a production of both those bodies and modernity’s particular conception of the time-space continuum.

There may be a danger in following too slavishly the historical path traced here—a danger that one might end up having merely constructed a new beginning, a beginning seemingly more pure and essential, more true to photography’s “original identity,” than that provided by the account it seeks to displace. However, the greater danger is in assuming that the question of origins, a question one cannot escape even if one would want to, is ever anything *but* dangerous. By shifting the focus of the question from a singular moment of invention to the general appearance of a certain desiring production coinciding with the advent of modernity, photography’s emergence is at least made an inescapably political issue. The writing of its history must henceforth address itself not just to developments in optics,

chemistry, and individual creativity, but to the appearance of a peculiarly modern inflection of power, knowledge, and subject, for this inflection inhabits in all its complexities the very grain of photography's existence as an event in our culture. Thus, a beginning that was once thought to be fixed and dependable is now revealed as a problematic field of mutable historical differences. That is not a bad ending from which to begin again. To give Foucault the last word, "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."<sup>56</sup>

This essay is a revised version of "Desiring Production Itself: Notes on the Invention of Photography," in Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell, eds., *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 13–26. Some of its elements have also appeared in *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); "Burning with Desire: The Birth and Death of Photography," *Afterimage* 17:6 (January 1990), 8–11; "Orders Profoundly Altered: Photography and Photographies," *West* 1:1 (University of Western Sydney, 1989), 18–21; and "Photography's Haunts," in Stephen Foster, ed., *The Masque*, exhibition catalogue (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2000), commissioned.

