

Lesson Nine

Truth

Patrick Nagatani tells all his new photography students at the University of New Mexico “All photographs lie.” To many this is a shocking and inflammatory statement. What do you mean, all photographs lie? Isn’t photography considered a way to record reality? Photographs are used as evidence in court cases. We are all familiar with the phrase “a photo doesn’t lie.” What about a photo finish in horse racing? Photographs document history, show us the way things were, tell us what happened when we weren’t there.

But we are also familiar with this comment, often uttered after picking up photos at the one hour, or printing them out from our computers: “It didn’t look like that.” or “the water was greener than that, the sky was bluer than that.” We are also familiar with the concept of photo manipulation (which has existed since the invention of photography), both the 21st century digital style and the older hand manipulated style that is often associated with political propaganda.

Throughout this series of lessons we have discussed the issue of subjectivity in photography. Because every photograph is taken by a person, his or her personal biases are reflected in his or her photographs. Objectivity in photography is a rare, almost impossible thing, even though many photographers would argue they are objective.

If you take 12 people and have them photograph the same scene at the same time the result is 12 different photos of the same place. They will differ in viewpoint, framing, subject matter included or left out, color or black and white, film or digital, format size, etc. In the Malheur 2003 photo exhibit, each of the 12 workshop participants submitted a photo of the Blitzen River in the Malheur



Patrick Nagatani. Kweo/Wolf Kachina, United Nuclear Corporation Uranium Tailings Spill, North Fork of Rio Puerco, Near Gallup, New Mexico. 1989.

National Wildlife refuge. Each photo is different, at times quite radically, from one another. Yet they were all taken at the same place at the same time.

What does this all have to do with lying, as Nagatani implies in his statement? Am I lying about what I see when I take a photograph? Sometimes, yes. The subjective nature of photographs allows photographs to “lie.” But first let’s talk about the concept of reality.

Reality, really?

In our postmodern world the concept of reality has become quite flexible. To put it another way, humans have become more aware that there are different points of view. The concept of physical relativity also applies to the psychological relativity humans experience in everyday interaction. Each person’s reality is relative to their personal and cultural mentality. We discussed this in terms of how people read and react differently to photographs in Lesson Six. We also discussed how memory and psychological associations affect the way we take photographs. Everyone sees the world a little differently (for both physical and psychological reasons). Everyone’s personal reality is slightly different. I can say this today and not startle too many people, though I may have been burned at the stake for it during the Grand Inquisition of the 1500’s. Luckily things change.

The following ideas about truth echo some of the underlying sentiments behind Nagatani’s statement:

- 1) There is no ultimate truth, so each photograph we make lies in its implication that photographs do tell the truth. (If you didn’t notice that statement is a complicated double negative.)
- 2) There is an ultimate truth that we cannot perceive, thus to think photographs show the truth is a big lie (based on Plato).

More directly associated with the nature of photographic representation comes these ideas about truth:

- 3) There are factors that influence the way a photograph is made (such as choices of the photographer, or surrounding physical and cultural context) that the viewer will never see or understand. Those influential factors are unique to specific situation and time and cannot represent larger visual truth about that place.
- 4) The mechanical documentation of a place and the subsequent reproduction of a photographic print inherently change and diminish the original “aura”

of the place (read as truth value). (Benjamin 1936)

5) Photographs are a surrogate for reality. (Sontag 1977)

Likeness

Photography falls under the same conceptual “rules” as other forms of representation. A process of translation occurs through the act of representing an actual subject. David Hulse states there is always a “gap” between the place being represented and the representation itself. The product of representation is not the thing itself, but rather a *likeness* created by someone. Photography is thought of as truth telling because it is a product of representation, the photograph, is so realistic *looking*. But that doesn’t mean it is truthful. Realistic does not equal truthful. Realistic implies *like* something, not *the* something. The use of “like” in the English language implies metaphor or simile -- something interpreting or representing something else.

Let’s take for instance this sentence: My cat is like a tiger. We all know, however, that my house cat can’t be a tiger. My apartment is simply too small. But she does look like a tiger with her tabby stripes and her wild ways. The picture here looks like my tiger like cat, but the image is not my cat, it is an image *of* my cat. Coincidentally, it could also be a picture of another tiger like cat in the neighborhood who is often mistaken for my cat. Someone else in my neighborhood might look at this picture and think it was my neighbor’s cat, not



Photographs of beautiful landscapes can be deceptively transparent, encouraging viewers to relate to the inviting scene and treat the photograph as a surrogate for the experience of nature without being fully aware of the photographer’s transformative and interpretive role. One of the attractions of photography, from its introduction in 1839, has been its uncannily convincing realism that almost magically transports viewers to remote landscapes they might otherwise never experience.

Thomas W. Southhall. “Where We Stand.”
The Altered Landscape. 1999.

Anne Godfrey. Bailey the Tiger. 2001.

mine. She might be totally convinced, but she would be wrong. She is fooled by the photograph because it *looks like*, but not *is*.

Another example along these lines is Rene Magritte's painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe) from *The Betrayal of Images*, which strikes at the heart of this issue of representation. Magritte paints a pipe. He does not make a pipe, he simply makes a picture of a pipe with paint brushes and oils. We don't know what the actual pipe really looks like and in fact there may not even be an actual pipe. It may simply be a product of Magritte's imagination. This process of picture making does not yield the embodiment of the subject matter, instead these pictures are *representations* of the actual thing.



Rene Magritte. *The Betrayal of Images*. 1928-29.

Photography fools us because it does look so real. As a casual viewer we are seduced into the idea that photographs show reality and the truth. We have been conditioned to think that any photographic representation must show the truth. Optically, modern day photographs look like the way humans have been conditioned to see the world. Because of this factor we often assume photographs depict the truth.

In 1839, truth was not assumed in photographs, rather quite the opposite, photography was unbelievable. The idea that a mechanical device could record a fairly good likeness of a person or a landscape was magical. To stare back at yourself staring back at yourself in a photograph was conceptually mind-bending. The mirror was the only other man-made device that could do this. But in photographs you saw how you looked to others, not the inverse reflection of yourself. Moreover, a photograph was far more permanent than a reflection. No wonder certain cultures and religions developed the idea that a camera could steal the soul.

The assumption of truth in photographs developed with the use of photography as a scientific recording device. One of the many ways photography is used by science is as a way to measure movement. Eadweard Muybridge created a whole catalog of photographic movement studies. His most famous set finally proved the theory that all four legs of a horse did leave the ground when in a full gallop (*Galloping Horse*, 1878). The use of photography in science, combined with the improvements in film and printing techniques to produce optically realistic images, led to the general assumption that photography presented the truth.

Lies (or just fooling around)

Beyond the conceptual notions of representation, reality and truth, we must understand that photography is just as malleable a form of representation as painting or drawing. The methods of this manipulation just aren't as accessible or obvious to the everyday camera user. To become critical viewers it is important to understand some of the basic methods of photographic manipulation. The following discussions present a set of photographers who rely upon the flexibility photography offers in creating visual representations.

Pictorialism and Emerson

Pictorialism, a photographic style gaining popularity in the 1880's, used painting techniques to manipulate photo plates and negatives. At times soft focus was used to give the photographs a deeper sense of atmosphere. This was most common in portrait work but also was applied to landscapes. The goal of the pictorialists, lead by Peter Henry Emerson and his work *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (1889), was to transcend the notion of photographic objectivity and ask the photographer to create psychological impressions of the subject with the camera, instead of trying to slavishly produce literal (or truthful) representations. His most controversial observation was that human vision does not function like the camera lens. Human vision selectively focuses on particular objects, constantly moving, but never fully focusing on a full scene, while the camera lens has the mechanical ability to bring everything within the frame into full focus. Cezanne also developed a similar theory, observing that the eye is always shifting and thus shifting how an object looks to the observer. (These ideas later lead to the Cubist movement in painting.) These concepts, from the early days of photography (1880's-1890's) question the notion of "truth" in photography.

Emerson had begun to question the verisimilitude of photography by separating scientific truth from artistic truth. He noted that the photographers should be faithful not to objective, scientific facts, but to the appearance of reality. By the late 1890's however, truth in pictorial photography was understood to be not a fixed or quantifiable entity, but something relative and subjective; it was defined [by Dallett Fuguet] as "the verification of all things through human consciousness, and their statement through human feeling" (1900). As truth took a secondary role to the expression of personal sentiment, photographs could no longer be accepted as a priori statements of visual facts.

Sara Greenough. "The Curious Contagion of the Camera." *The Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*. 1989.

Edward Steichen. The Pond, Moonrise. 1903



Adams and Straight Photography

straight photography: *photographic style that accentuates the documentary qualities inherent in the photographic process of image making. Straight photography is a Modernist movement that is a direct reaction against Pictorialism. Well known straight photographers are Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Much of the photography we view today is straight photography.*

Ansel Adams, considered the master of **straight photography**, used a very measured and methodical system of light manipulation to produce his beautiful prints. Straight photography was a direct reaction against pictorialism. The straight photographers chose to work within the limits of the camera device, valued full focus prints and shunned the idea of physically manipulating or marking on a print or negative. But straight photography still utilized the basic methods of light manipulation in the darkroom. Through various and simple methods of shielding, focusing or filtering light on particular parts of a print, the photographer can manipulate the lightness, darkness and tonality of particular sections of a print or the whole print. Adams developed the Zone System as a measured and predictable way of manipulating light for these purposes.

Even though this genre of photography calls itself straight, it in no way means that a straight unmanipulated print is made from a negative that is taken with unfiltered light. Adams' straight photographs do not represent the human optical reality of the place. Instead the prints are idealized interpretations by the photographer based on his personal vision.

Ansel Adams. Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California. 1944.



A pivotal moment in Adams's work occurred at Yosemite while photographing Half Dome. Viewing the scene he realized he wanted more contrast in the negative than the scene would present to an unfiltered lens. Adams fitted the lens of his large format camera with a red filter. This red filter increased the tonal contrast recorded by the lens onto the film. As a result the recorded landscape was not as it was seen by Adams' naked eye, but as he imagined it would be seen with the filtered light. The result is the striking "Monolith, the Face of Half Dome."

Adams created similar monumental prints through the use of his red filter and light manipulation in the dark room. "Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada" and "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico" bear the telltale signs of **dodging** and **burning** techniques. The ridgeline in "Winter Sunrise" has been darkened (through burning) to create a sharp line against the snow covered mountains. The sunlight falling on the horse and trees may have been lightened (or dodged) just a bit to really make the photo sing with light. Through these methods Adams made beautiful, inspiring photographs. It is important for a critical viewer of these photographs to understand Adams's methods and how they influence the emotional impact of his work. These photographs are not the way these places look to the average visitor, but are idealizations created by Adams' personal vision and methods.

Man Ray and Surrealism

Man Ray, especially with his photograms (or self-proclaimed Rayograms), pushed the concepts of photo manipulation by looking at how the photographic process created pure form. As a active member in Surrealist and Dadaist societies in the 1920's-1940's Man Ray used photography as a way to explore the conceptual theories of these two movements. His Rayograms relegate the actual subject to a secondary level and focus on the plasticity of the subject's form through the manipulation of light. Photograms are created by placing photographic paper under an enlarger, placing objects on the paper and then exposing the paper and objects to light. The patterns in the Rayograms result from the objects shielding the paper from the light. Sometimes we can identify these objects based on these shapes, while other times the combination of objects obscures any identifiable qualities, creating a photograph that is a unique creation of its own reality. Man Ray explains how this this process effects

dodging: *shielding light from a particular area while exposing a negative to a light-sensitive photo paper or plate. This causes that area to appear lighter in tone.*

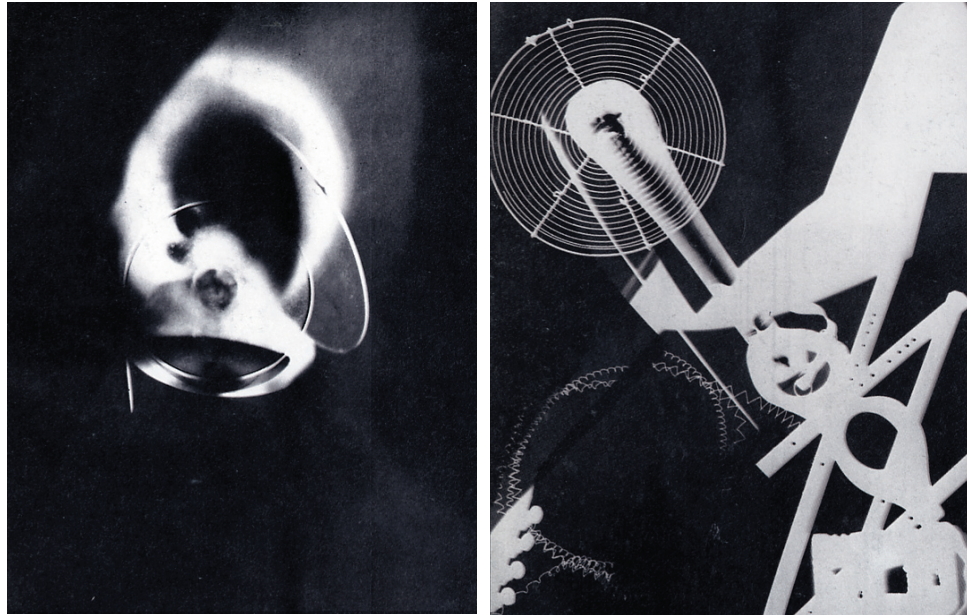
burning: *exposing light to a particular area for a longer amount of time when printing on light-sensitive paper or plates. This causes the area to appear darker in tone. Burning is the opposite of dodging.*

Man Ray. Rayograph. 1926.



The photographer, in order to discover the unknown in everyday objects, chooses the most unexpected, which is also, as so often, the simplest means: separating the object from the world, he considers only the object itself. This is the true role of photography: To isolate things so as to render that which is familiar, strange.

Pierre Bost. *Photographies modernes*. 1930.



Man Ray. Rayographs. 1922 & 1926.

form in 1934 for the Preface of a retrospective, *Man Ray Photographs 1920-34*: “Working directly with light and chemistry, so deforms the subject as almost to hide the identity of the original, and creates a new form.”

Uelsmann and constructed images

Imagination and personal vision are at the creative core of Jerry Uelsmann’s work. Though most photographers would say this is true for their work, Uelsmann brings the magical limitless quality of his imagination to the visual surface of his prints. His constructed images, made of multiple negatives through a methodical and painstaking printing process, create new worlds from pieces of our everyday life. His seamless constructions lure the viewer into half-believing these places could be real.

Uelsmann applies basic printing practices, such as masking, dogging, and vineg burning to create these images. They are not computer generated, and only use the manipulation of light to alter their tonal values and transparency. Uelsmann uses the same printing techniques used by Adams, Emerson and every other photographer who prints his or her own work. Uelsmann’s imagination and emotional reaction to his printing experiments yields a process of making that transcends our sense of reality; transcends any expectations for photographic reality. Uelsmann states in the first sentence of *Process and Perception*: “For me the darkroom functions as a visual research laboratory” (1985).

Uelsmann is aided by photography’s reputation as an unbiased recorder of reality; so, even though his photographs represent a meticulous distortion of ordinary reality, they still carry the impact of reality . . .

John Ames. “Recollections.” *Uelsmann: Process and Perception*. 1985.

What makes Uelsmann's work outstanding is his facility with the basic formal issues of photography, especially atmosphere. His film exposures are perfect and his sense of luminosity in the printing process makes his prints glow. Through years of experience he has learned to make the camera, enlarger and developing process work for him and help him create his vision. He has full control of the technical aspects while letting experimentation and inspiration guide his image making process.



Jerry Uelsmann. 1983.

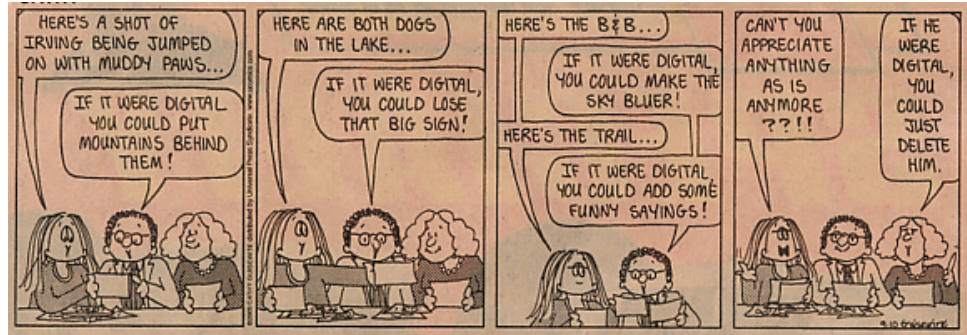
When I look at my contact sheets I try to find clues to things that may work, clipping possible combinations together as I flounder. I sometimes make little sketches and then begin by trying to build the images that was initially perceived at the point of making the sketch. When I get an idea for a variation, at any point in the process, I usually change direction and try the new ideas. I believe that almost anything you can think of is worth trying. It is difficult to make a qualitative judgment in the initial stages of the creative process.

Jerry Uelsmann. "Techniques." *Uelsmann: Process and Perception*. 1985.

Digital photography

Today, in the 21st century, digital photography demands a whole new conversation about what photography is. The history of film photography has been predicated on the recording of the actual with drastic manipulation of the photo as an exception to the rule. With digital photography manipulation is the rule instead of the exception. The introduction of Adobe Photoshop in the early 1990's to the mass market made photo manipulation available and easy for anyone who owned a computer. Now virtually anyone can edit out undesirable objects in a photograph (power lines, accidental fingers in front of the lens, ex-boyfriends) and edit in desirable ones (beautiful sunset, bluer ocean, Johnny Depp's arm around you).

Cathy. Spetember 10, 2003.



Because digital photography is based on the recording of data that exists in a virtual environment, not physical tangible shape and form, that data can be reorganized and altered extensively based simply on the whim and expertise of the photo manipulator. As the technology and the people using it become more advanced it is becoming harder and harder to tell if a digital photograph has been altered. Now more than ever it is important for us to understand why photography makes us assume the real when it is truly a representational manipulation of the real.

As landscape architects we have the training to closely examine photographs and question if they are manipulated or not. Part of our job is to literally read the land. We can look at light source and shadow, climatic and seasonal indicators and see if there are any hints of alteration. We can look more closely and think longer about what is presented in photographs.

To assume a photographic image is an unmanipulated documentation of the real is no longer a safe conceptual platform from which to view and critique photographs. The most recent and startling example is a photograph supposedly

Anonymous. Tourist Guy. 2001.



taken from the World Trade Center's second tower on the morning of September 11, 2001. The photo showed up on the internet a few days later and convinced thousands that it was a truthful documentation of this horrific event. On closer inspection many flaws in this photograph reveal its inauthenticity. First, the plane is not the same model as the one that impacted the tower. Second, the view from the tower in the photograph is from the first tower, not the second. Third, the light and shadows do not seem right for that time of day at that time of year. Fourth, the observation deck isn't open that

early in the morning. And the list goes on and on. Why were so many people so easily duped? Mostly because we all so easily accept a photograph, especially a snapshot, as a truthful record of an event. We take it at its face value, literally, and do not critically think about what we are actually seeing.

Truth and landscape architecture

Why is it important for landscape architects to ponder truth and photography? It all comes back to how photography influences and informs our work. Remember, we learn about and document our designs and landscapes photographically. We present ideas to others through photographs (both manipulated and not). The history of our profession is recorded photographically - from the Court of the Lions to the Getty Center. All of these photographic representations control the way we perceive these places. Most of us will never visit all of the major works in landscape architecture, so we must rely on others to present them to us through photographs.

This is where we get into trouble, and this is why we must think about photography like we think about any other form of representation. Photography can give us a false impression of a place. A photographer can manipulate our experience of a place through his manipulation of all of the formal qualities of photography (frame, composition, viewpoint, atmosphere, time).

Alan Ward speaks to this issue in "On the Making of Icons." I assign this as the first reading of the class and revisit it here because it is so relevant. Ward discusses the power of photography in representing a place and making it an icon. The best, most well-orchestrated qualities of a place are often amplified by the photographer's choices. In this process the less successful qualities of a place can be edited out and left out of its photographic history. Places like Dan Kiley's Miller House or Hargraeve's Crissy Field are icons frozen in time by the camera. We are shown the best places and angles of view in the photographs. But we don't see what doesn't work. We don't see overgrown sickly trees at the Miller House, and we don't see the dysfunctional wetland at Crissy Field. We don't see the passage of time and we don't see how use degrades or alters these places. The photographs, taken at the prime of these places' lives, are iconographic objects quite separate from the everyday flow of life in these landscapes.

Landscape architects rely on photo manipulation techniques to display their designs. Sometimes these photo manipulations are so meticulous it takes close

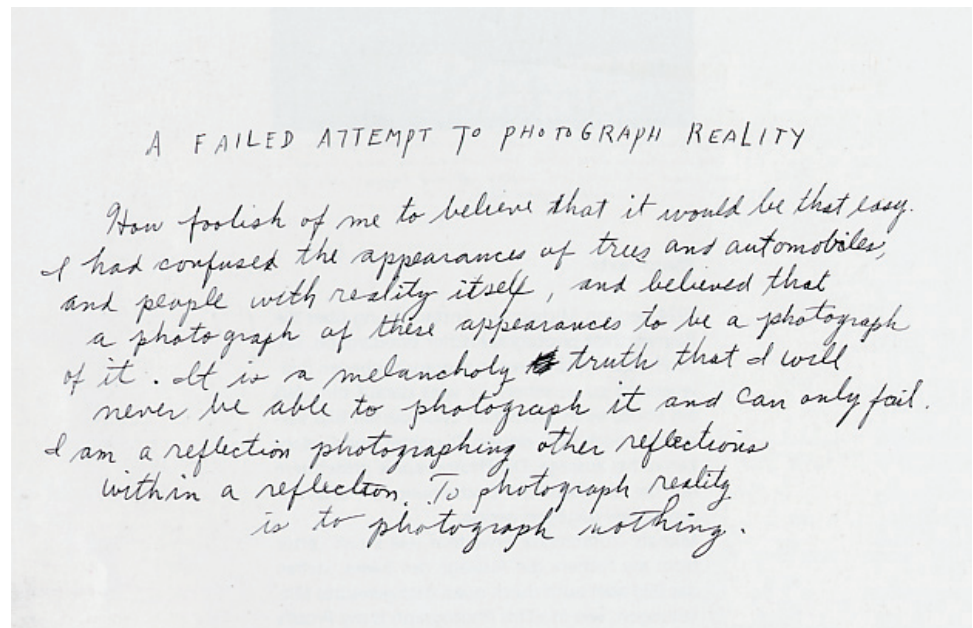
...while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph."
Lewis Hine. "Social Photography." 1980.

inspection to realize it is a constructed fiction that doesn't exist. Our use of photo manipulation -- possibly making our designs look better than they can be -- can falsely represent our intentions or abilities through fantastic representations. Photo manipulation, because it plays on the casual viewer's assumption that photography represents the real, can give a false impression of the design's potential more than any idealized drawing.

This is not to say that photo manipulation should not be used to present design ideas and proposals. Instead we must keenly be aware of the power these representations have over the viewer. We must take more responsibility in making sure 1) that it is clear that these are photo manipulations or simulations and 2) that we do not misrepresent what is possible.

The Life Long Assignment for Truth

Use everything you have learned in these lessons to be critical of how photography is used to represent a place, a thing, a person, an idea. Remember that photography can manipulate reality and is just as malleable as drawing, painting or sculpture. Photography is yet another tool humans use to articulate opinions, desires, experiences, values and feelings. A photograph is always reliant on the person who made it. Even though photography is a mechanical means of recording, photographs and the camera are not independent from the biases of the user.



Duane Michals. A failed attempt to photograph reality. 1975.

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Plato. The Cave.