



After Photography
FRED RITCHIN



FRED RITCHIN **After Photography**

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To Carole, Ariel, Ezra



FIG. 1: Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, *Sunbathers*, 2000.

The artists are investigating the capacity of living grass to record complex photographic images through the production of chlorophyll. Genetics researchers developed a grass that keeps its green color longer, allowing the artists to maintain the visibility of the image over a longer period of time as the grass dries.

Preface

We have entered the digital age. And the digital age has entered us. We are no longer the same people we once were. For better and for worse.

We no longer think, talk, read, listen, see the same way. Nor do we write, photograph, or even make love the same way.

It is inevitable. The changes in media, especially media as pervasive as the digital, require that we live differently, with shifting perceptions and expectations.

Our cosmos is different, as is our sense of time. Our sense of community is different, as is our sense of ourselves. Rendered virtual, we have become the stuff of our own dreams.

If the world is mediated differently, then the world is different.

MySpace, YouTube. Second Life. All are welcome.

It's 8:17 now. Not a quarter past eight. Not a little past the first light. We live in the abstracted integers of the digital age.

Marshall McLuhan once remarked: "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water"—they do not know that the water is wet because they have no experience of dry. Once immersed in the media, despite all its images and sounds and words, how can we know what it is doing to us?

From television we now know that war can be entertainment, and that stardom is worth almost anything, no matter how humiliating. Most of all, we know that an alternate world can be put onto a screen. And it wants us to reside there.

We are not so much traveling as emigrating.

The planet once was thought of as flat, but Columbus did not fall off. Now the world is flat again, on the television screen, or the computer screen—except that we do not fall off: we enter it, and it enters us. We become "users," and it uses us. Meanwhile, our world, or what is now called RL (real life), is reduced to a reference point.

We cannot be living through a revolution in media and expect it to be primarily a revolution in shopping, mistaking the new hardware and soft-

ware for the new world. This revolution, despite all the hype, is still largely invisible (Gil Scott-Heron was right—the “revolution will not be televised.”). But it’s already in our heads, our bodies, and soon will be in our hearts. Some of it, I hope, is in this book—linear, analog, and palpable.

For those who do not think that the melting of Antarctica is important, or the disappearance of some 25 percent of animal and plant species by 2050, or the genetic manipulation of our food supply and of our children, or the accelerating violence and abject poverty that have become a global terror and despair, this book can be read as a speculation on change that may have limited use when applied to the stock market or to inventing a Hollywood blockbuster. For those, however, who are attentive to the emerging and potential catastrophes on our planet, this book offers ways of thinking about photography and allied media that may enlarge our capacity to explore and perhaps even ameliorate a fragile universe.

This book makes no attempt at prophecy. It is rather an attempt to acknowledge the rapidly evolving present for what it is and what it might become, while engaging one of the less violent strategies for social change still extant: media.

Simultaneously, it considers how at very fundamental levels our media, in the digital environment, will profoundly and permanently change us—our worldview, our concept of soul and art, our sense of possibility. We are busily reinventing media under the guise of what is essentially a marketing term, the “digital revolution,” not daring to admit, in these perilous times, that what we are really reinventing is ourselves.

From digital images to mobile phones to the World Wide Web, media have become, in their easy transcendence of previous limitations of time and space, nearly messianic for us. They replace and sublimate RL with VR (virtual reality) while waiting for AI (artificial intelligence) to maximize its potentials. (Acronyms, like those of global corporations, are both easily digestible and effective disguises.) In the interim, we are deluged by torrents of imagery that enable “branding,” transforming objects into desire, and creating a map of the world that refers increasingly to itself as it mutates into something self-serving and, at times, rapacious.

What paradise does the proliferation of new media promise us? Is a byte from an Apple better than it once was? Or will it too be met by a sudden expulsion?

Photography, freezing and slicing the visible into discrete chunks, has been a major player in a delineation of the real and, as numerous critics have asserted, in an insidious distortion of our vision of it. As one of the most universal of media, it is also an expansive filter through which to glimpse the transition from analog to digital. While the chasm rapidly widens between pre- and post-digital media—over 90 percent of cameras sold now are digital—some of their radically differing, and overlapping, assumptions on the nature of existence begin to emerge.

The history of media is not a linear narrative following a neat progression. It is a chaos of possibilities that emerge and recede, back up and move forward, crisscrossing one another. Each medium filters the world according to its own characteristics, so that essential ambiguities are lost in the overbearing vortex of message. In self-defense, all one can do is to look frenetically everywhere at once, hoping that being open to multiple perspectives, like a cubist, will allow an approximation of the essentials. Propitiously, digital media are particularly good at this.

If developed intelligently, the new imaging strategies that will emerge from the digital revolution can stimulate new approaches while transcending many of analog photography's limitations. The humanistic potentials for all emerging media need to be maximized thoughtfully and quickly, at the beginning of the digital transition, particularly considering the extensive efforts by commercial and governmental interests to exploit and tame emerging media for their own advantage.

These are not technologies that are out of reach of many in more affluent societies, as a printing press or a television broadcasting studio had been. For example, some 250 billion digital photos were made in 2007, and nearly a billion camera phones were said to be in use. A head of the global news agency Reuters, looking beyond its usual professional corps to solicit photos and videos from amateurs, asked, "What if everybody in the world were my stringers?" An unknown photographer, after only four hours of

work using software, created a short video of his self-portraits that has, as of this writing, attracted more than eight million viewers online.

The changes in scale are enormous. Web 2.0 and its offspring—what might be called Photography 2.0—acknowledge the massive amounts of input from anyone with access, not just a professional elite. The production of content and its publication are now considered to be the right of anyone technologically enabled, bypassing conventional editorial and curatorial filters. New software is being developed to take advantage of the vast numbers of photographs online that will allow the completion of a scene using other people's pictures or, even more ambitiously, 3-dimensional photographic fly-throughs of sites from throughout the planet.

But is this enormous expansion making the world a better place? Or are we becoming ever more submerged by information, opinion, and imagery, and increasingly narcissistic? And what of the billions with no access to such advanced technologies, and for whom physical survival is the predominant concern? Fewer than 4 percent of Africans are connected to the Web, for example.

At the moment there is less appreciation for the quiescent and barely liminal; the preference is for the incandescent and explicit. We appear to be on a mission to wallpaper our sightlines with deracinated images of so little value that they render us numb while simultaneously telling us that we can now see.

Although photography's evolution can be charted, analyzed, and discussed, the will to utilize such knowledge to devise new strategies of understanding, to select a better option from various looming futures, is always in short supply. Given the major dilemmas facing humanity and the planet, the harnessing of media to help us comprehend our transitional universe and to intervene in its evolution is less a luxury than an urgent requirement of citizenship. As photography is transformed into a variety of emergent media strategies and becomes partially integrated into an increasingly sophisticated multimedia, we should be looking to create more useful, exploratory images, not just the flamboyant, shocking ones.

The deconstruction offered by media analysis insists on the requisite reconstruction; otherwise, all is vanity.

In no way do I mean to downplay the digital divide; the exigencies of survival dwarf any extensive consideration of media for an enormous part of the planet's population. But in a morally responsive world those with greater material resources need to engage others in the necessary conversations as to how to use their wealth. How forcefully and profoundly these discussions are joined and shaped, including those on the future of media, will be significant in determining the destiny of our increasingly intertwined planet.

Whatever we eventually choose, the new media that will surface, with or without our intervention, will transform us. Why? Because that is what media do and because, whether we are aware of it or not, we want them to.

Just think: if we could have begun a similar conversation early on about the nascent technology of the automobile, the planet's oceans might not be warming, the seasons might not have become unmoored, and the world would not now be calling the sound of glaciers cracking and breaking "art."



FIG. 2 · *The Drummer*, 2004, by Loretta Lux.

I

Into the Digital

“But why not just kill the photo, there and then?”

“Because she might want to look at it again. Because it meant something to her. Something? A great deal? Everything?”

—Penelope Lively, *The Photograph* (2003)

Photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging, with an evolving medium hidden inside it as in a Trojan horse, camouflaged, for the moment, as if it were nearly identical: its doppelgänger, only better.

Like all media, photography is a reflection of the societies that have spawned and embraced it. It can also be a powerful instigator, in both obvious and highly subtle ways, for societal and personal change. The process is dialectical, evolutionary, and largely unconscious, opening new possibilities while others are defused.

Digital photography has been configured as a seamless, more efficient repetition of the past, easier to sell to the apprehensive consumer even as it is celebrated as part of the “digital revolution” (a term that has joined the lexicon of consumer branding). Its name is intended to express massive change while paradoxically citing a medium that dates from the mechanical age. A comforting ambiguity results that, not coincidentally, abnegates our own responsibility for what we have invented.

A string of misnomers is conceived to contextualize and undercut sensitivity to the actual revolution that is only alluded to by “digital.” We are given terms from nature and from the utilitarian everyday—apple, mouse, web, blackberry, windows, lap top, desk top, word, personal assistant, fire fox—to describe an environment that has, as of yet, no taste, no smell,¹ and where touch is reduced to clicking and typing and sight is continually framed by yet another rectangle.

What the metaphors also hide is the remarkable self-containment of this new technological universe. “The simulated desktop that the Macintosh

presented came to be far more than a user-friendly gimmick for marketing computers to the inexperienced,” wrote MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle in describing her surprise at getting her first Macintosh. “It also introduced a way of thinking that put a premium on surface manipulation and working in ignorance of the underlying mechanism. . . . With the Macintosh, personal computers began to present themselves as opposed and even hostile to the traditional modernist expectation that one could take a technology, open the hood, and see inside. The distinctiveness of the Macintosh was precisely that it did not encourage such fantasies; it made the computer screen a world unto itself.”

It is a world where the human often feels at a disadvantage, where the machine is considered smart and the human sometimes stupid. Banging the machine in frustration will accomplish nothing; it has better things in store for you. Or, as Umberto Eco noted of the Macintosh and what he characterized as its Catholic roots: “It is cheerful, friendly, conciliatory, it tells the faithful how they must proceed step by step to reach—if not the Kingdom of Heaven—the moment in which their document is printed. It is catechistic: the essence of revelation is dealt with via simple formulae and sumptuous icons. Everyone has a right to salvation.” (In a similar vein, Eco argued that MS-DOS could be seen as Protestant and Windows as representing an “Anglican-style schism.”)² The typewriter, considerably more transparent, made no such claims.

The computer also promises a secular *über*environment in which “reality is merely a convenient measure of complexity,” as Pixar’s Alvy Ray Smith once put it, to be simulated by computer graphics and ultimately transcended. Induced to sign on, to purchase hardware and software, we become “users,” a moniker embracing both computer devotees and drug addicts. (In Web statistics we are also known by the dubious but commercially valuable sobriquet “unique users.”)

The mimetic disguise of the computer, with its “paint” programs and Web “pages,” minimizes digital media’s profound departures from its predecessors. Based on distinct segments, calculated choices, binary strategies, and on bytes rather than atoms, digital media work off a representational model that, while able to simulate analog media, eventually will be more transformative than the perspectival changes of the Renaissance or the experimental arts of the past century. Digital media leverage abstraction, nonlinearity, asynchronicity, the dance of code over texture, multiple authors,

and most important the circumvention of nature as we have known it, while redefining space and time. It stimulates other logics and ultimately new philosophies of life, moving from the authority of the Newtonian to the probability of the quantum, and from the visualization of the phenotype to a preference for the coded genotype.

Digital media translate everything into data, waiting for an author or an audience (or a machine) to reconstitute it. Images can be output as music or music turned into text, or created by an algorithm, or transformed by an anonymous and far-flung chain of spectators. A synthesizer makes music that sounds almost like it's coming from a flute, but it can also combine the sounds of a frog and a goose, and add a random function that precipitates a mix to create the voices of new beings—the digital inhabits the land of in-between, and beyond. Similarly, a photograph may be considered a menu to be touched or clicked, or simulated (although the scene depicted may have never occurred, and possibly never could), or its o's and r's may be transmogrified into anything else at all.

Sections, segments, and steps are the stuff of the digital; analog media reference (are analogous to) continuity and flow. Digital involves coded signifiers, data that can be easily played with, abstracted from their source; analog emanates from wind and wood and trees, the world of the palpable. Digital is based on an architecture of infinitely repeatable abstractions in which the original and its copy are the same; analog ages and rots, diminishing over generations, changing its sound, its look, its smell. In the analog world the photograph of the photograph is always one generation removed, fuzzier, not the same; the digital copy of the digital photograph is indistinguishable so that “original” loses its meaning.

Like a novel, and our earthly lives, a vinyl record was created with the intention that it be experienced within the logic of a beginning proceeding to an end; a music CD or iPod is made to be resequenced, shuffled, and rethought. In digital media, nonlinear and interactive, no two people will necessarily read the same words in a book, listen to the same music, or experience a film or photo essay in the same sequence.

Cause and effect, even life and death, flicker nostalgically in the rearview mirror that is now the twentieth century. Immodestly, we envision the immortality of being able to give postmortem interviews or of composing while literally decomposing long after death.

When the world was created in seven days, as the story goes, the process did not begin on day four, rest on day seven, and then skip back to day two. Light was separated from darkness before the animals were created. But in the digital story of creation not only can the sequence be reshuffled at will, or randomly, the story can be cross-referenced, mutated, linked, laid over with numerous other media, responded to in “real time,” and evolved in an infinite number of ways that have little to do with an everyday sense of darkness, light, water or breath—or of a logical God. Creation is reconstituted, open for re-creation, linked, perhaps, to the speed of a butterfly’s wings over Hong Kong or to the score of a football game in São Paulo.

Similarly, a digital watch does not have hands mimicking the diurnal movements from light to darkness as the sun rises and sets (twilight is not a digital concept), but refers self-referentially to its own more abstracted world of integers. In the transition to the digital every creation is reconfigured, made more pliant, primed for human manipulation—potentially becoming the ultimate consumer choice.

Likewise, photography in the digital environment involves the reconfiguration of the image into a mosaic of millions of changeable pixels, not a continuous tone imprint of visible reality. Rather than a quote from appearances, it serves as an initial recording, a preliminary script, which may precede a quick and easy reshuffling. The digital photographer—and all who come after her—potentially plays a postmodern visual disc jockey.

At the next frontier, code triumphs over appearance. Phenotype, the stuff of photography, once trumped genotype (in the “image of God”). In the information age it is the DNA that has been crowned humanity’s essential arbiter. (What is the sex act if not an exchange of information?) One day soon we will ask of the image: “From where do those blue eyes come?” expecting that the answer will be conveyed in code.

Moreover, the photographic act, once requiring the presence of a seer and the seen, the distillation and creation of aura, the focus not only of lens but of one’s intuitive mind, evolves into one more quick and omnipresent communication strategy, casually enacted using telephones and personal digital assistants, Web cams and satellites. Added to a plethora of text messages and e-mails, it contributes mightily to a condition that former Microsoft executive Linda Stone called “continuous partial attention.” One may wonder about the dialectical role of attention deficit disorder and other

psychiatric maladies. To what extent are they symptoms, and to what extent do they cause some of the frenetic digital multitasking strategies?

“The great divide—between the reality of temporal and spatial distances and the distancing of various video-graphic and info-graphic representations—has ended,” wrote cultural theorist Paul Virilio in 1984. “The direct observation of visible phenomena gives way to a tele-observation in which the observer has no immediate contact with the observed reality.” Like the modern soldier, one eye on a small screen showing what is happening miles away, and the other concentrated on the battlefield just ahead, we too live in multiple spaces, talking to and seeing images from distant friends and acquaintances while walking down the street, the experiences merging.

Painting was posited to have preceded, inspired, and then been threatened by photography in the nineteenth century—the handmade versus the mechanical. In the twenty-first century photography of the digital kind—wired, instantaneous, automatic, malleable, a component of a larger multimedia—may eventually turn out to have a more distant relationship with the film-and-chemicals variety that came before it.

This is not to suggest that there has ever been only one kind of photography. Since early in its history there have been a whole slew of strategies, ranging from phantasmagoric “spirit” photography to the blandest mug shots. It has been used in a utilitarian way to document, in a transcendent way to create art, and as a vital hybrid of the two. Despite the variety of approaches, photography has achieved the paradoxical credibility of a subjective, interpretive medium that has simultaneously been deemed reliable and ultimately useful as a societal and personal arbiter.

Its perceived credibility, to whatever extent it exists, has been a useful function, especially as evidence of one sort or another. But its perceived credibility has also been purposefully misused to manipulate the public since the medium’s inception for political and commercial goals. The introduction of digital photography, noted for its nearly effortless malleability, provides a propitious moment to ask whether this evidentiary role can and should be retained, or even expanded. Certainly there is a substantial number of potential witnesses: by the year 2010 it is expected that we will be producing half-a-trillion photographs annually.

For those who think of digital media as simply providing more efficient tools, what we are witnessing today is an evolution in media. This is

the more reassuring, business-as-usual stance, probably held by the majority. For those who see the digital as comprising a markedly different environment than the analog, what we are currently observing is no less than a revolution. This latter view is considerably more accurate.

All emergent media borrow heavily from previous media at first, primarily because it takes time to summon the energy and imagination for a dramatic reinvention. (In 1964, McLuhan argued that “the content of any medium is another medium.”) Early film looked like theater depicted on a screen (see D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, for example). Early television looked like a visualization of radio with men in white shirts and ties, newly apparent to the public, reading the news from behind microphones. Early photography self-consciously and somewhat insecurely imitated the textures of painting, as in Pictorialism.

We should be suspicious of the easy melding of photography into digital photography, focusing on initial similarities. In a sense, it is somewhat like continuing to think of the automobile as a horseless carriage. Even now the speedy, multi-ton, climate-controlled, gas-guzzling vehicles dependent upon computer chips and equipped with GPS and ABS, DVD and MP3 are advertised as being run by a more naturalistic “horsepower” (one current commercial alludes to 263 horses). The metaphor of the horseless carriage, even a century later, manages to minimize the manifold ways in which the automobile long ago transcended its beginnings.

Horses kept things mostly local, constrained by the biological; automobiles, like cyborgs, did not. The paving of vast stretches encircling the planet, the growth of suburbs, as well as the displacement and degradation of the extended family can be attributed in considerable measure to the automobile. The proliferation of malls, countless deaths in high-speed accidents, and the enduring obsession with oil have little to do with horses. Would anyone have bothered to invade Iraq for hay? And whatever unpleasantness a horse leaves behind is trivial compared to the smog, lung diseases, and hugely destructive perils of climate change.

The automobile also eventually heightened our sense of control, and perhaps even more importantly our sense of entitlement. Enhanced expectations of power and of mobility came from the automobile and its motorized descendants—family, work, leisure, and war can all happen at a distance, day or night, and in all kinds of weather. A new 24/7 mobility over a vast

network of roads became the conceptual metaphor for what was earlier called the “information superhighway.” (Now it has been reformulated as the more centralized Web, like “horseless carriage” a more naturalistic reference, but one that also has overtones we choose to ignore of being captured and devoured.) The Internet can claim partial descent from a planetary road system, with the fantasy fulfillment of no stoplights, tolls, or gas pumps as people zip from one Web address to another.

Similarly, the mentality of automobile-obsessed cultures had earlier helped to spawn the rapid-fire, semiconscious zapping from one television channel to another (remote control in hand, we are always in the passing lane) and the joystick-controlled navigation of video games. At high speeds, the external world had become increasingly remote and inconsequential behind the windshield. Virtual reality could not be far behind.

Like the automobile, the photograph created new realities. Part of the problem in distinguishing them is realizing that for many of us the world is largely envisioned, even in the absence of a camera, as photographic.

“My view of the world was a photographic view, like I believe that it is for almost everybody, no?” sculptor Alberto Giacometti stated over forty years ago. “One never sees things, one always sees them through a screen.” The multitudes of photographers now intensely staring not at the surrounding world, nor at their loved ones being wed or graduating, but at their camera backs or cell phones searching for an image on the small screens, or summoning the past as an archival image on these same screens, is symptomatic of the image’s primacy over the existence it is supposed to depict. It is as if we have banished the actual experience and instead flattened it into a small rectangle, preferring its commodification as a picture show. It is not because it makes it more immediately “real” that we prefer the image, but because it makes it more unreal, an unreality in which we hope to find a transcendent immortality, a higher, less finite, reality.

We are also changed, turned into potential image. Even before the ubiquity of a billion cell phone cameras, we were already in rehearsal for the pose, the look, and a diminished sense of privacy. “In a YouTube world, one’s home is no longer one’s private retreat: it’s just a container for the webcam,” as the *New York Times* recently put it. Wars, sports events, weddings, graduations, and even funerals are staged. Advertisements promise a picture-perfect vacation. Actress Ellen Barkin complained, upon her separation from billion-

aire Ronald Perelman, that “You don’t spend years with someone and they’re just Photoshopped out of your life.”³ Young people are continually imaging and re-imaging themselves for a better MySpace or Facebook profile. One teenager described his date to me as being “sufficiently photogenic.”

Photographing well trumps a more ethereal beauty; a variegated existence is suppressed for an ever more exigent two-dimensional photographic currency. In his novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo limns the photographic disconnect as well as anyone has ever done:

Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides—pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

“No one sees the barn,” he said finally.

A long silence followed.

“Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.”

He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others.

“We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one.

Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies.”

There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.”

Another silence ensued.

“They are taking pictures of taking pictures,” he said.

He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film.

“What was the barn like before it was photographed?” he said. “What

did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now."

He seemed immensely pleased by this.

The aura DeLillo describes has, if anything, expanded, and photography's primary task has become not only to maintain the aura but also to enlarge it. When Susan Sontag wrote in the 1970s, "A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask," the "real" she was referring to was the scene itself, not its simulation.

Where then is the "real" now? Increasingly we are looking at photographs of the map that refers to no territory: the pictures of pictures, the photo opportunities in which politicians and celebrities have their managers stage a scene as if it had actually happened, the photo illustrations that magazines adroitly set up to prove a point, the advertisements for products too glossy to exist, the media filters that reduce life to a shorthand of shock and voyeurism. They are invariably done with a sense of superiority, as if by capturing the image we somehow own the experience. A 1990s Kodak advertising slogan, "Let the memories begin," became another ploy to obscure the repression of the present.

"Consider the United States, where everything is transformed into images; only images exist and are produced and are consumed," the French theorist Roland Barthes commented in 1981. Earlier in the century the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke had argued, "Now is emerging from out of America pure undifferentiated things, mere things of appearance, sham articles.... A house in the American understanding, an American apple or an American vine has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, or the grape that had been adopted in the hopes and thoughts of our forefathers." In the globalized marketplace both image and sham are spreading, intertwined.

Once the world has been photographed it is never again the same. (This is where Eve and the Apple come in.)

Once the images begin to replace the world, photography loses much of its reason for being.

Into the vortex, then, comes the digital.