



Kate Palmer Albers

Uncertain Histories

Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography

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Doubt in Contemporary Photography*

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PART 1

PHOTOGRAPHY IN SUSPENSION

INTRODUCTION

Uncertain Histories revolves around a fundamental paradox generated by the photographic medium: How can photographs so vividly capture specific moments and yet, at the same time, tell us so little? In this book, I argue that the fraught relationship between photographs and the histories they might tell is precisely where some of the most interesting artistic minds have been working since the late 1960s.

In its relatively short history, photography has been characterized both as a clear record keeper of history and, more recently, as a medium so deeply contingent on context that it is incapable of transmitting a historical truth. *Uncertain Histories* considers artists whose work, rather than subscribing to either end of this spectrum, presents photography as a fundamentally ambiguous medium that can be, at once, deeply evocative of the historical past while at the same time deeply limited in the stories it can convey. This aesthetic position has emerged and shifted since the late 1960s, developing at the same time as the theoretical impulse to see photography as contextually bound, but treating the medium in a more nuanced and specific way. Rather than proclaiming definitively what photography “is,” the work discussed here revolves around photographs that function as objects always held in suspension, perpetually oscillating in their ability to convey history.

The following chapters focus on several instances in contemporary art where the power of the work depends on the affective and evidentiary role of photographs, and yet the barrier to producing meaning from the image is the central point. Crucially, the problematic engagement induced by these barriers generates questions and criti-

cal involvement, thus activating a viewer's own sense of historical engagement. To this end, *Uncertain Histories* addresses the photographic work of Christian Boltanski, Gerhard Richter, Dinh Q. Lê, Joel Sternfeld, and Ken Gonzales-Day, among others. The strategies these artists and others have used to get at this perpetual ambiguity has shifted over time. Part One of this book, "Photography in Suspension," establishes a historical and theoretical context for the concerns at stake. Part Two, "Abundance and Opacity," hinges largely on installations that incorporate family and other types of personal photographs, often in great quantities. Work by Boltanski, Richter, and Lê is examined for how it probes the often-ambiguous experience of reading family photographs—whether one's own or someone else's. In Part Three, "Unseen Histories," I turn to the artists Joel Sternfeld and Ken Gonzales-Day, who have confronted an absence of the visual in photographic representations of history. Crucially, for them, photography emerges as a critical medium with which to grapple with such absences. I argue that their projects are, counterintuitively, deeply dependent on our notions of photographic indexicality, whether or not we see their ostensible photographic referents.

In this book, the compulsion to dwell on history—on how it is recorded, stored, forgotten, collected, saved, narrated, lost, remembered, and made public—is at the heart of each artist's engagement with the photographic medium. The artists question the different and varied ways in which photographs maintain and construct historical knowledge, and their endeavors expose the ongoing processes of writing, telling, and seeing the past. Through their work, they examine a photographic paradox that hinges equally on knowing and not knowing, on definitive proof coupled with uncertainty, on abundance of detail being met squarely with its own inadequacy. The work considered in the following chapters rests, on the one hand, on the status of the photograph as document and as evidence, as a medium whose images are indelibly linked to a real, physical world. On the other hand, through various aesthetic strategies, each artist's project elaborates on a specific failure or limitation of this evidentiary quality. The photographic projects foreground what we *don't* know about the images in question, and use the medium less as a springboard to knowledge than as a site for uncertainty. In turn, however, the photographs' uncertain history leads back around to a new kind of knowledge production. The uncertainty is not a dead end, but a generative space for the viewer's own productive engagement with the construction of history.

Ultimately, the works that interest me in *Uncertain Histories* are the ones that use the photographic medium as a vehicle for thinking past the close indexical relationship a photograph has with its subject and toward the ever-evolving relationship a photograph has with its viewer. This temporal adjustment from looking at a photograph as a record of the past to looking at a photograph as an object that will activate a relationship with a future audience entails shifting from a subject-centric view to a user-centric view, and pressing on the conventional terms of photographic indexicality.

PHOTOGRAPHY'S DUALITY

In 1969, the French artist Christian Boltanski made a little album of his childhood that vividly demonstrated how easily a photograph can stand for a history it does not actually represent. This album will be the focal point of the next chapter and in many ways sets the terms for the ensuing chapters. In it, photographs of Boltanski's young nephew mingle seamlessly with the artist's own boyhood mementos, and demonstrate what has, in the nearly fifty years since, become a truism in critical photographic studies: that the meaning of a photographic image is deeply dependent on its context. Beyond this, the album also engages with the capacities and limits of a photograph's ability to tell a story of history. Boltanski presents personal history as a mixture of factual record and fictional invention, in which not only the viewer, but eventually the artist as well, is hard pressed to distinguish between the two modes. The album may initially have seemed to claim merely that photographs do not necessarily convey the truth. But it does much more than this, particularly as it engages questions of the many-faceted and complex ways that photographs can, often simultaneously, succeed and fail to engage their viewers with history.

Since Boltanski's work in the late 1960s, to which I will return, the terms of the conversation have shifted. From the vantage point of 2015, and in the wake of post-modernism, anyone with a critical interest in photography has had an opportunity to consider that photographs fail, often spectacularly, in their ostensible promise to narrate the past. The routine conventions of photographic albums have been clearly charted by historians, and critically minded viewers are well aware that photographs themselves are subject to endlessly mutable iterations of meanings that are deeply dependent on such variable factors as framing, captions, context, presentation, and historical position. Decades of Photoshop and critical theory have taught us to know better than to blindly trust photographs, and to be sophisticated in how we consume images—for instance to recognize that we don't know what is just outside the frame.

The temptation, which one sees over and over again, is to make a blanket statement: No one believes photographs anymore. But it is not so simple as this. While any unshakable faith between a photograph and "truth" long ago eroded (at least within many scholarly and professional circles), photographs still have a tremendous capacity to inform, to document, and to communicate. In many realms of the medium, from photojournalism to travel photography, family portraiture to scientific documentation, photographs are made and circulated with the intent to describe and visualize, and with the expectation that they will do so. Despite the emergence of a collectively sophisticated eye that is ever more wary of the elusiveness of photographic truth, we do not, in everyday practice, simply take photographs as bald lies. Recently, scholars have begun to point this out more persistently. For example, in her study of photography and political violence, Susie Linfield ruminates on the complex affective power of photographs, even in an age when

viewers are trained to “know better”; indeed, scholars and practitioners of photojournalism and what has become known as citizen photojournalism are perhaps those most deeply invested in tracking the shifting forms of photographic authority and document in the digital age.¹

The concept of the photographic “index” is related to nineteenth-century positivist notions about the medium, but emerged specifically from the writings of the American semiotician, mathematician, and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. As will be discussed more fully in later chapters, Peirce developed a system—if a loose one—that includes icons, symbols, and the index as a way of differentiating the functions of various types of signs. The aspect of Peirce’s idea that has, over time, come to be most relevant for scholars and theorists of photography is that the index describes a physical connection between the photographic image and its referent in the real world: The “action” of light rays emitted from the subject affect the film’s emulsion and cause a physical and chemical change that is recorded as the photograph’s negative. This close physical relationship is seen by many as the defining characteristic of analog photography’s distinction from other methods of visual representation that are not connected so directly to their real-world counterparts.

Peirce’s term was given new life in an influential set of essays that the art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss published in the late 1970s, “Notes on the Index,” and the term has since been a regular part of photographic discourse—deployed with greater and lesser degrees of earnestness and irritation—among scholars and critics. The discussion of the index will be developed in chapters 6 and 7 to highlight a greater extent of Peirce’s analysis and definition of the “index” than is generally acknowledged in photographic studies, extending beyond the physical connection between image and object. Specifically, I will take up the expanded role of the index to point, focus attention, and provide a junction between two “portions” of experience to understand artists’ interest in the function of photographs as markers of something unseen and thus not visually inscribed, and the rising importance of the performative act of photography in contemporary practice. Extending the function of the index away from the photograph’s point of origin untethers the photographic object from its necessary, yet often unknowable, historical referent and directs attention to the ongoing role of the photograph as it moves forward through time from one viewer to the next, serving multiple functions.

The artists in this book are attuned less to capturing current events and more to the roles of photography in evoking the past. Yet they demonstrate over and over that no matter how analytic a viewer may be in decoding the many ways in which photographs remain, at best, a subjective approximation of some lived reality, at the same time they continue to be extraordinarily powerful in their evocation of a real past, whether in terms of a historical moment or something as apparently simple as a likeness of a friend or family member. Knowing that photographs are deeply deceptive, yet still reacting with fondness and delight—and a clear absence of critical judgment—to a funny or

happy photograph taken by a friend or family member are not mutually exclusive positions. Indeed, it is precisely this dual response to photographic imagery that artists have investigated in their sustained engagement with the basic yet deeply complex question of how photographs evoke history.

This book focuses specifically on how, since the late 1960s, artists have been particularly instrumental in pointing to and elaborating this complexity. Throughout *Uncertain Histories*, I discuss ways in which artists have pressed on photographs' status as documents that invariably record the existence of something before the camera, and the difficulty of determining what that subject was. Rather than a totalizing theory about what photography is or does, the artists in this study demonstrate in highly specific ways how our relationship to photographs and our efforts to glean meaning from them remains muddled and vexing.

It is tempting to find, or coin, a word to describe the shifting or oscillating ambiguity of the work discussed here. Consider "anceps": The word has its origin in Latin meter, the foundational structure of poetry and verse.² An anceps is a type of syllable that can be either short or long; it describes a segment of language that is unfixed or undecided. Most appealingly, anceps indicates a wavering, an indeterminacy, a state of fluctuation. Doubt and ambiguity are at its core. And yet, as appealing as this word is, it lacks the counterbalance of being fixed, as most of the photographs in this book stubbornly (also) are, even as they oscillate and waver in the viewer's eye. Another (if inelegant) contender might be "ambi-photographs" or "amphi-photographs," indicating a photograph that does two things at once, or inhabits both an uncertain but fixed past and an activated and malleable present. Ultimately, however, it is the common word "uncertain" that indicates best the indeterminacy and flux I am concerned with. To some ears, "uncertain" may have a ring of the wishy-washy, or a weakness of just not being sure, but, as the artists will demonstrate, there is a highly productive uncertainty in numerous forms of photographs. Consider, too, from physics, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (also translated as the principle of indeterminacy), which states that at the quantum level, paired properties such as the position and the momentum of a particle cannot be known at once. The degree of certainty that fixes one element is counterbalanced by a greater uncertainty about the other, and yet both properties undoubtedly exist and have a real bearing on the particle. While I would not seek to import the truths of science to explain the arts, the uncertainty principle is a useful reminder of the pervasiveness of uncertainty in a world we seek to measure and explain with exactitude.

Ultimately, *Uncertain Histories* takes its structure from a field of approaches contemporary artists have used to address the limits of photography's ability to narrate the past. It argues that in their works of art, doubt, uncertainty, and inaccessibility are not dead ends: These apparent impassés to knowledge can generate a space for a productive uncertainty that is as culturally valuable as information and clarity. *Uncertain Histories* identifies a range of artists who have taken up similar issues as Boltanski but have redirected their aesthetic strategies to accommodate fresh approaches to a lasting core

concern. In a trajectory of case studies from the late 1960s to the early twenty-first century, the ambiguity and uncertainty of how we today can “know” history is built into the projects, each of which uses photographs as reminders of what we do not know, what we cannot see, what is not recorded. Fundamentally, the sum total of the artists’ approaches offers a revised account of the conventional understanding of photographic indexicality. The projects shift attention away from resting primarily on the photographed moment or the event captured—and the medium’s remarkable connection to that always-past place and time—and direct the primary area of engagement to the shifting present of the viewer.

UNCERTAIN ORIGINS

John Szarkowski provocatively claimed that photography was “a medium born whole,” and, indeed, the contradictions of photography that captivate many artists today were already in play in the nineteenth century, despite a far more pervasively felt belief in the positivist qualities of the medium.³ As early as 1844, when William Henry Fox Talbot began publishing his extraordinary *The Pencil of Nature*, assessing and predicting the potential uses of this new technology, he posited that photographs might be used as evidence in a court of law—proof, in his example, that stolen pieces of china had existed and belonged to an individual. Talbot referred to the “mute testimony” a photograph could present, but left open the question of “what the judge and jury might say to it,” recognizing already that the photograph’s “testimony” might not be admitted without question.

Talbot, one of the inventors of photography, wisely hesitated to claim that the relationship between photographs, the evidence they bore, and the subsequent retrieval of that evidence as historical fact was clear. But in practical application, belief in a transparent communication from past to present was acknowledged in the first decades of photography’s invention. To take one example from many that could be cited: In the early 1860s, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, working in Paris under the direction of Napoleon III, hired Charles Marville to use the new medium of photography to document the narrow medieval streets and buildings of Paris that were slated for imminent demolition.⁴ Just ahead of the wrecking crews, Marville faithfully recorded each building and street that was to be torn down in the process of modernization. He produced a document that immediately served as a historical record: not just a smattering of images, casually taken, but a systematic representation of a specific predetermined subject made to keep a record for the benefit of posterity. Haussmann presumably commissioned the photographs to create a record of what he saw as the dirty, cramped, germ-ridden medieval streets of old Paris, and perhaps assumed that they would effectively contrast with the clean, broad new streets and uniform buildings that were to be built in their stead.⁵

The Marville example suggests that the medium of photography has been understood from its outset to have an integral relationship with time, with documentation, and