



Photography  
*and the Art of Chance*

ROBIN KELSEY

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## Photography and the Art of Chance

For Cynthia Cone

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# Introduction

Can photographs be art? Institutionally, the answer is obviously yes. Our art museums and galleries abound in photography, and our scholarly journals lavish photographs with attention once reserved for work in other media. Although many contemporary artists mix photography with other technical methods, our institutions do not require this. The broad affirmation that photographs can be art, which comes after more than a century of disagreement and doubt, fulfills an old dream of uniting creativity and industry, art and automatism, soul and machine. For those of us who find the best of photography compelling and full of insight, this recognition is a welcome historical development.

The situation, however, is not as rosy and simple as all that. It's not as though the art world assimilated photography solely on the basis of disinterested inquiry and careful argument. There were many incentives at work, including the lure of a profitable new market and the desire for more accessible museums. Institutional gatekeepers often suppressed, dismissed, or answered only vaguely the many questions raised about how well photography satisfies our demands on art. As a result, some of us who hold the aesthetic potentials of photography in high regard nonetheless have deep misgivings about the terms of its assimilation. Although some troubling aspects of these terms have received significant attention in recent years, one issue remains neglected: chance.

Photography is prone to chance. Every taker of snapshots knows that. The first look at a hastily taken picture is an act of discovery. In this one, an expression is exuberant or a gesture is winning; in that one, a mouth is

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agape or a hand blocks a face. Once in a blue moon, a rank amateur produces an exquisite picture. Trained photographers may be better at anticipating when and how such a picture might be made, but even they take scores of shots for every one worth posting or publishing. For amateur and professional alike, the successful picture can be an uneasy source of pride. Pressing the button fosters a sense of having produced the picture, but how far does that responsibility extend? Has the person who has accidentally taken a superb photograph made a work of art? The conspicuous role of chance in photography sets it apart from arts such as painting or literature. Whereas in a traditionally deliberate art form, such as the novel, chance comes across as something contrived, in photography it comes across as something encountered. What does it mean that photography so often entails a process of haphazard making and careful sorting?

These are questions that the art world has tended to muffle or ignore. Chance, one might say, lacks a constituency. Generally speaking, it valorizes neither the photograph nor the photographer. Most photographers, collectors, and curators would prefer to suggest that a picture speaks for itself and therefore the circumstances of its production are immaterial, or to presume that pictorial success reflects a mastery of the medium. But the notion of pictures speaking for themselves is problematic if not paradoxical, and inference of mastery from any particular photograph, due to the role of chance in the medium, is unwarranted.<sup>1</sup> Photographs, to be meaningful, must be products of history, and that history is haunted by chance.

In the twentieth century, the assurance that what may seem like luck is actually a matter of skill and effort became a shibboleth of photography books and exhibition catalogues. A passage from *Photography and the Art of Seeing*, published in 1935, offers a typical account: "Nor must we overlook that the operator's success largely depends upon his taking his shot at the moment when the interest of the scene culminates. This is not a matter of lucky chance, but of artistic skill which is the outcome of synthetic effort. The most convincing proof of the foregoing assertion is to be found in certain remarkable photographs."<sup>2</sup> Such blanket assurances that mastery can be read directly from the exceptional photograph without regard to its history have underwritten the art photograph both as museum object and as commodity.

Art authorities have often dismissed chance as an issue only troubling the ignorant. Consider this passage from an article in the *Yale University*



*Art Gallery Bulletin* discussing a recently acquired series of photographs by Robert Adams, a selection of which had been published as a book:

For non-photographers, the ratio of negatives to pictures-in-books that Robert Adams produced on this project most likely seems large: over 5,000 pictures made and, of those, fewer than one hundred selected for initial publication. Unsurprisingly, these figures are, for photographers, less an issue than an irrelevant distraction: Garry Winogrand, on being asked in public forum just how many pictures he had to take to make a good one, replied irritably, "Art isn't judged in terms of industrial efficiency," a remark that should suffice as the last word on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

Why the last word? Winogrand's response offers tart rhetoric but little substance. The supposedly naive question he received is actually of the utmost relevance. It is precisely the "industrial" quality of photography that allows photographers to take so many pictures for each one selected for display. Even the "non-photographers" denigrated in the passage know this, because they are in fact photographers. The issue is not efficiency but instead how meaning is produced in a medium prone to chance.

Rather than impatiently dismiss the problem of chance in photography, some of the medium's greatest practitioners have explored it with dogged brilliance. This book is devoted to the work of a handful. It interprets their photographs and texts in light of the entangled histories of photography, art, and chance to discover whatever insights this work may proffer. It does so from a conviction that these photographs and texts constitute a vital legacy for our times and remain promisingly open to the future. Underlying the effort is a belief that through the study of art we can know ourselves and our world more intimately and ardently, an engagement our humanity requires.

The book's argument is narrow in some respects and broad in others. It links a series of practitioners who worked in England or America: William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), Frederick Sommer (1905–1999), and John Baldessari (1931–). Readers familiar with the histories of photography and art may recognize these names as canonical, and in several respects that status is precisely the point. These practitioners enjoyed the privilege of working canonically—that is, of contending deeply and critically not only

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with prevailing circumstances but also with a constellation of vigorous thinkers and practitioners coming before and alongside them. Canons suffer the subjugations and exclusions pervading society at large, and the generally pale and almost wholly male membership of this series of practitioners is cause for lament about the past and for impatience with the present. But the call-and-response structure that canonical work builds through the generations is the baby in the proverbial bathwater, worthy of preservation even as we seek to discard the prejudices that have constrained canon formation to date. Canons are saturated with power, but with critical vigilance they can serve to divulge and resist it. They can show the reliance of cultural achievement on participation, dialogue, emulation, encouragement, and rivalry. Canons are conversations around which a culture can define itself, and without them collective aspiration and social value threaten to dissipate into the blunt and banal exchanges of commerce.

The span from Talbot to Baldessari encompasses almost the entire era of analog photography. Apart from a brief discussion of our digital moment in the conclusion, this book is about the photography of plates, films, emulsions, and shutters. It is about the investment that modernity made in the industrial magic of photochemistry and the black boxes of cameras, and how this investment changed the production and consumption of images. It is about the verve and ingenuity with which certain practitioners sought to make art from the action of light. But this history is not a paean to a lost age. It is an account of struggles with contradictions that still rend and baffle our society. The implications of these struggles remain immense, and artists of our own day are finding effective means to address them. In support of present and future efforts to find such means, those of us who personally experienced the onset of the digital era may bear a special responsibility to relate the issues and insights of the analog past.

There is one claim, it should be clear from the outset, that this book does not make. That claim is that art is the essence or sole fulfillment of photography. With respect to social value, photography as a means of knitting people together in rewarding associations, or of alerting them to atrocity, or of enabling them to convey the significance of their existence, or of amplifying their visual experience to encompass new scales or temporalities, takes no backseat to photography as art. The book claims only that the testing ground we call art, to the extent that it entails a commitment to critical reflection on means and ends, can foster awareness of how photography carries out its many functions, and how it might do better. Built into

the argument is the belief that photography as art has been inextricably bound to its other operations.<sup>4</sup>

The basic elements of this book's story—photography, art, and chance—have all changed markedly over the years. Dovetailed with the chapters on the work of the featured practitioners are chapters that trace these changes from one generation to the next. The book thus alternates between a tight focus on an individual practice and a broader optic taking in the historical circumstances that this practice engaged. Even the broad chapters, however, tend to concentrate on particular texts or pictures to bring out the vivid dispositions of each historical moment. This structure affirms the value of close reading and looking in the search for historical meaning.

Some readers may be surprised at the notion that chance has a history. Chance may seem always mere chance, the imp that escapes all systems. A roll of the dice in 1840 may seem the same as one in 1930. This impression is crucial to the argument, but equally important is the recognition that the significance of chance has changed throughout the modern period.<sup>5</sup> For many Victorians, chance was a spectral agent in Darwinian evolution that imperiled traditional accounts of creation. For some Cold War analysts, it was an instrumental input into simulations of international strife. Across the generations, chance has been encountered or enlisted in new forms.

The concept of chance is difficult to grasp even in principle. Consider this 1962 effort at defining the closely related term *random* by the physicist and information theorist Donald MacKay: "Having made this division [between randomness in events and randomness in states] we must further distinguish between (a) the notion of *well-shuffledness* or impartiality of distribution; (b) the notion of *irrelevance* or absence of correlation; (c) the notion of *I don't care*; and (d) the notion of *chaos*."<sup>6</sup> Rather than approach chance through such a taxonomic framework, this book will wade through a fertile muck of kindred notions. Various strains of chance, randomness, luck, and accident will come into play, including all the strains MacKay mentions, but they will take impure forms. History is messier than philosophy, and these various strains of chance and its cognates have mingled incessantly in molding attitudes toward the world and toward art.

Although chance changes over the years and from one situation to the next, it has possessed enough continuity to give this story shape. It has remained a mostly negative concept. As an agent, it has lacked purpose or obligation. Whether associated with the gambling den, the Darwinian

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mutation, or the decay of radioactivity, chance has been about spontaneity and surprise, about the event that seems to come from nowhere to interrupt an existing order or give rise to a new one. It sets a limit to any scheme, plan, or account. This is still the way of chance today. When all other explanations are exhausted or abandoned, chance is what remains.

How we view chance depends on the agent we imagine it to supplant or delimit. When we imagine that agent to be God, chance becomes a feature of secular cosmology. In a world saturated with intention, there is no room for it; divine will or design pervades matter and events down to the last particular. To attribute something to chance is to forfeit faith in an omnipotent and omnipresent creator. Chance is therefore associated with doubt, and with doubt about divine providence in particular.

It may seem odd to suggest that a book about photography is about doubting God, but in some sense this is true. Photography and chance are bonded by an indifference associated with the Enlightenment and its skepticism regarding theological explanation. Photography records whatever is before the camera, giving the stray and trivial the same treatment as the main and essential, as if everything were equivalent. Chance is the same. A die may come up showing any number of pips from one to six, and the odds of each are equal. Such radical indifference is associated with the withdrawal of God and the advent of a disinterested cosmos in which the place of humanity is random and unprivileged. In the modern mix of order and disorder, we are a sum of chemical and biological accidents. From the work of Galileo and Charles Darwin to contemporary astrophysics, scientific inquiry has discovered evidence of cosmic indifference and undercut the notion of a universe intended by God for humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Photography and secular thought have thus been bound by the ways in which they circumscribe causation. In early modern Europe, chance impinged on the explanatory sufficiency of providence. It served to cover the gap between human knowledge of causes and the operation of divine laws that were presumed, albeit with a weakening faith, to govern even incidental phenomena. As the tracking of statistical regularity gained respect as a means of acquiring knowledge in its own right, chance began to inhere in the world. It thus marked a limit on what appeals to providence or natural law could explain. Secular thought removed the hand of God from ordinary events, while photography removed the hand of the artist from pictorial marking. Whether investigating phenomena or making pictures, moderns turned to mechanical causes and aggregate results. Marked by

indifference and prone to chance, photography was thus a pictorial medium tailored to the secular drift of the modern era.

If this claim seems a stretch, consider that photography arrived roughly alongside the notion of geologic time. The publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* in three volumes between 1830 and 1833 did much to supplant the biblical account of creation with a story of geologic gradualism. A few years later, in early 1839, experimenters in France and England announced the invention of photography. The coincidence is striking: while scientific minds were boggling at the notion that the earth had shaped itself without design through the incremental action of earthly forces, there arrived a technology heralded as enabling "all nature" to "paint herself" through the incremental action of light.<sup>8</sup> The threatened displacement of the artist as a maker of pictures came alongside the threatened displacement of God as a maker of the world, and a crisis of meaning accompanied both. What did a picture mean—or a world mean, for that matter—if it just took form of its own accord?

Or consider that photography appeared soon after Robert Brown in 1827 observed pollen grains under a microscope jiggling randomly, a phenomenon now known as Brownian motion. Brownian motion was more in keeping with pagan accounts of matter than with the biblical story of creation. In the first century B.C.E., Lucretius had noted the random dancing of dust particles in beams of sunlight and inferred that such spontaneously moving atoms must make up the universe. For Victorians in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the behavior of tiny particles of matter—whether pollen grains, shoreline sand, or droplets of light-sensitive silver—was a source of unsettling fascination. Closely observed, these particles behaved in autonomous and unplanned ways. From pictures to hillsides, forms that had seemed intrinsically a matter of design were revealed to be the cumulative effect of autonomous and haphazard activity.

The modern notion that the world is composed of marvelous aggregations of autonomous particulars, of course, abides by the form of the market. Adam Smith's invisible hand has long been the preeminent sign for the power of capitalism to make a prosperous order from atoms of self-interested action.<sup>9</sup> According to Smith, although each man with capital may pursue his own wealth, security, and ease, the effect at times will be an allocation that inadvertently advances the welfare of society at large. In *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, he cited circumstances under which the investor is "led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of

his intention.”<sup>10</sup> Smith’s receptivity to the notion that selfish individual acts could tend toward social betterment was informed by his faith in a benevolent deity, but in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such faith grew scarce. The invisible hand increasingly seemed a careless mechanism, distributing aggregates ungoverned by providence. In this respect as well, the withdrawal of the hand in photography and the resulting openness of pictures to chance was in keeping with modern times.

In the absence of God, the need to contend with chance became a secular binding agent. Pollen grains were innocuous enough, but some operations of chance put life and prosperity in jeopardy. As an indiscriminate source of suffering, chance was a power against which all people in principle could rally. The rise of the modern welfare state was, among other things, a hard-won recognition that the harshest consequences of chance justified public insurance against risk. If sufferers did not endure the hard lessons of divine judgment, but instead the arbitrariness of an indifferent universe, then they had a strong claim on the individual conscience and the public purse. The negative cast of chance made it universal, enabling the state regulating its effects to bind citizens otherwise splintered by differences of affiliation or identity.<sup>11</sup> As an egalitarian principle of the modern period, chance played a key role in establishing progressive social programs and philosophies. The political philosopher John Rawls suggested that the social contract should be negotiated from behind a “veil of ignorance” concerning the participant’s social position because chance, not God, will make the allotment.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, a society given over to chance could ostensibly make opportunities for good luck available to all. Whereas state lotteries offered a miniscule shot at instant wealth, photography promised the ordinary person a significant share in the prizes of pictorial fortune.

Along with insurance and state lotteries, art was a way of contending with secular uncertainty. In search of new meaning, modern society placed much hope in the integrative powers of human creativity, exalting art as an antidote for faltering belief. But this collective effort to compensate humanity for God’s withdrawal was hampered by paradox. The rise of secularism added to the burden of art but weakened its authority, which for centuries had been modeled on divine creativity. The analogy between artist and God had particularly obsessed the masters of the Florentine Renaissance, against whom so many later artists were judged.<sup>13</sup> How could an artist exercise godlike powers when God himself had been routed by doubt?

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With respect to this conundrum, photography appeared as both destroyer and redeemer. On the one hand, it threatened to extend the callous logic of aggregation into the last bastion of meaningful social expression. On the other hand, it bore the potential to wring from that logic some compensatory enlightenment and aesthetic value. Guided by the right intelligence, some enthusiasts believed, the mechanical ways of photography could reveal, address, or momentarily overcome the mechanical ways of the world. The chapters that follow consider ingenious efforts to deliver on this homeopathic promise. What Terry Eagleton said of his recent book—that it “is less about God than about the crisis occasioned by his apparent disappearance”—could be said about this one as well.<sup>14</sup> Although the entwinement of photography and theological doubt grows less salient in the later chapters, it remains a burden with which the featured practitioners implicitly grapple. In one way or another, all five ask chance for a measure of redemption.

Our view of chance changes considerably if we imagine it to supplant or delimit the agency of a human entity rather than that of God. In the secular context, chance becomes a limit on responsibility. Attributing an event to chance puts it beyond the reach of blame or credit. The exculpatory side of chance is crucial to modern legal regimes. *It was an accident*. Such words have been used to deny responsibility at every level of society, from individuals seeking to swindle insurance companies to corporations shielding themselves from liability for flawed products. If religion has been an opiate of the masses, then chance has been an alibi of the powerful. Time and again, efforts to ensure occupational or consumer safety have had to reframe the accidental as the inevitable. For photography as art, credit rather than blame has been the tricky issue. Chance has threatened to fill the disconcerting gap in the medium between intention and result.

The five practitioners featured in this book all faced a different struggle for credit and looked for redemption in a different form. In the mid-nineteenth century, Talbot, one of the inventors of photography, endeavored to defend the value of pictures made by his indifferent and capricious process. This defense required him to address key aesthetic and theological problems of his time. Could a picture that simply recorded things as they were constitute a work of art? Could a stray detail bear signs of the world's intelligibility? Such questions had been troubling important Victorian thinkers before photography arrived, and the new technology only complicated the search for answers.



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As Victorians of Talbot's generation drove God away from terrestrial affairs, they also began mastering chance. They did so through statistically driven management and mechanized means of production. While insurance companies converted risk and uncertainty into predictable returns, factories used machines to minimize accidental variation. Uniformity was a watchword of the modern economy, which aimed to produce precise and interchangeable parts and commodities. Because many Victorians feared a loss of humanity in this pursuit of exact equivalence, accident and error took on connotations of human vitality and uniqueness. Chapter 3 describes how Cameron exploited such concerns to find aspiration in photographic happenstance.

The next two chapters concern vapor. Since the days of Lucretius, the play of moisture and other particulate matter in the atmosphere has been a vital locus for chance. By the early nineteenth century, clouds, mists, and fogs had become crucial to the Romantics as a means of countering what many regarded as the desiccated rationality of the Enlightenment. Such obscurant vapors offered spirited natural forms to revive or compensate for a curtailed faith in divine immanence. Vaporous atmospheres could also be visual archives of historical change. The great painter J. M. W. Turner, for example, depicted smoke and steam as well as natural vapors to contend atmospherically with the unsettling effects of modernization. Within decades, photographers were looking to vapor as a means of transmuting the world into a visual poetry that their apparatus could transcribe. Chapter 5 considers the winter that Stieglitz, wielding a new handheld camera amid the turbulent atmospheres and restless streets of New York City, courted chance and mobility to represent modern life.

Living without ritual certainties has inspired modern efforts to find solace or liberation in the everyday. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, certain photographers were celebrated as seers who could perceive and distill moments of transcendence in the spontaneous action or stray remnants of ordinary life. The horrors of two world wars fueled a desperation to experience pockets of redemption, while also subjecting to immense pressure the mythic capacity of the seer to find and deliver them. Belief in ties binding chance to the unconscious and to the primitive informed the search for photographic epiphanies, the results of which filled the pages of illustrated magazines. Not everyone, however, thought the celebrated purveyors of quotidian insight were hitting the mark. Chapter 7 addresses the war-time photography of Frederick Sommer, who spurned the exaltation of spon-



taneous elegance and instead explored the bracing estrangement of material indifference.

The final two chapters concern the decades following the Second World War, when the institutions of the art world began to assimilate photography. As this process gathered momentum, curators and critics strove to determine how best to define photography as a modernist medium. Because of its fluid and ubiquitous presence in society at large, photography seemed to stand as much for the impossibility of keeping media distinct as for the possibility of being a new one. Museums responded to the challenge of making photography into an autonomous art by constricting acknowledgment of the complex, varied, and troublesome conditions of its actual production. Meanwhile, certain social critics had begun to analyze the functions of photography with unprecedented rigor. As museum practice fell behind the best thinking on photography, artists found an opportunity to unsettle the art world and upend or renew the terms of American modernism. Chapter 9 describes how one such artist, John Baldessari, used randomized simulation to model the workings of chance in photography and thereby address the new interdependence of photography and art. The book concludes with a brief consideration of photography and chance in the digital era.

If the argument succeeds in its aims, the reader will have a new regard for the struggle to make photography into art. In the process, she or he may also have a better understanding of modernity and the challenge it has posed to those seeking to maintain a cultural practice of bringing complex yet intelligible forms into the world. If it helps those who are currently engaged in making photographic art, so much the better. Although this book celebrates instances of extraordinary achievement, the history it relates is one that threatens the viability of art as a public occasion for meaning. For the conversation this book describes to be carried forward, new means of restoring that viability through a collective commitment to the social function of art will need to be found.

This book is about photography, but it is also about the search for meaning in the modern world. For those who find the random indifference of that world bewildering and tough to bear, the pictures motivating this book can be a source of understanding, encouragement, and honest relief. The history that follows explains and affirms that possibility.