

# Photography

## A Critical Introduction

Fifth Edition

*Edited by*  
**Liz Wells**

# **Photography A Critical Introduction**

**Fifth Edition**

**EDITED BY LIZ WELLS**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

This fifth edition published 2015  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
an informa business*

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First edition published by Routledge 1996

Fourth edition published by Routledge 2009

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Photography : a critical introduction / edited by Liz Wells. –

Fifth edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Photography. I. Wells, Liz, 1948–

TR145.P48 2015

770–dc23

2014031957

ISBN: (hbk) 978-0-415-85428-3

ISBN: (pbk) 978-0-415-85429-0

ISBN: (ebk) 978-1-315-72737-0

Typeset in Bembo and Frutiger by  
Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK  
Printed by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow



## Photography

*Photography: A Critical Introduction* was the first introductory textbook to examine key debates in photographic theory and place them in their social and political contexts, and is now established as one of the leading textbooks in its field. Written especially for students in further and higher education and for introductory college courses, this fully revised edition provides a coherent introduction to the nature of photographic seeing.

Individual chapters cover:

- Key debates in photographic theory and history
- Documentary photography and photojournalism
- Personal and popular photography
- Photography and the human body
- Photography and commodity culture
- Photography as art.

This revised and updated fifth edition includes:

- New case studies on topics such as: materialism and embodiment, the commodification of human experience, and an extended discussion of landscape as genre.
- 99 photographs and images, featuring work from: Bill Brandt, Susan Derges, Rineke Dijkstra, Fran Herbello, Hannah Höch, Karen Knorr, Dorothea Lange, Chrystel Lebas, Susan Meiselas, Lee Miller, Martin Parr, Ingrid Pollard, Jacob Riis, Alexander Rodchenko, Andres Serrano, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall.
- Fully updated resource information, including guides to public archives and useful websites.
- A full glossary of terms and a comprehensive bibliography.

**Liz Wells** is Professor in Photographic Culture in the Faculty of Arts, Plymouth University.

**Contributors:** Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, Derrick Price, Anandi Ramamurthy and Liz Wells.

### **Praise for previous editions:**

'A brilliantly designed book. It provides a much-needed conceptual perspective, so lacking in other histories of photography, and with the new material on photojournalism [the book] is even stronger.'

*Ulrich Keller, University of California at Santa Barbara*

'Bravo to Liz Wells for putting together such a comprehensive critical introduction. Lucid, smart and well illustrated, this will be a "must read" for every serious student of the medium.'

*Deborah Bright, Professor of Photography and Art History, Rhode Island School of Design*

'An essential purchase. It raises awareness of the main contemporary issues related to photographic practice.'

*Howard Riley, Swansea Institute of Higher Education*

'A timely revision of a great book. It is invaluable in setting the stage for critical research in photography. . . . A substantial contribution to the critical study of photography.'

*Professor Lynne Bentley-Kemp, Rochester Institute of Technology*

'Precisely the kind of book I have been yearning to see appear for a long time. Carefully structured, it fulfils the need for a critical theory text for FE, HE and introductory college courses.'

*Nicky West, University of Northumbria at Newcastle*

'Ideal for stimulating discussions on the critical use of photographic images and their evaluation. It is ideal for teaching this part of my BTEC Media and BTEC Art and Design courses.'

*Ken Absalom, Gwent Tertiary College*

'Well structured – each chapter is thorough and relevant. The quality of the finish is superb – lovely photos and good use of margin notes.'

*Richard Swales, Roade School, Northampton*

## Contributors

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## Editor's preface

This book aimed to remedy the absence of a good, coherent introduction to issues in photography theory, and resulted from the frustrations of teaching without the benefit of a succinct introductory textbook. There were a number of published histories of photography which defined the field according to various agendas, although almost invariably with an emphasis upon great photographers, historically and now. Fewer publications critically engaged with debates about the nature of photographic seeing. Most were collections of essays pitched at a level that assumed familiarity with contemporary cultural issues and debates which students new to this field of enquiry may not yet have had.

The genesis of this book was complex. The first edition resulted initially from a discussion between myself and Rebecca Barden, then Media editor at Routledge, in which she solicited suggestions for publications which would support the current curriculum. Responding subsequently to her invitation to put forward a developed book proposal, two factors were immediately clear: first, that the attempt to be relatively comprehensive could best be tackled through a collective approach. Thus, a team of writers was assembled right from the start of the project. Second, it quickly became apparent that the project was, in effect, impossible. Photography is ubiquitous. As a result, there are no clear boundaries. It follows that there cannot be precise agreement as to what a 'comprehensive' introduction and overview should encompass, prioritise or exclude. After much consideration, we focused on issues and areas of practice that, given our experience as lecturers in a number of different UK university institutions, we knew feature frequently. That we worked to a large extent in relation to an established curriculum did not mean that the project has been either straightforward or easy. On the contrary, the intention to introduce and explore issues reasonably fully, taking account of what critics have had to say on various aspects of photographic practices, involved investigating and drawing upon a wide and diverse range of resources.

The overall response to the first edition was positive. Comments included some useful suggestions, many of which we incorporated within the second, revised edition which, in response to feedback, included a new chapter on the body in photography. This chapter, taken as a whole, stands as an example of the range of debates that may become engaged when the content or subject matter of images is taken as a starting point. In this respect it contrasts in particular with chapters 2 and 6, in which the focus is on a specific genre, or an arena, of practice. The third edition was updated and included colour plates. It was translated and published in Greek in 2008. The fourth edition was further amended and



incorporated colour illustrations throughout. A Chinese version was published in 2012.

More radically, in this fifth edition we have dropped the final chapter. When we first planned the book there were key debates raging as to the import, impact and likely future developments for the digital in photography. These debates questioned some of what had previously been taken for granted in photographic documentation. Previous editions have included a final chapter, titled 'Photography in the age of electronic imaging' (intended as a reference to Walter Benjamin's famous article on 'The Work of Art in an Era of Mechanical Reproduction' and, indeed, to debates of the early twentieth century on the social implications of the mass reproduction and circulation of photographic imagery. At the time of our first edition, there were discussions as to the implications of a shift from analogue to digital imaging – for reference, two of the diagrams that illustrated this discussion follow the Glossary in this edition. Now this is past history, the digital is completely integrated within photographic procedures and, more particularly, is no longer a matter of theoretical challenge or debate, although aspects of the virtual, of the centrality of online space continue to pre-occupy. For these reasons – the transcendence of questioning the import of the advent of the digital, along with the realisation that there are many questions to be asked about the social implications of visual media within virtual (global) space – led us to decide to integrate all discussion of the digital within the other chapters with which, at least in editions 3 and 4 of the publication, a considerable degree of overlap had developed.

As editor, further researching this book over the twenty years since the first edition has led to further questions, as well as to engaging discoveries. The tension between looking, thinking, investigation and discovery is one of the pleasures of academic research. Repeatedly revising the book has offered opportunities to revisit and further clarify various points as well as to reflect on recent critical developments in historical research and theoretical engagements. Given the number of publications on photography that have appeared in the last two decades, we have enhanced discussion of further references.

This book aims to be relevant, and of interest, to students of photography, graphics, fine art, art and design history, journalism, media studies, communication and cultural studies. We hope that it proves both useful and enjoyable.

## Acknowledgements

This book could not have been produced without the support of a number of people. First and foremost I should like to thank Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, Derrick Price and Anandi Ramamurthy, without whom the book would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Martin Lister for his key contribution to earlier editions of the book. The project has been a difficult one but nonetheless a happy one, due to the quality of the team which I have had the good fortune to be in a position to assemble. I should like to thank Rebecca Barden for first commissioning this book: in addition, Natalie Foster, Sheni Kruger, Emma Hudson and others at Routledge for their support.

I should like to thank colleagues, especially Kate Isherwood, and students who, over the years and in some instances without realising, have contributed to shaping and developing the project. Needless to state, the book could not have been further developed without this extensive feedback for which we are all very grateful. We would also like to thank staff at various archives for their help in introducing us to their study collections, and, in particular, the many photographers and archivists who have given permission for use of their images as illustrations.

Liz Wells  
May 2014

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We are indebted to the people and archives below for permission to reproduce photographs.

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Herbert Bayer, *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932