

National College of Art & Design

Fine Art Media and Education

Residual Mnemonic

Dan Shanahan

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed:

Programme / department: Fine Art Media and Education

Date:

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Table of Contents

Introduction	Pg. 5
1. The Darkroom	Pg. 5
2. The Found Image	Pg. 6
3. Appropriation	Pg. 7
4. Nostalgic	Pg. 8
5. The Photograph	Pg. 9
6. Recognition	Pg. 10
7. The Surface	Pg. 10
8. The Object	Pg. 11
9. Spectrum	Pg. 11
10. Inventory of Mortality	Pg. 12
11. The Content	Pg. 12
12. Detroit	Pg. 13
13. The Interview	Pg. 15
Conclusion	Pg. 17

Introduction

In this essay, I will be investigating emotional connection and projected narratives through the study of photograph materiality. Much of this discussion will be based around a single photograph. It is weathered, beaten and browned with age. It has been torn, a third of it is missing but is a part of me, a small but significant personal artifact. What makes this photograph different from any other photograph in the entire history of photography? How would someone else interpret the photograph if it was classed as “found photography”? Although this object bears a personal connection, I will be analysing it as an object under photographic theory. I will also be discussing some artists who use found photography in their work.

Photographic theory and photograph materiality have been written about comprehensively. While researching this topic, the same philosophers repeatedly appeared in many research papers and literature; Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Their investigations and thoughts on the nature of photography as an art form and an object, have been influential in the study of photography.

As a tribute to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, this essay is written in the style of Barthes’, in brief numbered sections.

1.

My burgeoning fascination with found photography began in the darkroom in college. Presented with a box of negatives, we each took one to hand so that we had something to practice processing with. The negative was placed carefully in the enlarger carrier, the lights turned off and the room was bathed in the blood red of the safe-light, a light that does not expose the photographic paper. The timer was set for a blast of light, four seconds would be enough. The light from the enlarger shone through the negative, casting its reverse image onto the blank paper below, activating the silver halide emulsion that the photographic paper was coated with. The blank paper, was then brought to a tray and immersed in a chemical for two minutes to develop the image. It was in this

moment that the 'magic' happened. The tray was agitated slowly back and forth, the chemicals washed over reacting with the light activated emulsion and an image from the past slowly materialised under the shimmering surface.

2.

The first image I had ever developed in that darkroom, the image contained on the negative, was of a group of men. The main figure, in his forties or fifties, with slicked back hair and wearing thick rimmed glasses. The photograph conveyed the impression that he was in a heated discourse with somebody out of frame, his finger pointed; maybe in argument or maybe putting his point across. To his right and just out of frame, another male watching this conversation take place. His lips pursed and staring, with a deliberate gaze. The background contained another male, balding, his back turned and sitting at a table with a cup and saucer. To his left, yet another male stared across at this conversation happening in the foreground, his face bathed in a menacing, dark shadow. This scene would not have looked out of place in a mobster film.



I had stared at this photograph for days, the blank photographic paper I had processed now contained an image ripe with plot. The process of making was replaced with the wonder of

narrative. I had no idea who these people were, who had taken the photograph or where it had come from but there was enough in the image for me now to cast my own narrative. This was the wonder of found photography.

“It is often said that it was the painters who invented Photography” Barthes writes, “I say: no, it was the chemists. For the *noeme* ‘That-has-been’ was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object. The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.” (Barthes 2000, pg. 80)

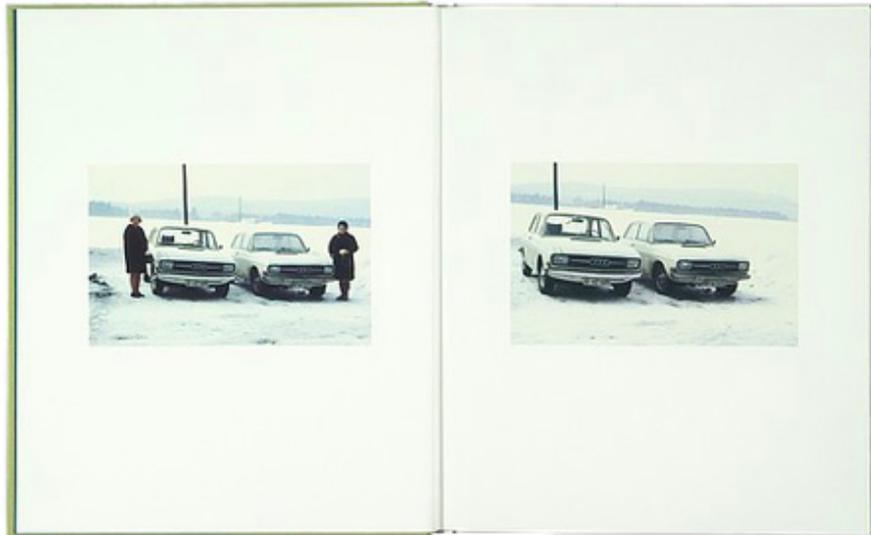
When I read this in *Camera Lucida*, it reminded me of that day in the darkroom. The tutor had said something similar in that, film photography was capturing the light that had travelled a vast cosmic distance, illuminating the person you are taking a photograph of and was captured, now forever contained on a strip of film. The photograph you hold in your hand is them, or in another sense, evidence that they were there.

3.

Was this art? Sontag (1978) put across the idea that time eventually turns most photographs to art, which means even the most ordinary photograph can be transformed, whether physically or otherwise. *Floh* by Tacita Dean (2001), is an example of flea market found photography, salvaged and presented as art. It retains the mystery of the found image with no explanations, no text descriptions. Portraits, holiday snaps, everyday “normal” life, oddities.

“Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs).” (Sontag 1978, pg. 71). Appropriationism, reusing and repurposing, recycling: the

art of the found object has its origins with Duchamp and his contemporaries in the early 20th century.



“Appropriation in art is as old as art itself. Art always arises from appropriation, namely by unconscious or intentional strategies of conforming or redefining oneself against pre-existing concepts, materials, technologies, work processes, form , and names within and outside of human-made visual culture.” (Aden 2016, pg. 201)

4.

I can't remember exactly when or how the photograph in question, had come into my possession. What I do remember: long, colourful envelopes of photographs stored in messy drawers around our house. These coloured pouches were adorned with the logos of the companies that make camera film, Kodak or Fuji-film seemed to be the more prominent brands in our home. On the back of these envelopes, a sticker to tell you where you might have had them developed, a chemist or a camera shop, the date and your name written in biro. Advertisements for small photo albums and reprints, images of different film types and offers of one hour processing and a free frame with enlargements if you wanted. The envelopes were made of a slightly tougher paper, strong enough to hold your photographs and negatives and if you were careful, they would last decades.

Somewhere and sometime in my youth, I had come across this photograph in one of these envelopes that I have unknowingly carried with me in my teens, into my forgotten twenties and now my resurgent thirties.

5.

The photograph is eleven centimetres long and nine and a half centimetres in height. The remnants of a larger photo, the left side has been torn away. The two figures in the picture are my grandmother and myself, I am taking my first steps. Or was I? This was a guess at this stage as I know little about the photograph apart from what the image tells me.



In the background there is a chair with a brown and black tartan design, a large tear in the fabric on the arm. To the right there is a step of orange bricks and a wall of elaborate brickwork, on the step there is a brass jug ornament with something white behind it. The carpet is wine in colour, although the colour of the photograph has degraded over the thirty-plus years of its existence. I recognise the setting of this picture, it being my grandparent's sitting room. The elaborate brickwork was the

fireplace and had been constructed by my grandfather, existing in his house up until it was sold after his death.

6.

I don't recognise the child in this picture, I don't remember this moment. I don't remember the maternal love or the flash of the camera bulb. The hands reaching for me, the moment of balance. I am not that person anymore. The child lives in that moment now, forever reaching out and feeling his first steps. I recognise my grandmother's face because it is also my mother's face, although she has now surpassed my grandmother in age. I have fuzzy recollections of my grandmother, moments of memory that is stirred when I see her image, her warm smile. This photograph for me has triggers and I find it hard to see beyond the image itself and look at it objectively.

7.

The surface of the photograph is the barrier between now and then. Something about the photograph solidifies that moment, it can't be touched. The movement in front of the camera caught forever with the snap of a shutter.

“So, I thought that looking into a photograph is like standing on black lake ice and looking down into the water beneath it. Like black ice, the material surface of a photograph is often transparent to vision: my eye moves right through the thin shiny surface of the photographic paper, except where I see scratches or dust, or where the coating reflects my face.” (Elkins 2011, p.19)

When it is torn, the story the image tells, take on a new form and a new narrative. It becomes more than a photograph now, it is a marker or a prompt to remind me of my emotion in a particular time and place.

8.

“Of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?” (Barthes 2000, p. 6). Found photography, for the most part, are photographic memories of memorable occasions. Holidays, weddings and birthdays; any happy moment of friends and family together needed to be marked and archived, an extension of our memories. Family albums of photographs could be flicked through or studied slowly, like visual bookmarks bringing us back to a happier time and place. As we look with our eyes, our subconscious mind pieces together the information contained in these small pieces of paper and brings them to life again.

9.

In *Camera Lucida*, the author observed three emotions or intentions in a photograph: to do, to undergo and to look. The *Operator* is the eye behind the camera, operating the shutter. The *Spectator* is ourselves, the ones who look through collections of images and interpret them, consciously or unconsciously. And the person or thing featured in the photograph is the *Spectrum*. (Barthes, 2000)

Photo taken from eye level, looking down at the *Spectrum* or referent. The flash has illuminated the scene, reflected in the ornament, shadows cast against the ornate wall. The child's face pale white, almost featureless in the print, reaching towards the *Operator*. Was this photograph planned? Or a spur of the moment? Pre-smartphone era meant owning a camera or the very least, a disposable camera so the *Operator* is conscious of the moment, camera in hand, to do, to capture; flash at the ready. The moment proceeds, the shutter is released and the light is captured. The *Spectrum* has now become an object, and undergoes a transformation. How many people have been *Spectators* of this photograph? The developer of the image, friends and family spectating this intimate moment between three generations. But who really looks at photographs for very long?

10.

“Through photographs we follow in the most troubling way the reality of how people age.”

Photography is in its very nature, what has been, what has passed and what will never be again.

Sontag also called it an “inventory of mortality” (Sontag 1978, pg. 70).

I am aware of my own mortality looking at this photograph, also what I *have* lost and what I wanted to lose in a past moment of anger. That child is forever frozen in time as a representation of childhood. My grandmother is now the sole maternal figure with the forced removal of my mother from the narrative. How easy it is to manipulate one’s own past with a simple tear of a photograph. If I had not known of this photograph to begin with, I wouldn’t have known of the presence of anyone else.

11.

I know I tore a piece of this photograph when I was a teenager in one of the many arguments with my mother. I know I was wanting to cause hurt because I was hurting, in what can only be described as a teenager tantrum. And I feel the burning regret of this even now because I ruined that which can’t be replaced. When the last of us associated with this photograph have gone, there will be no narrator, no one to claim this moment and the next *Spectators* to see this photograph will be creating their own narrative. I remember the original photograph, I can see it clearly in my mind’s eye. My mother with her permed curly hair and oversized jumper (as was the style of the Eighties), the youthful face smiling at her son, her hand forever reaching out to catch him if he falls. Or is this only imagined? A creation from a host of other photographs that I have seen of her from that era.

12.

When photography became more than just a hobby for the rich and found its way into the homes of the working-class in the form of disposable cameras, photographs were being thrown away as much as they were being lovingly kept in albums. The mis-laid, the rubbish, the lost photographs had now given artists a new medium for them to explore by re-using and re-editing. Others, like Martin Parr and Stephen Shore have been influenced by the thematics of the vernacular, the snapshots of life that no amount of planning or posing could re-create.



Found Photos In Detroit is a photo-book by artists Arianna Arcara and Luca Santese from their project of the same name. Their original idea was to document the abandonment and deterioration of Detroit from the socio-economical crisis that hit the city in the middle of the Seventies. What they found on their first trip in 2009, was discarded photographs close to old public buildings such

as police stations, hospitals and schools. They amassed an archive of one thousand photographs, editing it to two hundred for their first body of work. (*censura.it*, 2020)



These photographs tell a story, of inequality and powerlessness, in their images but also the material of the photograph itself holds that narrative. These are torn, bloated with water damage, discoloured and misshapen. They become something that the “ones and zeroes” of a digital photograph simply could not... an historical artefact of a period in time. It’s something you can hold, you can smell and feel. Who are these people? What has become of them? You see their faces, you know where the photographs were found and the economic destitution of the city and most of the images are of African-Americans. All of these elements creates a narrative which might not be the case at all. There is no way to disassociate the image from the material, they are connected now more than when they were first created.

One online reviewer of the book, Vince Leo, writes, “That is the agonising contradiction at the heart of Found Photos of Detroit: that the source of its power as a social critique is made possible only by

appropriating the despair of the abandoned. To hold those contradictory positions in your mind is to grasp the cost of representation; to hold them in your heart is to know truth as an oppressive other.”

Sontag put it another way, “Any collection of photographs is an exercise in surrealist montage and the surrealist abbreviation of history.” (Sontag 1978, pg. 68)

These found photographs have taken on a new form under an artists gaze. They have gone from rubbish to art because they are presented in an artist’s book. The information surrounding the photographs, the subject, the title; all create a forced narrative.

In my own photograph, I am appropriating the image, the narrative, and projecting it onto my own personal guilt. I have taken a happy and blissful family moment and turned it into its own drama.

I can’t look at this photo as objectively as I’d like to. The missing player in the scene, the tear of the paper all add up to what has occurred. Nothing can be changed about this or if it can, its only to further destroy the image and thus wiping it from existence leaving the last shred of it as a faded recollection in my mind.

13.

There was an action I needed to complete if I was to create a fully rounded investigation into this torn photograph. I needed to talk to the one person who was actually there that day and was still alive to chat about it, my mother. I was apprehensive about this, the guilt pang bore heavy in my heart and I imagined a whole plethora of outcomes to her knowing I destroyed this photo in my youth. A photograph of such importance in the growth of her first born, a moment never to be repeated again.

I sat down with her to discuss the photograph, first giving her the photograph to watch her reaction. To let it sink into her psyche, to bring her back to that moment in time. James Elkins described a photograph like a window pane and the world beyond that pane, the subject of the photograph, fused together. (Elkins, 2011)

Would my mother also see it as such?

“That’s you in the picture.” Her first reaction, to which I replied that I knew exactly who was in the picture just nothing outside of it. Who was behind the camera?

“It could have been me, I don’t know.” To which I replied that it couldn’t have been her, for she had been in the picture originally.

“And where is the other half of it?”

I told her that I had ripped it in my teenage years as an act of defiance, revenge and puberty-driven malicious madness.

“Oh right.” Oh right...obviously I imagined a bigger reaction to this scenario. Could she tell me anything about this photograph at all? She imagined that the person behind the camera was either my grandfather or my father, which I had already deduced. At the age that I was in the photograph, she said we were all living in my grandparent’s house at the time before my parents were married and had their first home together. My grandmother was fifty one in this photograph and seven years after this she passed away. This was definitely not, or probably anyways, not a picture of my first steps but instead just one of a few photographs taken that day. She then mentioned that the person who took the photograph could have been my grandmother’s friend and next door neighbour who was always in their house.

What I learned really is that, it didn’t matter really what was going on because I was the one who had created a narrative for this photograph. It meant something to me but it didn’t have to mean anything for my mother. To her, it was just another day or just one of hundreds of photographs that she has in photo albums at home, tucked away somewhere in a drawer or cupboard. It’s not that she doesn’t see the importance of photographs, she has collected hundreds of photographs of my niece since she was born and has them all backed up online. She just looks at them differently. They are a comfort, a keepsake and a reminder of growth and love.

With the impending birth of my own first born in July, I promised my mother that I would recreate this one photograph, her role now as the grandmother figure. I thought that the only way for the photograph to transform into something else, would mean it's inevitable destruction but in fact, it can be made anew.

Conclusion

In this essay I have found myself mentioning the transformation of these objects called photographs, of how in the action of discarding them, they can transcend from their original purpose and carry with them a mystery and create a new story. Like Barthes, I find photography astonishes me. It's not a memory or imagination but, as he called it, reality in a past state. (Barthes, 2000.)

I can't feel like this about digital photography. There are no accidental photographs, no discarded Google Drive folders of weird, one-off shots for someone to discover. Digital photographs are information stored on memory cards. We are bombarded daily with hundreds and thousands of photographs, snapped and deleted, filtered and edited before the right one has been chosen. Then it is sent to the cloud to be distributed online before its been right clicked and saved, copied and pasted, re-edited and re-phased into a Facebook memory that you had forgotten about four years ago. There is nothing to hold onto, that moment in time that meant so much is just someone else's touchscreen swipe while the multi-billion dollar company that owns the software now owns the rights to the image.

Found photographs are the voices of the forgotten, the recording of the lost moments that meant something to someone, somewhere. These photographs end up in bins, found on a street, in a flea market or antiques shop or sold online. Somewhere along the way, whether out of curiosity, nostalgia or as a subject for art; they will make a connection again with someone new.

In analysing this torn photograph under photographic theory, I have found that there is a wealth of information to be mined from something so small. The narrative is connected to experience and emotional content. In contrast to this, it would also mean nothing at all if it was in someone else's hands and why would it? The key to photography is away from digital screens, it needs to be real, something you can hold or stand in front of. To spend time with an image and take in the details with a patient mind. Photographs are the capturing of time, to remind us that it is fleeting and we should look at photographs as memento mori. (Sontag, 1978). This photograph of mine reminds me of arguments, of love and loss but also of the one I hadn't mentioned much who is missing from the photograph; my grandfather (the eye behind the viewfinder...probably). I don't want to think of this photograph as just a torn photograph, this is my Winter Garden and thus I leave the last word to Roland Barthes:

“Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilised code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.” (Barthes, 2000. Pg. 119)

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