Digitally Yours; The Body in Contemporary Photography

Daniel Rubinstein

Introduction

Since the invention of modern photography in 1839, the unremitting production of photographs filled the world not only with endless images, but also with innumerable photographic objects: postcards, limited edition prints, snapshots and studio portraits. This proliferation of the photographic object highlights a paradox: while the photographic image claims a privileged relationship with truth, an evidence that "that was then" (Barthes), the photograph as an object hints at the phantasmagoria of social relations encapsulated in the photograph as material commodity. The photographic object contains within itself traces of its social uses, it speaks of its history, of its owners and of the roles it was designed to perform.

But what of the materiality of the digital image? For the question of photographic materiality – its political-cultural sociality – takes on a peculiar importance especially when one remembers that unlike its predecessor, the digital image is a matrix of digits, a mathematical equation, a binary sequence which can be recorded to disk, transmitted electronically as a stream of data and construed as a visual pattern by algorithms which control the way the image will appear on a display device.[1]

Following this line of thought, the difference between an analogue and a digital photograph can be expressed as follows: An analogue photograph is both an object and an image. It is a reflection of the world, but it is also a trace of world, As Geoffrey Batchen observes: "unlike other systems of representation, the camera does more than just see the world; it is also touched by it."[2] In Peirceian semiotics, photographs belong to the class of "indexical" signs, identified by their physical connection with the object. In the case of photography, the fingerprint of the real is in the formation of the photographic image by the rays of light that are reflected from the photographed object. When the light strikes the light-sensitive film inside the camera, it forms an image that is *analogous* to the object. This

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[1] T. Lenoir, "Introduction," in Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, (London/Cambridge: The MIT Press: 2004), pp. xiii-xv.

[2] G. Batchen, "Ere the Substance Fade," in E. Edwards & J. Hart (eds), *Photographs Objects Histories*, (London/New York, Routledge: 2004), p. 40.

analogue image is preserved through all subsequent copies from the original negative. The privileged position of the photograph as a purveyor of truth is based on the notion that, at least in part, it is an unmediated recording of the object in front of the camera. Roland Barthes described this quality of the photograph as a "message without a code", suggesting that the there is an uninterrupted continuity between the world and the photographic image, which does away with the need to interpret or decode the photograph.[3] This is a privileged position indeed – no other image can claim to be a direct imprint of the real, and it goes a long way to explain the unique status of photography both as a medium for recording memories (for the masses) and as tool of surveillance (for the rulers)[4].

The formulation of photography as an "image without a code" belongs to the historic period of chemical photography, and accurately captures the essence photography's claim for truth. But as we move into the digital age, this special relationship between photography and the real appears to be broken. Sensors that convert the intensity and the colour of light to numeric values record the digital photographic image. While the analogue image is a direct and continuous recording of the object, the digital image is made of discrete picture elements (pixels) that encode light intensity as binary digits. The digital image is therefore nothing else but mathematical code that can be stored, manipulated and transmitted by computers. By following the logic of specific algorithms, it can be displayed on a monitor or output to a digital printer. Visually, the analogue photograph can be similar, even indistinguishable, from the digital image, but the former is fossilised time, a slice of the past preserved, while the latter is a stream of binary data which can be manipulated, edited, rearranged and reconfigured thus breaking photography's link with the real.[5]

In contrast to the digital image that is being stored as a string of binary numbers, the pre-digital, analogue photograph is not only an image, but also an object: a physical and manufactured thing. As an object, a photograph has presence, it belongs to history. The markings left on the photograph by the hands that handled it are an evidence of uniqueness and authenticity.[6] The material qualities of the photograph can be as meaningful and informative as the image. To take one example, the small size of the photographic snapshot suggests certain intimacy between the viewer and the image, this proximity is further

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[3] R. Barthes, *Image music text*, (London: Fontana Press: 1997), p. 17.

[4] S. Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin Books: 1979), p. 178

[5] W.J. Mitchell, *The reconfigured eye*, (Cambridge: MIT Press: 1992), pp. 1-17

[6] N. Vestberg, "Archival Value; on photography, materiality and indexicality," in *Photogrphies* Vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 49-65. (London: Routledge)

reinforced when the snapshot is placed in a family album – the size of which suggests mutual, shared viewing. The back of the snapshot can sometimes carry handwritten inscriptions with the date, the location and the names of the people involved. Taken as a whole, the snapshot holds a complex message, parts of which are located in the object and other parts in the image.[7]

As Joanna Sassoon observed in "Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction":

> [It is]appropriate to consider a photograph as a multi-layered laminated object in which meaning is derived from a symbiotic relationship between materiality, content and context.[8]

That is the case with an analogue photograph, but where will one locate the materiality of the digital image? For it seems to have no material presence at all. Or, if it does, it is to be found in the algorithms which control the appearance of the image on the screen, in the fibre-optic cables which carry signals across networks, in the metal, plastic and polymers which computers are made of.[9] All that seems very different from the experience of holding a photographic print in one's hands, feeling the surface of the print, turning it around to reveal a faded inscription in an old fashioned handwriting.

In addition to appearing dematerialised, fragmented and mathematical in origin, the digital image seems to be lacking the physical and tactile qualities, which contribute to the highly fetishised status of traditional photographs. With this in mind, it would be instructive to ask what is the response of contemporary artists to the apparent dematerialisation of photography that occurs with the transition from the analogue to the digital image. By turning to photographic works made with digital technologies, I am changing the question from "what is digital photography?" to "what can it do?" This is of course a significant shift in focus: from a Platonic search after the essence of the thing, to the functional enquiry about the way in which the thing manifests itself in the world. But as I am questioning after the materiality of the digital image, this shift is justified, if not essential. For as long as we are concerned with essences and ideal forms, the material, the physical and the corporeal will appear as of lesser significance than the operating principle.

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[7] E. Edwards E. & Hart J. *Photographs Objects Histories*. pp. 1-15

[8] J. Sassoon. Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction. in E. Edwards & J. Hart (eds), *Photographs Objects Histories*, (London/New York, Routledge: 2004), p 189

[9] M. Manoff, "The Materiality of digital collections: Theoretical and historical perspectives," in *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 6, No 3, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 311-325.

But before we turn to two recent examples of the ways in which materiality enters the discourse of digital photography, I want to consider briefly one historical image which I hope will help to demonstrate that questions of materiality were of concern to photographers since the early days of the medium.

Historical note

Hippolyte Bayard: *Self-portrait as a drowned man*. 1840

In 1840, Hippolyte Bayard made what is probably the earliest example of a photographic self-portrait. Titled "Self Portrait as a Drowned Man", it was created one year after the invention of photography. Bayard, one of photography's pioneers, is often considered to be the first photographer to use the medium for artistic, rather than scientific or commercial ends.

The image and its caption (*Self Portrait as a Drowned Man*) comprise a multi-layered meditation on the complex relationship of photography with truth and death: the title engages with the truthfulness of photographic representation by admitting that the corpse is a fake. (The relationship between the caption and the image is based on the Cretan paradox, the self cancelling statement '*I am a liar*' – *in Bayard's case '*I am dead*'*)

Bayard is simultaneously inside and outside the image: he is at one and the same time the (dead) subject, the author and the narrator. The title of the image takes issue with photography's ability to show the truth by presenting us with a simulacrum and drawing attention to the manipulative and deceptive possibilities of the medium while at the same time relying on photography's inherent ability to reproduce reality in convincing detail.

In addition to the play of presence and absence created by the juxtaposition of the title with the image, there is a handwritten note on the back of this photograph which negates the

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artifice of the image and directs attention at the same time to the illusion of the dead body and the reality of the photograph as object:

> "The corpse which you see here is that of M Bayard, inventor of the process that you have just seen, […]he has been at the morgue for several days and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and Gentlemen, you'd better pass along for a fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and the hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay. – H.B. 18 October 1840."[10]

In Bayard's photograph the photographic and the corporeal are linked in multiple ways – the corpse of the artist in the picture is a simulacrum, it is a make believe, but the text on the back of the image draws the attention of the viewer simultaneously to the realism and the artifice of the image: the dark patches of skin on the hands and the face are visible evidence of the 'decay'; the body is perceived as a surface that can be inscribed with meaningful signs – a parallel is established therefore between the body and the surface of the photograph.[11]

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[10] G. Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 167-171

[11] For a detailed account of this image see: Batchen, 1999

The body

Alexa Wright: *Archaeology of the Self*. 1997

In the series "Archaeology of the Self" Alexa Wright embeds pictures of fossils onto the body. According to artist's own statement:

> "In this work the body is represented as ambiguous, androgynous, sculptural and monumental. Alluding to both geological formation and artefact, these images contemplate natural/cultural constructions of self. Fossils, resembling tattoos, are depicted embedded in the back to explore ideas of the body as a territory partly formed and occupied by its own (cultural) history and partly consciously controlled."[12]

Here, similarly to Bayard's "*Self-portrait as a drowned man*", the human body is the site of artistic intervention. For Wright as well as for Bayard human skin is a sensitive surface that can be inscribed with messages through the agency of photography. This performative quality of the photographic act is emphasised by drawing attention away from the photograph and directing it towards the body which functions as the site of the performance and as its subject. The similarity between the body and the photograph is further reinforced by the rhetoric of an image within an image: the image (of decay in Bayard, of a fossil in Wright) is framed by the body that is in turn framed by the photograph.

And yet, there is a significant difference between the body/image relationship in the work of Bayard and Wright. The process of digital manipulation that inscribes the fossil onto the skin and marks the body in a way that appears indistinguishable from real, physical scars, suggests not only that there are continuities between our own bodies and the environment we inhabit, but also that there are no clear boundaries between ourselves and digital images. In

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[12] http://www.alteregoinstallation.co.uk/main_site/aofspg.html accessed 06.08.08

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"Archaeology of the Self" the body is both the object of manipulation and the canvas on which the results of digital manipulation are displayed – the fossil is framed by the body, suggesting that the body is the surface of the image, drawing a parallel between the human skin and the computer screen. This work can be read in the context of Katherine Hayles' unpacking of the myth of disembodiment in cultural theory:

> The body's dematerialization depends in complex and highly specific ways on the *embodied* circumstances that and ideology of dematerialization would obscure. Excavating these connections requires a way of talking about the body responsive to its construction as discourse/information and yet not trapped within it.[13]

"Archaeology of the Self" fits within the logic of embodiment as outlined by Hayles: These images present us simultaneously with the simulacrum of representation and with the materiality that produces it. In this context the distinction between the real and the artificial is a discursive and cultural one, not determined by technology alone.

The question of Identity

Wendy McMurdo: *Helen, Backstage, Merlin Theatre (the Glance)*, 1995

The work of Wendy McMurdo concerned with the relationship between the digital and the uncanny. For the project "Doppelganger" she employed traditional photography and computer technology to produce images of children who seem slightly "out of this world", situated as it were between fact and fiction. In this series, each child is digitally "doubled" so

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[13] N. Katherine Hayles, *How we became posthuman*, (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 193

the two – the real and the copy, occupy the same space. This work of Wendy McMurdo is often discussed as an attempt to explore the inaccessible world of children, and as a suggestion that there is a dark side to the popular narratives of childhood.[14] But in the context of present discussion, it seems to me that there is another concern in her work that is directly related to the question of materiality of the digital image.

At first sight, this is a photograph of identical twins identically dressed. The subtitle of the series "the digital and the uncanny" suggests that the photograph is of a real child and her digital double. The image is offering us an opportunity to examine the link between the real and the digital and asks after the relationship between them.

On the most basic level we are presented with a meditation on the question of identity: the identity of twins is at the same time an enquiry after the identity of the digital technology that makes twining possible. And while we are looking at the real person and a copy, we are also confronted with photography's claim for truthful recording of the real, so the identity of photography is being questioned too.

If we remain at this level of understanding we risk missing the opportunity to follow the path beyond the binary opposites of "original" and "copy". Moving past the notion of identity, we are confronted with more complex claim that makes us question the significance of the apparent similarity between the original and the copy. My reading of this aspect of the image is based on Heidegger's "Identity and difference", in which he states that the question of identity is "the oldest, and still the most troubling question in the history of Western thought".[15] The work of McMurdo provides a way of exploring the significance of that question. At first sight, the analogue and the digital girls are identical (twins), we might therefore be tempted to conclude that A=A. Or, as Hegel puts it in the Preface to "Philosophy of Law": "The real is the rational and the rational is the real"[16]. Or, going back to image in hand: the digital child is a fateful copy of the real child. But if this is our reading of the image, we are still in the realm of representation; we are still upholding the rational digital image as a perfect copy of the analogue.

There is something disturbing in this photograph of the twins; something, which keeps reaching out to us, suggesting that we did not go far enough, that there, is more to this

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[14] See for example: http://www.iniva.org/dare/themes/play/mcmurdo.html accessed 07.08.08

[15] Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, (New York: Harper & Row: 1969) p. 23

[16] G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*. Translated by S. W. Dyde (New York, Dover Publications 2005), p. xix

question of identity. So we go back to the image, to notice that the real and the digital do not match; one is not an accurate copy of the other. At last we are drawn to the differences between the two. The question of identity acquires a new meaning; as we are noticing the differences, we become occupied with the image in a new way – now we are comparing the two girls and seeking out the dissimilar, not the identical. The differences between the real person and her digital double are only visible to us, the viewer, and through acknowledging this difference, we become essential to the meaning of the image. In other words, our attention is drawn to the relationship, to the being together of the digital and the analogue. This relationship, which is available in all its richness to the observer who can contemplate both sides at the same time, precedes both the digital and the analogue, being more original then they[17]. So instead of A=A, what we have now is A *is* A. This *is,* third person singular present of the verb *to be* directs us to think about being, the being for whom the relationship between A and A reveals itself.

At the end of this dialogue with the image we arrive at the realisation that for any meaning to emerge there has to be a being to whom the image speaks. In other words, when we say that A = A, (real and digital are the same) we pose an equation based on the premise of mathematical objectivity. This is an idealistic position. The underlying concept of Idealism is that the law of identity is an axiom, an objective, mathematical truth. But when we are saying A *is* A we are saying that A is experienced as A by us as belonging to A. As Joanna Drucker observes:

> […] when empirical and/or positivist logic invades culture to such an extreme that representation appears to present a unitary truth in a totalizing model of thought, then that leaves little or no room for the critical action or agency that are essential to any political action or criticism.[18]

The work of Wendy McMurdo points to a fundamental flaw in the argument that claims complete identity between the digital image and the notion of disembodied, dematerialised information. McMurdo's work seems to suggest the opposite – that there is no information without representation, that information cannot exist on its own, without agency, without specific material conditions, such as the empty theatre where the meeting between the girl and her digital twin takes place.

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[17] Identity and Difference, p. 26

[18] J. Drucker "Digital Ontologies: The ideality of form in/and code storage–or–can graphesis challenge mathesis?" in *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 34 No. 2.
(http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/leonardo/v034/34.2drucker.html)p.142

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Conclusion

As we saw in Bayard's "Self-portrait as a Drowned Man", questions of materiality are part of photography's rhetoric since its invention. But these concerns undergo a transformation in the digital age. For Alexa Wright and Wendy McMurdo materiality of the digital image is linked to the notion of the co-presence of the human and the digital.

In Alexa Wright's work the digital is embodied in the corporeal – the digital image is mediated through the body, which is both the site of the digital manipulation and the medium through which the image comes into being.

The work of Wendy McMurdo problematises the notion of the dematerialised digital image, suggesting that it is not defined by the absence of materiality, but on the contrary, by the presence of the observer who evaluates the differences and the similarities between the original and the digital double. The digital and the analogue are not the same – there is a sense of imperfect match, the digital is not an identical twin. The work points to the differences, the mismatches, the absence of identity, and in doing so involves the viewer as a mediator between the two sides of the image. Difference, not identity, appears to be the commanding rule of digitality. Instead of appealing to mathematical principles, this image suggests that meaning cannot be obtained without human agency.

While the traditional photograph can sit on the mantelpiece or hang on the wall, ostensibly carrying an independent existence of an object in the world, the digital image does not have this level of autonomy from human presence. Lev Manovich pointed out that digital images depend for their existence on user's active involvement – from switching on the computer and ensuring a constant supply of electricity, to proceeding to treat the images according to the logic of hypertext – looking for links, image maps and hidden features, zooming in and out and resizing.[19]

In "New Philosophy for new Media", Mark Hansen argues that the involvement with the image does not stop at the level of interaction delineated by Manovich; he proposes that contemporary digital art underwent a paradigm shift in the very basis of aesthetic culture: it is a shift from the dominant ocularcentric aesthetic to the tactile, haptic aesthetic rooted in the direct and necessary link between digital images and bodies that interpret the images, mediate and perform them.[20]

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[19] L. Manovich, *The language of new media*. MIT Press, Cambridge Mass 2001. p. 183

[20] Hansen, 2004.pp. 9-10

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The idea that digital images are performed, rather than viewed, is significant as it moves away from thinking about photographs as objects, and instead viewing them as processes. This echoes a suggestion made by Raymond Williams in "Problems of Materialism and Culture", where he says:

> "[…] I think the true crisis in cultural theory, in our own time, is between this view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as a practice."[21]

This is not only a call to privilege the mode of production over consumption; it is also a suggestion that works of art have no singular existence:

> "There is no *Fifth Symphony*, there is no work in the whole area of music and dance and performance, which is an object in any way comparable to the works in the visual arts which have survived."[22]

It appears that for the photographers we looked at here, the triumph of digitality demands a re-evaluation of the role of materiality in the discourse of photography. Close examination of their work reveals that in the digital age, materiality still plays an important role in the making of photographic meaning. In fact it could be said, that in the digital age, more than ever before, materiality is the message.

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[21] Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. Verso, London. New York, 1980. p. 47.

[22] Ibid.

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