

## Blank\_\_\_\_\_Photographs

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Photo: Hans Gindlesberger

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**Abstract**

Blank\_\_\_\_\_Photographs surveys three recent studio projects that bypass the indexical nature of the medium and instead excavate history, information, and meaning from empty photographic surfaces.

These projects bind established photographic practice with emerging imaging technologies. They look back at photography's past, toward its possible future, and underneath its surface at the latent information that is often overlooked, but essential to our relationship with images.

**Author Keywords**

Art; Photography; Indexicality; Materiality;  
Photogrammetry; 3D Printing



**Figure 1.** *Tintype (Boy in Plaid with Rosy Cheeks)*, 1855 - 1860s.

Crayon rubbing on tissue paper, overlaid on inkjet reproduction of original tintype. 11" x 14" 2016

As someone who began a serious practice with photography at the threshold between this century and the last, my relationship to the medium has been a nomadic one. This has no doubt been guided by the sense that photography finds itself in a perpetual state of becoming something else. Indeed, my formal education in photography overlaps with perhaps the most transformative sequence of events in its history. Version 1.0 of Photoshop was introduced in 1990 and by 2003 sales of digital cameras had overtaken those of film and the inversion of photography from an analog medium to a digital one was complete.

The notion that the photograph, despite its remarkable ability to fix time, is not a fixed thing itself underlines the three bodies of work in this paper. Each is invested in the view of photography that Geoffrey Batchen describes in his book *Each Wild Idea*. Batchen argues rather than being defined by any singular technology, photography persists as an economy of desires and concepts including "things like nature, knowledge, representation, time, space, observing subject, and observed object. Thus, if we do have to define it for a moment, we might say that photography is the desire, conscious or not, to orchestrate a particular set of relationships between these various concepts." Therefore, my projects *A Photographic Timeline*, *Partial Architectures*, and *Plain Sight* often find themselves as concerned with the latent information embedded in, and adjunct to, the photograph as they are in what was being looked at by the camera. These projects gesture toward the invisible context and the overlooked materiality of the image by encouraging the photograph to transfigure into something else, whether it be drawing, architecture, false memory, or data, in order

to look beyond the image itself.

The series *A Photographic Timeline* presents a straightforward, didactic chronology of major photographic processes and formats from the advent of the medium up to its present-day forms. Each piece is made by creating a crayon rubbing of the actual photographic object, then overlaying the source image with its topographic impression. In surveying photography's mutability, these artifacts simultaneously push back against the indexicality that is photography's core tenant. Images such as *Tintype (Boy in Plaid with Rosy Cheeks)*, 1855 - 1860s (fig. 1) seek to invert the typical relationship between object and image by looking past the picture and toward the physical contours of the substrate that are equally as present and offer an alternative understanding and access point to the photograph.

The rubbing technique perversely obscures the visual information typically desired from photographs, while calling forth another kind of surface information that speaks instead to the care, the abuse, the ornamentation and alterations unique to each photograph's encounter with the world. Originating, for the most part, as mechanically reproduced multiples, time has transfigured each specimen into a unique object, which the rubbing technique is apt to record. The creases, folds, tears, and warping or decorative encasements, protective varnishes, and embossed embellishments that we, as viewers, are often trained to look past, now come to the fore and dominate the reading of the image in the peculiar way this particular encounter is configured.

Despite the subversive appeal, it must be acknowledged that, from a visual standpoint, the idea of creating a rubbing of a photograph is an absurd one. Two less compatible processes could not be imagined. However, an internal logic is at play in the material relationship between image and object. Just before seriously diving into this project, while I had the notion to make rubbings of photographs in mind, but was doubtful about whether it made any sense, I came across the catalog for an exhibition called *Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now*, co-organized by the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles and The Menil Collection, Houston. What was immediately striking was the language used to describe the work - trace, phantom, witness - as being common to the discourse of photography. The curator of that exhibition, Allegra Pesenti, described rubbing as "an indexical contact process that re-inscribes an image with the notion of memorializing that which has passed away" - a definition that could just as effectively be applied to an image that comes out of a camera.

In employing a technique most familiar from the colloquial act of copying the face of gravestones, I think of each of these pieces as an elegy for one brief iteration of a medium that is constantly dying and reinventing itself. They are also a call to actively seek out a physical relationship with the images we produce. Estimates point to 1.3 trillion photographs having been made in 2017, and they were, of course, disproportionately created and consumed through the relatively homogenizing and immaterial experience of a digital screen.

While debates that privilege either the analog or digital

image over the other have become tiresome, it's undeniable that physical photographs have a special way of wedging themselves into one's lived experience. Part of the motivation to better understand the materiality of photography's history can also be traced back to an experience in which I was let down by the fragility of traditional photographic materials and turned to a new set of digital tools in an act of photographic resuscitation.

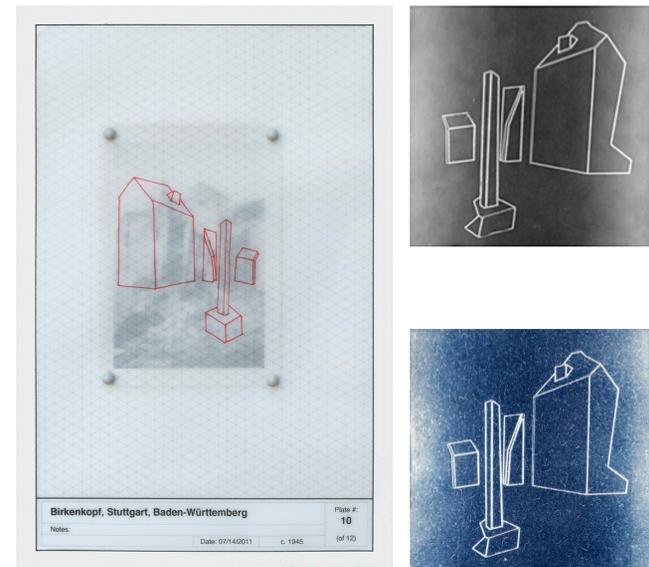
In 2011, my family was preparing to sell my grandfather's home and was in the process of boxing up his possessions. In a closet, a roll of film was found that he had shot in Germany while he was stationed there as a soldier in the US Army during World War II. For reasons unknown, this single roll was never developed and was then forgotten for close to 70 years. In the months before he passed away, we questioned him about what might be on it, but he could not recall. Eventually, the film was sent to a lab in Chicago that specialized in the handling of old stock to be developed, but it returned as a strip of dense blackness, the accumulation of decades of time and life after returning from the war.

By coincidence, I had planned to travel to Germany around the same time, which made me all the more interested in the history and the experience that was captured and still held as a latent image on the film. Although a faulty memory and the fragility of film had clouded the hope of knowing what he had witnessed, my imagination continued to work on the problem, wondering if there might be an inventive way to circumvent this failure and somehow extract the latent history once recorded and still embedded in the film.

The project that came from this line of thinking, *Partial Architectures*, built in phases, interspersing photography and other technologies. As a starting point, the project began with a small collection of war time photographs my grandfather had, in fact, printed. Surprisingly, nearly all of the images he brought back were rather impersonal snapshots of the ruined remains of singular buildings. It was reasonable to assume that whatever had been captured onto the blackened roll was likely to be similar to these studies. Thus, the project began by covering this collection of archival photographs with tracing paper and transcribing diagrams that extrapolated on the remains of architectures ruined by the bombings, circumscribing what was alluded to by the ruins but no longer in visual evidence in the landscape (see fig. 2).

This gesture was informed by an experience had while attempting to relocate Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, which I had visited five years earlier. Upon returning to the church's square and wondering around for some time, neither myself nor my travel companion were able to find the iconic landmark. Eventually, we happened upon some signage and learned that the church had been temporarily ensconced in a protective facade, which gave it an appearance similar to any of the other modern buildings in the surrounding area.

Not only was the enclosure graphically similar to the simplified geometric drawings I later made, the experience of being in a location whose history is simultaneously absent and present correlated to the obfuscation of the images contained on the severely overexposed roll of film.



**Figure 2.** Left: *Schematic #10 (Birkenkopf, Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg)*, Pen and Ink on Gridded Vellum, Overlaid on Archival Silver Gelatin Print 6" x 9" 2011

Top Right: Top Right: Laser-Etched Archival Negative. 2.25" x 2.25" 2011

Bottom Right: Cyanotype from Laser-Etched Negative. 2.25" x 2.25" 2011

If the scenes my grandfather captured with his camera were to remain inaccessible through traditional photographic means, the next phase of *Partial Architectures* sought to navigate around the problem by using a laser cutting system to take the schematic drawings and inscribe them directly back into the vintage negatives. Drawings of absent architectures derived from his photographs, now written with light



**Figure 3.** *Untitled #2*  
(*Schloßgarten Park, Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg*), Inkjet Print on Hahnemühle German Etching Paper. 30" x 20" 2011

back into photographic material, create a document that conflates my grandfather's experience with my imagination, history with the present, and old technologies with new ones.

Similar to the way *A Photographic Timeline* sought to negotiate an uneasy logic between two divergent processes, *Partial Architectures* again embraces a dubious methodology in its attempt to recover the history and familial memory that has, inevitably, been lost to time. However, the grand gesture of the project was guided by a desire to establish some sense of legitimacy in the process. With this objective in mind, the photograph, in and of itself, felt insufficient. A collective familiarity with digital manipulation has only increased skepticism and eroded the notion of photographic truth. In order for the artifice being constructed to have a degree of credibility, it seemed incumbent on creating something that actually was tangible and physically real.

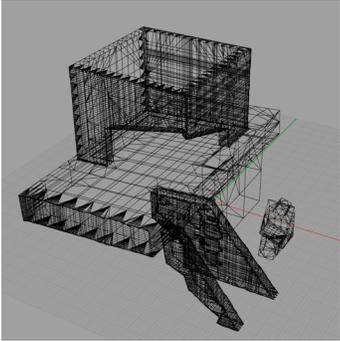
Confronted with this problem, *Partial Architectures* turned toward an unlikely confluence of old and new technologies. The negatives, with schematics now written into them, were contact printed as cyanotypes. The incorporation of the cyanotype, which had a long-established use in the production of architectural blueprints, foreshadows the physical presence these forms would later establish. The blueprint schematics were then digitized and re-encoded into three-dimensional models and realized as actual objects through a rapid prototyping process. The dialogue between mediums in this iterative process has the effect of building a self-validating circuit that creates a type of illusion where the recycling of content in each

subsequent step seems to affirm the previous iteration.

These anomalous objects exist as artifacts that fulfill a role similar to the photograph, as a trace of something once present in the world. In being generated out of this multi-layered procedure, they accumulate a degree of authority that trades on the veracity of the historical photograph they derive from and are augmented by a broad scope of technologies that lend these traces new physical and psychological dimensions.

The final phase in the project was to situate, as closely as possible, these vaguely architectural forms back into the landscapes they are associated with. On travels through Germany I remapped my grandfather's own movements through the country and documented sites he too may have witnessed. The archival photographs, which provided the visual seed for the project, lacked any contextual information that would indicate specific places where they were taken. Therefore, images such as *Untitled #2 (Schloßgarten Park, Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg)* (fig. 3) come to rest as the project began, as a speculative exercise that pair the forms with sites in a way that is approximate at best.

The awkward presence of the formations within the landscape animates the space between reality and imagination. Relative to a visual culture accustomed to seeing entire worlds fabricated inside a computer, these forms maintain an uncanny attachment to the real. They have a clear provenance going back to a particular moment in time, historical event, and known creator, but exist as ambiguous vestiges suggestive of monuments, architectures, or perhaps existing foremost as unknowable aberrations in the landscape.



**Figure 4.** Screen capture of a 3D model inside Rhino software. Production documentation for *Partial Architectures*.



**Figure 5.** Screen capture of a photogrammetry model inside 123D Catch software. Production documentation for *Plain Sight*.

The American Civil War provides a footnote to this project. In researching various photographic processes, I came across accounts that described a practice in the aftermath of the Civil War of repurposing glass plate negatives for use in the facades of greenhouses. Surviving as architectural elements, they were largely forgotten as “the sun slowly eras(ed) any memory of the images they once held.”

As a final gesture in the project, the archival photographs used to make the architectural drawings from were digitally grafted onto the surfaces of the three-dimensional prints. In this process, photographic images were imported into a software program and the pattern of light and dark, constituted from the silver halide of the vintage prints, was extruded out into three dimensions. Re-embedding the original photograph into a successive generation of itself brought the project’s internal logic full circle. What began as an attempt to salvage of a piece of family history became a meditation on making the invisible visible and the broader reconfiguration of concepts of memory, time, and place we are already experiencing through the deployment of these emerging technologies.

Where *Partial Architectures* leveraged new technology to augment the photograph and extend its capacity as a repository for evidence and experience, a subsequent project, *Plain Sight*, took a reductive approach. Creating *Partial Architectures* involved stepping into a software environment foreign to a photographer. Naivety has the occasional benefit of affording a more interesting way of thinking about technology and, at a fundamental level, it was simply exciting to engage with photographs under a new set of visual

circumstances. Outside the familiar confines of Photoshop, my relationship to the photographs I was working with and how I was seeing them became disoriented (see fig. 4, fig. 5).



**Figure 6.** *Woman in Buttoned Shirt, Round Glasses, Large Teeth*, Inkjet Print on Vellum. 24" x 20" 2014

What the images in *Plain Sight* show are people holding actual photographs from their personal collections that they have designated as being significant to them (see fig. 6). If this departure from conventional practice was motivated by a simple question, namely, “Can this be defined as photography?,” it felt as though the question would be best served if the content was self-reflexive. What’s at stake is not how this process represents a subject in the world, but how it does or does not replicate the qualities of a photograph itself.



**Figure 7.** *Hotel, Man and Woman Kissing, Three Passersby*, Inkjet Print on Vellum. 20" x 24" 2014

One of the more visually unusual software environments available at the time was 123D Catch, a now discontinued web application from Autodesk. 123D Catch was a photogrammetry program, which allowed the user to import an array of photos taken of a consistent subject from multiple angles.

This type of software analyzes photographs to find matching information, then measures spatial distance by comparing the scale of objects across the source images. From this data, the program is able to render a three-dimensional model of the subject or scene. While photographs often serve as the input material, photogrammetry software is unlike dedicated image editing programs. It has no role in traditional photographic practice. Rather, it is applied to fields where being able to create reliable simulations of 3D space is an asset, including map making, manufacturing, archeology, and computer gaming.

However, to the photographer's eye, the environment of 123D Catch did elicit an immediate visual response. The software uniquely manipulates the imagery as it attempts to take photographic details and paste them back on to the surface of the model they were used to create. The fidelity is impressive, but the models harbor many glitches that produce a jarring distortion in photography's essential skill, namely the ability to accurately transcribe the appearance of surfaces. Nonetheless, it remains very close to photography. Everything seen is captured with a camera and, although the photos are transcoded by a computer program, it's one where the overriding objective is still to constitute the subject as accurately as possible.

The curious flaws and uncanny aesthetic might prove alluring to the eye, but the photographic skin isn't necessarily what someone using photogrammetry software is primarily after. Therefore, it's possible to easily discard that layer of information in favor of the wireframe model underneath, which is closer to the raw data recorded. This version of the subject created an even more compelling paradox. All of the information is photographic. It originated in a camera that was directly observing a subject. However, on this subcutaneous level, the product lacks any indexical quality of photography. In losing that essential characteristic, does it render photography ineffectual or does it have the potential of opening new possibilities of perceiving and relating to the subject?

When inviting people into the studio to participate in the project, they were asked to bring images that were of consequence, however they defined it. The images are simultaneously empty and full, charged with meaning, if only for the person to which they belong. This is partly because of their visual vacancy, but also due to most participants selecting the sort of vernacular photographs that are often banal to all but their owner. As may be expected, nearly all of the photographs chosen were of parents, children, partners, with the occasional inclusion of a landscape where a personal experience may have once taken place.

On the rare occasion someone brought a more widely recognized image, it had a unique specificity, such as Robert Doisneau's *The Kiss* (fig. 7), which the sitter encountered as a young girl, but which was later confiscated by her father for being too illicit in a conservative household.

For the most part, they were similar to the family photograph documented in *Man and Woman in T-Shirts, Green Lawn, Red Brick Building with Six Large Windows* (fig. 8), which exists as the only photograph this person has of his parents together, prior to their divorce when he was three years old.



**Figure 8.** One of 45 source photographs for the image *Man and Woman in T-Shirts, Green Lawn, Red Brick Building with Six Large Windows*, 2015

A further frustration comes in the decision to withhold the story behind the images or the sitter's motivations for their selection. In the absence of their testimony and without the indexical surface that provides so many clues, the capacity of the photograph to communicate seems stunted.

The images are printed on a translucent vellum, which amplifies their emptiness and are accompanied by titles that, in the most plainspoken way, list the primary visual elements of the image, in lieu of the rich

information the camera scrapes off the surface of its subject. Though apparently ineffectual, a counter argument exists in our proclivity to be misled by surfaces. The unseen aspects of the photographic act, the ambiguities resulting from the way the photographic image abstracts the world, or the biased readings we bring to its content offer ample opportunity to precipitate the construction of erroneous narratives.

In the absence of what's traditionally thought of as photographic, how would we navigate the image to make meaning out of it? There remains useful information. Each image is a careful articulation of a person's physical relationship to the photograph, an experience that is both increasingly uncommon and, therefore, all the more resonant when it does occur. The physical and emotional impact of the photograph is in evidence, even if its details are obscured. Seen this way, perhaps we become re-sensitized to even the most banal image, our relationship to the photographic object, and the complex processes we unconsciously undertake to animate those surfaces with meaning.

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