

NO NEED TO REMEMBER WHEN 'CAUSE EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN!': VISUAL ARCHAEOLOGIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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What might it mean, in a time when you make phone calls with your camera, to deliberately take up a photographic practice whose basis is in silver, in collodion, in glass? Has digitization, by changing the material base of photography, changed its meaning? How can we compare works created with the technology of the 19th century with works and technologies of the 21st century? What new possibilities may be emerging? *Scope 8, Visual Archaeologies of Photography*, presents some responses to these questions.

1. *The light of those joyful mornings*

The fact that two enunciations are exactly identical, that they are made up of the same words used with the same meaning, does not, as we know, mean that they are absolutely identical.

Michel Foucault, "The Original and the Regular"²

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, from which we take the title of this issue, Foucault pours scorn on models of history that concern themselves with chronologies of invention. Archaeology, says Foucault "remains unmoved at the moment when for the first time someone was sure of some truth: it does not try to restore the light of those joyful mornings."³ As an alternative, Foucault suggests that history should concern itself with "discursive regularities" and "enunciative regularities". For Foucault, it is naïve and unimportant to enquire (for example) whether Archer or Cutting made the first ambrotype, with the intention of seeing one as "original" and the other as "banal". Instead, all ambrotypes can be seen as part of an enunciative regularity, in which they are all statements made using the same language. The regularity contains "creative" and "imitative" statements, and statements made in different times and places. It might seem unusual that photographers working in the 21st century would choose to use techniques and technologies from the 19th century; but under this construction, these photographers can be seen to be participating in an ongoing enunciative regularity—*enunciative*, as they are using the same language, the same means. The work they make belongs to the same formation, whether or not it seems to restate something that has already been said. This does not mean that a 19th century tintype and a 21st century one are identical, as Foucault notes above, but it does mean that the order in which they were made is less important than what they might have to say to each other. And it means that, as well as strictly chronological relationships between those images, there can be readings in which the newer image can inform the older one.

Foucault uses both the term "enunciative regulaties" and the term "discursive regularities" in his text.⁴ Perhaps we could use "enunciative" to describe technologies, means of operation, and "discursive" to describe ideas? Then, having agreed that there are enunciative similarities between, for example, Dan Estabrook and W H Fox Talbot, or between Ben Cauchi, Keliy Anderson-Staley, and Frederick Scott Archer, the question yet remains as to whether they can be housed within the same "discursive regularity". Works and texts by Geoffrey Batchen (on Keliy Anderson-Staley), Kevin Fisher (on Ben Cauchi), Joyce Cambell, Dan Estabrook and Jai Hall, take up this question in various ways in the essays and statements here collected.

2. *The green ray*

Jeffrey Eugenides: Does everybody see the green ray when they see the film, or does it happen too fast?

Tacita Dean: No. That's what's nice about it, because otherwise the film would just be about a phenomenon. But in the end it's more about perception and faith, I think.

JE: Did you always see it?

TD: This is really interesting, because I filmed it on this beach in Madagascar, and there was this couple who were hanging around. They didn't see the green ray, and they'd videotaped the sunset to document it. Then they replayed their video to me for proof that it wasn't there. But I was absolutely convinced that I had seen it, so it had to be on my film, which was optical and analog. When I got the film back, it was very, very faint, and I had to really push it to get more color in the film, to bring out the green ray. But it's definitely there. It's not a fiction. Some people think the green ray is an illusion, but it's not.⁵

Tacita Dean, interview with Jeffrey Eugenides, *BOMB* magazine, 2006

As several of the texts in this issue of *Scope* point out, some recent digital technologies have attempted to adopt the aesthetic of the analogue, ranging from digital "tintypes" to Instagram filters designed to emulate a notional film stock and its notional degradations in colour and tone. Essays by Courtney Johnston, Rachel Allan and Ted Whitaker all discuss these digital simulacra. Once again, Foucault's argument that "the originality/banality opposition is not relevant"⁶ might be applied in coming to an accommodation with images made with these technologies. Rather than arguing, then, that digital simulations of, say, tintypes, are validating a "new" form of photography with reference to an "older" type, the question instead is whether or not digital tintypes and analogue ones share a common discursive regularity, even if they do not share an enunciative regularity.

The photographic materials and systems I've used throughout my career are disappearing at an alarming rate. Over the last five years, companies such as Kodak, Agfa, and Polaroid have been pushed into an economic free-fall as the demand for their long-established products has evaporated. The end of the analogue era is evident in the recent closings and demolition of large-scale manufacturing facilities dedicated to the production of conventional photographic products.

Robert Burley, *The Disappearance of Darkness*⁷

It is a commonplace of photographic discourse that just now, or just recently, the digital image has replaced the chemical image. This has often been presented in terms of "the end of an era". Though the notion of "discursive regularities" tends to suggest a continuity in discourse, rather than a decisive rupture, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that among many parts of the community of photographers, particularly those who use analogue technologies as their primary creative means, there is a sense of loss at this perceived end of days. This loss has been caused in part by the destruction of infrastructure that supported these technologies (a destruction which has been recorded, for example, in Robert Burley's portfolio *The Disappearance of Darkness*). Throughout the modern era, photography has been the recording angel of the power that technology possesses, power to create and power to destroy. Gary Blackman's contribution to this issue, of Polaroid SX-70s and a brief statement, reminds us that these processes of destruction and reinvention have always churned away at the material base of photography as it has existed at any given moment in time. At the same time, he makes it clear that there is something essential to the Polaroid that should be missed and perhaps mourned, something that a digital simulation of a Polaroid does not contain. Like Gary Blackman, Brian Scadden and Alan Bekhuis have also made comment on how analogue photographers can operate at or after the perceived end of an era. As the section of Tacita Dean's interview in the epigraph points out, some photographers fear that what may be lost when film is lost is a way of seeing.

This is not to say that photographic work which examines the history of photography must necessarily be attempting to preserve something that is lost. Perhaps photographers who examine the history of photography are doing so out of a sense that the medium has enough history now for this to be possible: in short, that it has the mature self-confidence to be reflective, rather than constantly and neurotically re-inventing itself. Vikky Alexander's work, here paired with an image by Eugène Atget, might be considered in this vein.

3. *The last gleam of a dying star*

[Walter] Benjamin believed that at the birth of a given social form or technological process the utopian dimension was present, and, furthermore, that it is precisely at the moment of the obsolescence of that technology that it once more releases this dimension, like the last gleam of a dying star.⁸

...it is the onset of higher orders of technology... which allows us, by rendering older techniques outmoded, to grasp the inner complexity of the mediums those techniques support.⁹

Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*

In *A Voyage on the North Sea*, Rosalind Krauss describes Marcel Broodthaers, making films in the late 1960s and early 1970s, imagining himself to be an "artisanal" filmmaker of a type extinguished 50 years earlier. Broodthaers, says Krauss, was

...understanding the medium in the light of the openness promised by early film, an openness woven into the very mesh of the image, as the flickering irresolution of the illusion of movement produced the experience of sight itself as dilated: a phenomenological mixture of presence and absence, immediacy and distance.¹⁰

Under this reading of his work, Broodthaers has performed an extraordinary feat: imagining himself back in time, forgetting what he "knew" about how to construct a film, in order to learn something new about it. What possibilities for image-making, for understanding the world, were laid open by the early experimenters in cinema? Krauss, moving from the specific to the general, offers an intriguing thought:

As Benjamin had promised, nothing brings the promise encoded at the birth of a technological form to light as effectively as the fall into obsolescence of its final stages of development.¹¹

If chemical photography is "falling into obsolescence", what promises might be brought to light? How can we read back into photography's history, looking for clues for what to do now?

One model of this kind of historical reading is visual archaeology as supermarket: take any form, any technology, any aesthetic that can be derived from such a combination, and mix-n-match, making the tacit assumption that everything has a cultural equivalence and, at the same time, has no specific meaning. *No need to remember* the specific histories of a material or a way of working: just grab onto it and blaze away 'cause everything old is new again. But another, more reflective model of archaeology looks back on that which was offered on one or other "joyful morning", not to establish an order of precedence but to consider what facets of the "promise encoded at the birth of a technological form" may not yet have been explored. In this issue of *Scope*, we reproduce some work of Andrew Beck's, which, returning to the simplest mechanisms of photosensitivity, suggests new sculptural possibilities for the photographic image, connected certainly, if anachronistically, to Minimalist sculpture among other things. Caroline McQuarrie's images, also contained here, might be seen as exploring the heliographic reproductions of the 1820s as much as the operations and possibilities of the scanner.

Earlier this year, the British band London Grammar released a video for their song *I'm Wasting My Young Years*. The major sequences of the clip are composed of hundreds of simultaneous exposures from pinhole cameras, which

were stuffed with rollfilm and arranged in a ring or a strip around models' acrobatic jumps and dives. Set in motion, the pinhole frames depict the subjects caught in a static position, while the camera's point-of-view whirls around the moment. There's a heritage here, of course, not Muybridge and Marey but Tim Macmillan's *Time-Slice* and the "bullet time" of *The Matrix*, both from the 1990s. But the softness of these images (wide apertures to get fast exposures, imperfect pinholes) and the judderiness of the frames takes you back to the first films, (products themselves of early photographs) and makes you wonder, was the monocular logic of cinema as we understand it inevitable? Or were there, on that particular joyful morning, other choices for how the moving image might have worked? *Visual Archaeologies* suggests that those possibilities for the camera's images were not lost when photography and cinema took on the forms that they now appear to possess: rather, all the other possibilities were left latent, and they might yet, if approached with a sensibility that is forgetful of how things are supposed to be done, still be capable of being developed.

- 1 Lyrics from Peter Allen's 1974 song "Everything Old is New Again", from the album *Continental American*, A&M Records/UMG. The song continues: Don't throw the past away/ You might need it some other rainy day/ Dreams can come true again/ When everything old is new again.
- 2 Foucault, Michel, "The Original and the Regular" in his *The Order of Things*. (Translated from the French by A M Sheridan Smith. First published (in French) 1969; this edition New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 143
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 144
- 4 In many places, but also in *ibid.*, p. 144-5
- 5 Eugenides, Jeffrey, "Tacita Dean" [interview] *BOMB* 95/Spring 2006. Accessed May 2013 at <http://bombsite.com/issues/95/articles/2801>
- 6 Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 144
- 7 Burley, Robert, *The Disappearance of Darkness: photography at the end of the analog era*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013), p. 13
- 8 Krauss, Rosalind, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999) p. 41
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 53
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 44
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 45