

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEOFFREY BATCHEN

ENTREVISTA COM GEOFFREY BATCHEN

Geoffrey Batchen is professor of Art History at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. His next book is titled *Apparitions: photography and dissemination* (Power Publications, 2019).



Figure 1 - A view of Geoffrey Batchen teaching from Camera Lucida in 2009. Photo: Vlad da Cunha

Acervo. We would like to start by asking you to comment on your trajectory as a historian, professor and researcher of photography. How exactly did you enter the world of images and visual culture?

Batchen. I studied art history at the University of Sydney in the late 1970s but was never taught anything about the history of photography. It was only when in 1983 I joined the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York that I was exposed, through artists like Martha Rosler and Barbara Kruger and critics like Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh, to both postmodern theory and photography as a key element of it. I came home to Australia determined to write a PhD about the end of photography but found myself having first to account for the medium's beginnings. This project was eventually published as *Burning with Desire*. The question of photography's identity, a central issue

for this book, soon led me to reflect on the identity of my own discipline, the history of photography. I have always been attracted to the way this history allows one to pursue an almost infinite range of interests, from war to birth, from the stars to atoms, from art to commerce. And yet I became aware that there were many types of photographic practice that were not acknowledged by established histories of photography. So, as a means of developing a different way of writing that history, I chose to address various forms of vernacular photograph. More recently, I have been tracing a history for the photographic image, another aspect of photography that is usually ignored in official histories. Now I am writing a history for the photographic negative. In all these cases, I try to look to the margins of my discipline, to those things the discipline wants to ignore or repress, precisely in order to turn that discipline inside out, to make us all think again about those things we thought we already knew.

Acervo. *How does a reflection upon the photographic image contribute to the understanding of historical processes?*

Batchen. The photographic image is a strange and elusive apparition, being that aspect of the photograph that is derived, and yet separated, from the source it reproduces. It is the immaterial element of the photograph that we might call its intellectual property, the thing reproduced as a wood engraving or a photomechanical illustration in order to stand in for that which is otherwise absent (the thing which is photographic but is not in fact a photograph). Commercial photographers sought to separate the photograph from its image, and to find a lucrative market for each, from the earliest years. A study of that process necessitates an examination of photography's relationship to reproduction and dissemination, and thus to capitalism and globalism. It also provides a history that can make sense of the digital present. For all these reasons, I think a reflection on the photographic image is an important project.

Acervo. *Many commentators over the years praised photography as a definite substitute for the scientist's/artist's eye, mind or hand. Considering the word "reflection" used in the previous question, did photography change the cultural or scientific use of this substantive?*

Batchen. Photography has both extended and transformed the human eye, becoming a prosthesis that can go where nobody can go, to see what no mortal can see. The question is whether that prosthesis captures a world outside of itself or creates its own "photographic" world, based on the inherent mechanical and chemical properties of its apparatus. The world moves through space and time, whereas a photograph flattens three dimensions into two and slices diachronic time into a single sliver. A photographic image of Jupiter tells us as much about photography as it does about this otherwise invisible planet. Photography should therefore be associated with that aspect of reflection that is defined in terms of self-critical thought rather than slavish objectivity, with looking *at* a mirror as much as in it.

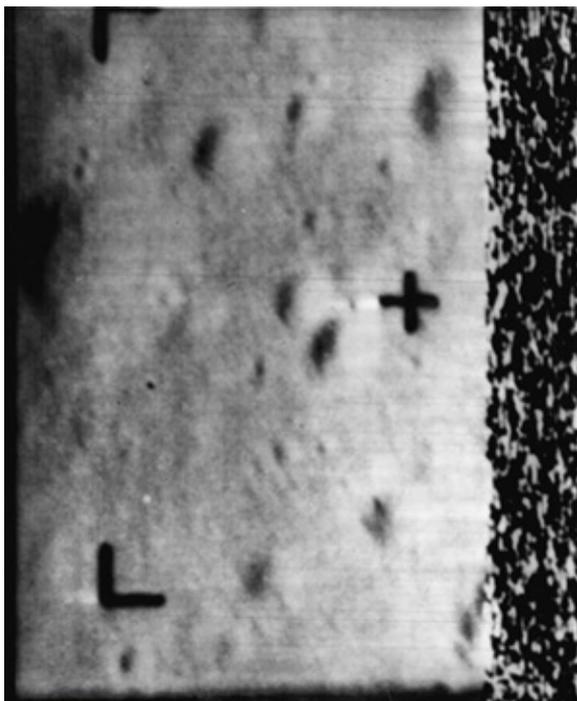


Figure 2 - Nasa (USA), Associated Press Wire Photo. This is a recropped version of JPL5 of today to provide larger copy of the upper left-hand section, showing the last picture from the Ranger VII spacecraft, 1964, gelatin silver photograph, 20.6 x 22.5 cm, 39.0 x 34.7 cm (frame). Collection of Geoffrey Batchen, Wellington

Acervo. *You have been very successful in the exploration of shadowy or neglected histories of photography. By the turn of the 21st century, you wrote that vernacular photographs usually “preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy [...]. Taken together, these ordinary and regional artifacts represent the troublesome field of vernacular photography; they are the abject photographies for which an appropriate history must now be written” (Each Wild Idea, p. 56). Has anything changed in the last two decades?*

Batchen. Yes, much has changed. When I wrote that essay, the word “vernacular” was adopted as a provocation for a field that had refused to acknowledge the majority of photographs as being of value or interest. I began by associating the word with what I called “ordinary photographs”, those photographs that the established histories of photography had chosen to ignore. I especially emphasised hybrid objects, suggesting that they involved commerce, sentiment, conformity and touch, all qualities considered not proper to respectable photographs, or at least to respectable historians. But I also referred to “neglected indigenous genres and practices”, specifically mentioning gilt Indian albumen prints, American painted and framed totypes, Nigerian *ibeji* images and Mexican *fotoescultura*. In extending the term in this way, I was encompassing the full range of meanings of the word “vernacular” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which include “ordinary” and “ubiquitous” but also “local,” as in the expression “speaking in the vernacular”. These kinds of regionally-specific artefacts, I said, “necessarily speak to us of difference, of cultural difference but also of photography’s own differences from itself”.

Notably, I used the word "abject" to describe all these photographs, whether ordinary or regional, calling on the work of Julia Kristeva to associate them with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite". It was in this quasi-revolutionary spirit that I then proceeded, arguing, not just for the inclusion of vernacular photographs within the existing history of photography, but for vernaculars to be made the "organising principle of photography's history in general", for a "*vernacular* theory of photography" to be advanced. In summary, I claimed that "vernacular photographs demand the invention of suitably vernacular histories". I knew that there was nothing particularly radical or disturbing to the *status quo* in simply adding vernacular examples to the pantheon of photography. What had to be disturbed was the whole system that supported any such pantheon. What was needed, as I argued in the last line of my essay, was "an eruption that promises to transform, not just this history's object of study, but its very mode of existence".

The vernacular turn in photo-history has of course now become typical rather than exceptional. The fact that, say, the Walther Collection comprises both portraits by Richard Avedon and criminal mug shots, both works by the Bechers and by Malick Sidibé, and regularly exhibits them in the same exhibition, suggests that any clear distinctions between commercial, artistic and vernacular photography have long since dissolved. I worry about



Figure 3 - Makers unknown (United States). Portrait of husband and wife on their wedding day, c. 1890, albumen photograph on card (cabinet card), rosette, veil, wooden frame with glass, 40.0 x 31.5 x 7.5 cm. Collection of Geoffrey Batchen, New Zealand

the ease of that dissolution. The art world has always had a rapacious capacity to absorb the readymade into its economy, especially if that readymade can be subsumed to the mesmeric taxonomic pleasures of the grid. As I have already said, the adoption of the term was always intended to be incendiary, to serve as a call for a transformation of that history in its entirety: in the way it was organised, in the way it was written and displayed, and in the way it accorded and accrued value and meaning. That challenge is still with us. Now that the term "vernacular photography" is firmly established in the lexicon I propose that we henceforth abandon it and instead speak only of "photography". At least that way we can entirely focus our critical attention on what photographs *do*, wherever they are found, rather than on what they are, or what they were. For, only by engaging with what photographs are actually *doing*, can we mount an effective argument about what they still might *become*.

Acervo. *Considering digital photography, is it fair to make a link between the lack of an analogical result (negative or positive) and the absence of an external referent, a previous reality? Have the ideas of proof, document or evidence been disrupted by what you've called post-photography?*

Batchen. We need to be careful that we don't too simply associate analog photography with truth and evidence and digital photography with artifice and distrust. As no less a figure than Edward Steichen wrote in 1903, "every photograph is a *fake* from start to finish, a purely



Figure 4 - "24 Hrs In Photos", Erik Kessels

impersonal, unmanipulated photograph being practically impossible". So the question should not be about whether any particular photograph has been manipulated: all of them have been. Our questions should be about *how*, and to what ends, that manipulation has taken place. I first used the term "post-photography" in an essay I wrote in 1992, an essay that discussed various photographic art works, none of which was made using digital technologies. I suggested that, in this work, "photography has become 'photography,' eternally framed by the quotation marks of historical distance and a certain awkward self-consciousness". I was therefore using the term to signal, not simply an "after photography" but rather, as I put it then, "that moment after but not yet beyond photography... when photography was everywhere but no-where in particular". For me, therefore, "post-photography" represents a certain attitude to the photograph, with the emphasis on a self-consciousness on the part of artists about photography's own history or even a recognition that photography is now itself "history." In this context, I proposed that post-photography be regarded as a folding of photography back on itself, a photography involved in a cannibalizing of itself, a photography that offered us a knowing reflection on its own reflections. I believe that, whatever the technology being used, this kind of self-reflexive attitude to the photograph continues to be relevant today.

Acervo. *In your experience, what challenges does the digital image pose to archives and collections? Does a collection of digital photographs fit in with an institutional archive?*

Batchen. The digital image does indeed pose a number of challenges to archives and collections. Let me name just two of them: the sheer number of digital images being made today, making it impossible to easily select a representative sample for preservation, and the regular obsolescence of digital storage modalities, platforms and viewing vehicles. Fortunately, I am not an archivist, but I am aware that these two issues are among those being debated by professional librarians today. Of course, these issues, and especially the first one, also preoccupy photo-historians who want to discuss the present and recent past. I have written a number of essays about this issue without pretending to have solved it. At this stage, I am content to follow the lead of artists like Joachim Schmid, Joan Fontcuberta, Erik Kessels and Penelope Umbrico, among others, each of whom have come up with creative ways to engage the digital archive in their work.

Acervo. *In your recent essay "Double Displacement," and also in Burning with Desire, you question the traditional narratives and its "heroes" or "founders", something Marc Bloch would call "myths of origin". On the other hand, revisiting those landmarks provides rich opportunities to read history in new ways. Why is it important to celebrate and remember Daguerre in 2019?*

Batchen. I have never been against those myths; indeed, I would say they are necessary to any historical account. As with so many aspects of photography, the question is *how* we should engage with origins rather than whether we should. As you suggest, my own work

could well be described as a continual questioning of origins. The career and work of French painter and inventor Louis Daguerre is one popular origin point for photography. And why not? He introduced the first commercially viable photographic process in 1839, after many years of experiments and failures. Such efforts should be accorded their due honor. But making Daguerre an individual hero doesn't get us very far. More interesting is to investigate the degree to which his efforts embody the anxieties and desires, not all of them conscious, of his historical moment. That moment and our own are not so far apart, and we have a lot to learn from Daguerre's negotiation of the relationships of power that constituted the context in which he worked on his invention. Beyond that, very little interpretation of his own daguerreotypes has been undertaken, despite them being fascinating as both images and ideological ploys. In short, there is still much work to be done.



Figure 5 - Engraver unknown (England). "Aboriginal Australians – Young Men etc", "Aboriginal Australians – Old and Young Man etc", "Daguerreotyped in Port Phillip by Mr. Kilburn", Australia Felix [BN1], 1850, in the *Illustrated London News*, 26 January 1850, p. 53. Ink-on-paper print from wood engravings after 1847 daguerreotypes by Douglas Kilburn (Melbourne), 40.4 x 27.5 cm (sheet). Collection of the author, Wellington

Entrevista realizada por Claudia Heynemann e Marcos de Brum Lopes