

Art in America

PHOTOGRAPHY IN FRAGMENTS

By *Zachary Fine*  January 7, 2021 3:02pm



Kwame Brathwaite, *Untitled*, c. 1966.
COURTESY KWAME BRATHWAITE ARCHIVE

Why is it that photography, more than any other medium, attracts some of the worst writing about art? There are shelves of books on painting, sculpture, performance, and prints that are unafraid to discuss specific artists, movements, or artworks without constant anxious recourse to the status of the medium, and yet with photography, it's as if there's something inherent in the technology, a kind of spell, that compels critics to follow a formula. Not many books about photography make it from start to finish without relitigating or rehearsing its origins (Louis Daguerre, Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot), writing streams of metaphors (photography as truth, photography as fiction, photography as trace, photography as evidence, photography as analogy), or citing the same set of stock theorists (Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes, Vilém Flusser, John Berger, Susan Sontag).

Photography does come with certain challenges: it has always been embattled as an art form, prey to easy manipulation and co-option, and highly changeable, with habits of use adapting to shifts in technology. But in addressing these issues, writing about photography relies on a narrow grammar, squeezing itself into fixed patterns and terms. To anyone who reads about the medium with even light frequency, the repetitions and redundancies can be stifling.

David Campany's *On Photographs* is guilty of these minor crimes, yet it shows one possible way of working the trap. It begins with some vague throat clearing: Photographs, he writes in the introduction, "confuse as much as fascinate, conceal as much as reveal, distract as much as compel . . . In each one there is a kind of madness." He repeats the word "madness" (a few too many times) to suggest how

unruly photographs are, how they resist being fixed with meaning, even though people have tried to steer them and constrain them with words since the early history of the medium. As Company points out, Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, published in six parts between 1844 and 1846, was not only the first commercially sold book to include photographs; it also included texts, some of which described the images and the processes used to produce them, and others that were more tangential. Following Talbot, Company lays out the method for his own word-and-image book: "The images do not illustrate a written argument, and the writing is not a script for looking, but together they may bring you closer to the madness."

Upon reading this, one might pause for a second: Are we about to sit through two hundred pages of free-associative prose-poetry that dances around photographs without saying much about them? Fortunately, no.

Company's book is a delightful jumble of particulars, and a corrective, in many ways, to theories of photography that concern themselves very little with actual photographs. He includes more than one hundred images, arranged nonchronologically, non-geographically, and non-thematically, each accompanied by a short text that blends description, theory, history, and biography. It's a kind of madcap survey that makes no claims to being comprehensive but, incidentally, covers a lot of ground.

There are photographs from the mid-nineteenth century as well as the twenty-first, from Paris and Mexico City as well as Los Angeles, Johannesburg, Port-au-Prince, Glasgow, and Tokyo. Some of the photographers discussed are famous, but others are barely known or completely anonymous. When he turns to well-trodden, canonical material—Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies, for instance—Company doesn't offer up the familiar image of the horse galloping, or the man leaping, but instead a weird, late example: *Chickens Scared by a Torpedo* (1884–87). On the next page, there is a 1914 "cyclegraph" by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, showing the motions of a woman's hands at work, as traced by beams of light. The text on Muybridge stays close to his biography—we learn about his seminal role in the history of photography and cinema, as well as the fact that he shot the man with whom his wife conceived a child, and decamped after the trial to South America—whereas the text on the Gilbreths blends a folksy meditation on the machine age with a gloss on the Gilbreths' methods (light bulbs attached to the body) and their promotional attempts to catch the wave of Frederick Taylor's "scientific management." A few pages later, there's a blue sky and palm trees in John Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, 1973; a few pages after that: a bold portrait of a young woman in London's East End, in 1955, wearing tattered high-Edwardian dress, surrounded by the rubble of war.

This kind of whiplash is one of the book's key pleasures. It steps away from the linear history of photography and attunes the eye to hidden affinities across time and place, visual echoes and patterns—like the three balls in Baldessari's photographs rhyming with the five bubbles in Helen Levitt's *New York*, c. 1942, the strip of circles in Étienne-Jules Marey's *Vertical Ball Drop* from 1890, and a circular photograph of George Eastman aboard the *SS Gallia* by Frederick S. Church, the shape of the photo echoing the portholes on the boat. ("Why are portholes circular?" Company writes, in one of his factoidal asides. "Corners cause cracks and corrosion.")

The book is also a trove of less-than-familiar photographers—names like Gérard Castello-Lopes, Marianne Wex, and Kwame Brathwaite—whose works easily grip. There are bodies flailing inscrutably, bodies isolated in their coded gestures, bodies configured for commercial purpose; in just a few seconds, we see how the lens has captured the body in so many of its aspects. One of the virtues of structuring a book around images, not just using them as examples or illustrations, is that it can ground history and

theory in concreto, and provide a vivid argument for why certain photographers need more attention and study.

David Levi Strauss's book *Photography and Belief*, is, in many ways, the opposite of Company's. It can fit comfortably inside of a small coat pocket and reproduces only one image (a frontispiece depicting a relic of St. Thomas Apostle). The book is not about any one thing, per se, but hovers around the vague plot of land between "photography" and "belief." What is the role of photography, and seeing more generally, Strauss wants to know, in luring us to believe something is true, factual, firm? He loosely strings together other people's scholarship, with little in the way of exposition or a guiding argument, to circle this very old question.

The first chapter is a rangy mini-essay on the early relationship between seeing and belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely through the figure of Doubting Thomas (who never actually touches the wounds of Christ in the Gospels, despite the countless paintings and drawings depicting him doing so). Strauss then looks at the debates around the Turin Shroud, in particular his "favorite branch of Turin Shroud literature": those who have argued that the Shroud is a photograph, and potentially the first photograph ever made, and even better, a photographic self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci himself. The chapter ends with a familiar knee-jerk challenge to the origins of photography: "It might be said that by the time Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot made their breakthrough technical discoveries in the nineteenth century, belief in photography had already been around for millennia."

This pre-origin origin theory of photography—that the invention happened long before the first photo was ever taken—has been made many times, memorably in Geoffrey Batchen's 1997 book *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, in which he argued that the beginning of photography couldn't be isolated to one moment, person, or technical innovation, but was traceable to a "desire" to photograph, a more diffuse discursive formation (Foucault haunts the scene here) that preceded photography itself. As interesting as the idea might be, how many more variations of it do we want or need? And how far back are we willing to go? Why not just start at the origin of language, or the evolution of the first humanoid eyeball?

After the first chapter, the book, by a number of standards—academic rigor, critical vitality, inventiveness—starts to crumble. In fact, it crumbles quite literally; it is a book of pieces and fragments: five short chapters, each divided up into short jagged sections, each section cobbled together mostly with quotations. The second chapter summarizes Benjamin, Berger, and Barthes on photography, supposedly as their theories relate to "belief" (though the connections to belief are often unclear); the third does the same with Vilém Flusser. The fourth chapter, entitled "Three Sources," sets out to "triangulate" the idea that photographs are "more fiction than fact" by stitching together Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (again), Ioan P. Couliano's *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, and Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence*, all in about one thousand words. The final chapter takes a more personal direction—"I love photographs. That means I believe them. It does not mean I am gullible about images, or that I am more susceptible to fakery and propaganda"—and then speculates about the post-photographic future, about the "streaming flow" of images today, which will potentially lead to the disappearance of the image as we know it (i.e., the image as "trace"). This chapter is such a shift in tone, and comes so late, that it seems to belong to a different project. Strauss concludes with "A Brief Anthology of Quotations on Photography and Belief," as if much of the book itself hasn't been such an anthology.

It could be said that Strauss's selection of quotations is part of his argument, and that every summary of a canonical text is a rereading of that text (and thus evergreen), and that books do not need to be cleanly or neatly argued but can splay poetically into fragments to illuminate things otherwise invisible. These same points can also be used to explain away the problems of a book that hasn't been sufficiently edited.

Writers today, across genres, are using theorists like Benjamin and Barthes to justify writing scattered and fragmented books, as if the tendency toward fragmentation were enough to make a book interesting and worth publishing. New studies of photography, in particular, would benefit from more intentional plotting or strenuous criteria. They might indicate why, for instance, it's worth working in fragments, or why it's worth trotting out the familiar names, the same essays, the same "aura," the same old studium and punctum—all the greatest hits—as opposed to bringing us alternative theories, different sources, a more varied and global sense of image-making. If the "photograph may ultimately become obsolete," as Strauss says, then we should think about saving it. Company's book provides one possible way of doing so. It cuts into the medium's history at a new angle and tethers his words to that elusive thing: photographs.

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