Disclaimer

The reader will notice that concepts like 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' as well as 'indexicality' are not used in the following text. However, some of the issues I raise could be related to such concepts. If the reader wishes to subsequently re-engage any of the terms mentioned it is at his or her own risk and I advice that precautionary measures be taken.

The Digital Image: Photography and Photographics

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Less than a decade ago Martin Lister's introduction to 'The Photographic Image in Digital Culture' solemnly declared that "there is no clean break [his italics]" between old and new media (Lister 2001, p. 20). Today, it has become apparent that his statement has to be seen within its historical context. 1995 was the time when 'new media' were still new. The concern was to assess just how new the proclaimed new media actually were and how possible it was to approach them using traditional forms of knowledge. Today, after the hype of the new appears to have worn out it is not so much that we might finally organise the cultural territory again with the 'digital' as another artistic practice, but that the territory itself has changed. For example, the title 'The Photographic Image in Digital Culture' implies that the 'photographic image' remained addressable as a viable entity and that it was merely its place within digital culture that needed to be negotiated. In contrast to this, the 2002 Brighton conference 'Photography, Philosophy, Technology' produced a reader entitled 'Where is the Photograph?' (Green 2003), which seemed to imply that the shifting cultural grounds had destabilised the traditional media themselves. This is not, however, to say that the new media themselves were stable. In fact, it is possible to speculate that with their arrival everything became unstable.
The purpose of this essay is not to theorize what we call 'new media' as a general term, but to try to explain what has happened to photography with respect to both the working method of the photographer as well as the socio-cultural status of the photograph. I shall start by briefly discussing Tate Modern's recent monumental exhibition ‘Cruel and Tender’. I would like to take this show as an example of how photography has started to open up to digital imaging technologies and how with the help of these, the history of photography is now being rewritten away from a recorded image towards its construction.

‘Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph’ (5.June - 7.September 2003) was Tate Modern's “first major exhibition dedicated purely to the medium [of photography]” (Burton and Bolitho 2003). This dedication was not just expressed in the sheer amount of photographs on show, but also in the focus on a central practice of photography, namely a realist or documentary style. The term ‘documentary style’ was used by Walker Evans, the photographer to whose work the words ‘cruel and tender’ were, in fact, originally applied, to make a sharp distinction between the photograph as a document and the photograph as an artwork. Evans made this clear in an interview with Katz in 1971 when he said: “When you say ‘documentary,’ you have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. It should be documentary style, because documentary is police photography of a scene and a murder....That's a real document. You see art is really useless, and a document has use. And therefore art is never a document, but it can adopt that style. I do it. I'm called a documentary photographer. But that presupposes a quite subtle knowledge of this distinction.” (Evans 1983, p. 216)

As a ‘documentary style’ photographer, Walker Evans created images that looked like documents and looked like they had a use, when in fact, according to Evans own definition, they were not documents, since they did not have any use. Documentary style, then, is the mode of an image that makes it appear to be a document when it is not. With the shift from the photograph as a document to the photograph as an artwork the point of reference to reality has shifted. For the police photographer, reality is the murder that has
taken place, whereas for the artist it is the image's appearance as a document that guarantees its photographic reality and no longer the authenticity of the motif. Photographic reality as produced by the photographic apparatus coincides only with the underlying reality if the image follows the conventions of realism. In the case of Evans, this can be said to be the case.

![Fig. 1: Walker Evans, Houses and Billboards in Atlanta, 1936](Hambourg, Rosenheim, Eklund and Fineman 2000, plate 60)

Evans characterised the documentary style in various ways. He linked the documentary style to Flaubert's style that is at once realist and objective, permitting no space for the photographer's subjectivity to appear (Evans 1983, p. 70). It is also lyrical, in so far as the non-lyrical documentary photograph was likely to fail its documentary function (Evans 1983, p. 238). Evans himself has, in an unpublished introductionary note of 1961, compared his way of working to that of an historian, when he wrote: "Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past." (Evans 1983, p. 151) The historian's or archaeologist's view allows for a disinterested distance as "an aesthetic ambition [my italics]" as Peter Galassi pointed out (Galassi 2000, p. 87). Another aspect of the documentary style is the choice of motif, in that it does not require painterly subjects but can accommodate the ordinary without producing minor works of art if the style was "literary" as Clement Greenberg remarked (Greenberg 1992, p. 63). According to Galassi,
this is, indirectly, Alfred Stieglitz’s merit. “By explicitly defining photographic art in opposition to the sprawling mass of ordinary, practical photography, Alfred Stieglitz paradoxically endowed the latter with an embryonic identity it had not possessed. Evans and his successors completed the process by recognizing a coherent aesthetic in the pile of mundane photographs that everyone knew and used, filed, or discarded as the daily occasion required.” (Galassi 2000, p. 39) Stieglitz’s work, in particular, served as a basis against which Walker Evans could create his style (Eklund 2000, p. 31f.). Ironically, Evans appears to have fulfilled Stieglitz’s demand that “unless photography has its own possibilities of expression, separate from those of the other arts, it is merely a process, not an art…” (quoted in: Caffin 1972, p. 36), a demand Stieglitz himself never quite matched.

Because the documentary style is *uniquely* photographic, it becomes the blueprint for a ‘photographic style’ in general. In the same way as the documentary style produces an image that looks like a document, the photographic style may be seen to produces images that look like photographs. The term ‘photographic style’ does not designate a style from a particular artist’s hand but work that is done ‘in the manner of photography’. The difference between photographic and documentary style lies in the fact that the former apart from being a very general term does not rely on the image to be according to realism as the documentary style does. Realism and the photographic real can appear simultaneously on the same image, but they need not as the following discussion will reveal. The term ‘photographic style’ is used to indicate an alternative definition of the photographic away from the traditional and more restrictive notion of photography as a medium.

When Tate Modern dedicated ‘Cruel and Tender’ to the medium of photography, and placed Walker Evans documentary style photographs at the heart of the exhibition, it implicitly emphasised style over medium. The work of Andreas Gursky, also exhibited in ‘Cruel and Tender’, can be used to illustrate this distinction further. His work shows how
digital manipulation can be used to ‘enhance’ an image’s photographic reality. It can also be used to deduce where the curators of ‘Cruel and Tender’, Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski, may have set today’s limits to the definition of the photograph. Weski, for instance, appears to have included Gursky’s work only to the extent that it “mimic[s] the language of documentary photography” by blocking a “direct engagement with the world” (Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 27). Gursky’s images are, for the most part, not digital photomontages, but digitally post-produced photographs. This point is stressed in the prospectus, according to which “Gursky has made subtle digital alterations to some of his photographs, adjusting the composition, eliminating details and enhancing colour [my italics].” (Burton and Bolitho 2003) This ambivalence between Weski’s rejection of Gursky in terms of documentary style at the same time as the exhibition’s safeguarding of Gursky’s photographic basis against the digital indicates the current strive for a re-definition of the photographic in terms of style.

Fig. 2: Andreas Gursky, Untitled XIII (Mexico), 2002
(Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 227)
The photographic style, then, relies on a visual understanding of reality as produced by the documentary style. The cultural knowledge of how a photograph should look like is used and referred to. Both photographer and spectator rely on this mutual understanding, which, on a second plane, can be challenged by the photographer. The photographic style produces photographic reality and offers a system of beliefs that, if prescribed as reality, in fact, can be seen to function as ideology. The ideological aspect of advertising, for example, lies in the identification of the reality of the product with its advertised promise.

Fig. 3: Robert Adams, From What We Bought: The New World (Scenes From the Denver Metropolitan Area), 1970 - 74 (Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 171)

Fig. 4: Robert Adams, El Paso County Fairgrounds, Calhan, Colorado, 1968 (Galassi 2000, p. 73)

Fig. 5: Lewis Baltz, East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin, 1974

(Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 195)

Fig. 6: Lewis Baltz, Computer Bank CERN No. 3, Centre Européen Recherche Nucléaire, Geneva, 1989 - 92 (Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 198)

'Cruel and Tender' develops such an ideology. Some of the work of Robert Adams for example can be seen as realism closely related to Walker Evans' documentary style (e.g. fig. 3) while other images (like the early example 'El Paso County' from 1968 that was not
included in ‘Cruel and Tender’, fig. 4) have started to replace realism by a pictorialised reality. Lewis Baltz, also on show, appears to complete this transition first in the images of the dehumanised American industrial architecture (fig. 5) (that in Robert Adams’ approach is still populated) and later in his ‘Sites of Technology’ (1989 - 92, fig. 6) where he is well on the way to an aesthetic model comparable to Gursky's. The photographic style as much as it creates a photographic reality allows the image to be de-realised. Photographic reality and realism are two separate categories, a fact even further underlined when photographs are digitally manipulated.

Fig. 7: Jeff Wall, The Flooded Grave, 1998 - 2000 (Lauter 2001, p. 151)

Digitally manipulated photographs are also re-negotiating photography's relationship to painting insofar as the 'hand' of the artist appears in the photographic image. The photographic style is an image's ability to reference a reality, as it would look in a photograph. Before the advent of image computation, photographic reality could only be represented in photographs, whereas in our digital age photography is no longer a prerequisite for the achievement of photographic reality. Gursky's images, according to the Tate prospectus, "could be compared to paintings in their sensuous visual impact." (Burton and Bolitho 2003) The idea of painting does not only come to mind because of the image's impact. Rather, it shows that digital photography has narrowed the gulf between
photography and painting since the production of the images employ a painter's methods of composition (see: Dexter and Weski 2003, p. 27).

An artist who consciously explores the relationship photography has to painting yet whose work was not included in 'Cruel and Tender' is Jeff Wall. Because of his art historical background and the careful composition of his images, Wall is often understood in relation to painting (see for example: Lauter 2001, pp. 18ff.). It is however his relationship to the photographic style, while using a painter's approach to composition that makes Jeff Wall's work relevant (Tietjen 2003). Wall, who uses the computer as a tool to create montages from individual shots, explained in an interview with Jan Tumlir in 2001: “The montage is composed of acts of photography, even if there is no simple photographed moment. I don’t think that any photographic qualities are eliminated, except the single moment in which the entire image was made.” (Tumlir 2001, p. 154) What Wall has discovered is that the single decisive moment of ‘taking’ the image was not necessary for the image to be a photograph. Although he decisively does away with the idea that a photograph has to be made in a single moment, he does not contest photography's perspective construction from a single viewpoint, nor does he challenge the integrity of the circumambient light. To photograph the individual images Wall carefully arranges the camera in a way that lighting and perspective are kept congruent. As he says: “The picture would be a failure if it
permitted any doubt that the two worlds were as one. [...] You could use the same digital
montage techniques to question [...] the idea of spatial continuity I've just described. But
I'm not interested in that." (Tumlir 2001, p. 153)

A style might be called 'photographic' then, when the reference to a photographic
reality is left intact. The images can challenge that reality (as Wall's 'surrealist' images
do), but from the moment they break it, they cease to be photographic. From the point of
view of the definition of photography as a medium, images like Jeff Wall's do not sit well in
the history of photography (and might for this reason have been excluded from 'Cruel and
Tender'), because they focus on digital montage techniques rather than the camera itself.
In terms of the perfection of photography as style, however, they seem to be an almost
logical conclusion. Jeff Wall, by bringing the reality of the photographic style into the
image as the product of a montage (as most famously done in 'The Destroyed Room' from
1978, fig. 8) and not as a naive belief in photography's built in realism, is able to propose
contemporary photographic realism outside to the confines of the medium. With this also
the opposite is true: in a situation where the photographic style dominates our cultural
reality its use without its explicit acknowledgement removes the photograph from this
reality and with it from reality as such. Photographic reality, then, serves as a substitute
to reality. 'Cruel and Tender' manifests a general tendency in recent photographic practice
to detach the idea of the photographic from the notion of 'medium' allowing a definition of
photography as style to claim its validity.

In 'Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures', Peter Lunenfeld
proposes that photography's new and digital place lies in its subsumption within computer
graphics, in so far as core qualities of the photograph are, in the digital realm, replaced by
those of graphics and painting. For Lunenfeld the technical reality of photographs is being
"blend[ed] even further into the computer's digital soup of letters, numbers, motion
graphics and sound files" (Lunenfeld 2001, p. 59), essentially prohibiting the meaningful
separation of computer graphics from digital photographs. In terms of medium, such an
argument might be consistent, although it promotes the fusion of the different practices instead of asking for their new and specific contribution to the field of computer graphics. It is, in fact, not a ‘given’, as Lunenfeld would have us believe, that it is only a matter of time until photography's particular relation with reality will wear out (Lunenfeld 2001, pp. 60f.). It can also be argued that photography's contribution to digital imaging lies in its claim to reality in which it keeps exceeding painting. In recognition of the fundamental shift Lunenfeld has described, but without yielding to Lunenfeld's definition of the digital image as such, I propose to use a new composite term to indicate the marriage of the photographic with the graphic. The term 'photographics' acknowledges the matter of fact shift to the graphic whereas its photographic implication reflects the photographic style that guarantees a photographic reality even within graphic conditions.

'Photographics' required a conceptual shift in the understanding of photography from medium to style, as discussed above, as well as a procedural shift in the way images are represented in computing in order to liberate the photographic style from the tether of its erstwhile chemical basis. Until the 1970s computer graphics systems were 'vector based'. Vector based systems construct an image by directing the movement of a tool across a material, be it the movement of a pen across a sheet of paper in a plotter or the movement of an electron beam across the screen of a Cathode Ray Tube (CRT). Vector based computer graphics are digital drawing machines. The nature of photography is completely different. Photographs are objects where a two dimensional image is imprinted. The new digital imaging technology that was developed in the 1970s and in commercial use from the 1980s employed 'raster graphics'. In raster graphics, an image can be represented in the computer by a two dimensional array of values called 'pixels' arranged in a raster. The image is no longer stored as a construction plan but as passive data'. In drawing, the movement of the pen organises the figure; the organisation is part of

\[\text{1 I am using the term 'passive data' in contrast to 'active data'. Fundamentally, anything that is fed into the computer is data. Active data is the data that describes the computers operations or algorithms. Passive data does not define algorithms but is the data that is used by the algorithms to perform their functions on.}\]
the figure. In raster graphics, the organisational structure - the raster or grid - is a foreign part of the image that adds to the image its organisation.

A comparison of vector and raster graphics helps grasp the particularity of raster graphics, which in turn is vital for understanding photographics. One of the main differences between vector and raster graphics is that vector graphics can be enlarged infinitely whilst maintaining a similarly smooth appearance throughout. Raster graphics, being formed of blocks - or pixels - of image information will, when enlarged, show these blocks as a square structure. Algorithms can be employed to interpolate to a finer resolution, but this compensates insufficiently for the missing information. A second difference between the two is the way in which both cover - or not - the surface of the image. In raster graphics, no part of the surface remains unidentified and everything is covered by the grid and forced onto it. The space in vector graphics on the other hand is not addressed as long as a line does not cover it. And finally, there is no 'glue' between the pixels other than their orientation in the grid. When a line is drawn in vector graphics, the points along the line literally belong to that same line. A line represented in raster graphics consists of individual pixels that happen to lie next to each other so that we get the impression of a line: no construction plan, no gesture, no intrinsic belonging-together connects the individual pixels.
In terms of information the raster, then, is not neutral. This applies also to the older
technique of half tone printmaking where the image consists of a dotted raster. By moving
printmaking into the digital sphere, the artist Paul Coldwell discovered that the raster
itself could be activated and used to provide extra levels of meaning. In his own words: “I
have used the half tone dot, the device through which photographic imagery previously
entered the world of print, as a means to register this membrane, allowing for me to
weave imagery that suggests spaces in front, behind and upon the virtual surface itself.”
(Coldwell 2003) By using the raster in a second, calligraphic way, Coldwell foregrounds the
raster as that which printed photographs are made of and its usually overlooked
contribution to the making of the image.

In my own practice I have been working with the impact of the digital raster. In
‘Remember Me’ (2000) I used found imagery of human faces, which I reduced in size to
about 24 by 24 pixels, to produce a result equivalent to a very coarse raster. I then
increased the size of the coarse raster to 7200 by 7200 pixels using Adobe Photoshop’s
bicubic interpolation feature. The resulting images show the underlying square structure of
the raster whilst blurring it into the dominant calculation of the image. The blurring is not
just the blurring of a face but it is the melting together of raster and source image within
the resulting image, pushing the raster into the fore without, as in Coldwell’s case, working
in layers.

Fig. 10: Michael Schwab, Remember Me 1 + 4, 2000
Conventional photography, unlike to half tone printmaking or computer raster graphics, is not organised by a raster. Nevertheless, photographs are made up of basic units, the silver haloids, which may be compared to half tone dots or pixels. Unlike half tone dots, silver grain does not vary in size across an image\(^2\), which is comparable to digital raster graphics as pixels are identical in size. In photography, the density of the grains is important for the colour of the area. In computing this is not the case.\(^3\) The pixel is used to express image information at a specific place within the image but it does not vary in size or density; only the attached image information changes and has to be interpreted (usually as colour). Pixels as they appear on a graphic device are already an interpretation of the invisible data composed from a location within the image and its colour information. The pixels are not the information itself. The real, invisible information is stored in the memory of the computer. According to Frieder Nake, the divide between the invisible signals in the computer memory and their visible signs on the screen is by definition, because only the reduction of the image information to electro-magnetic signals allows for their mechanisation (Nake 1999). Silver grains, on the other hand, are 'the real thing', not because they were activated by light coming from a real object, but because they are not a represented form of information; they are the information.

Recently, Peter Weibel has in his contribution to Tate Modern's lecture series 'When New Media Was New' (Weibel 2003) reminded us that the manipulability of digital media is one of their most basic properties. In comparison to chemical processes like photography and film, where the image information is chemically locked into the carrier material, electrical processes (as they were first employed in analogue video and later in digital media) because of this separation of information and carrier, allow for the erasure and re-writing of the image. In the case of digital media, this does not only amount to the possible manipulation of a complete image or frame, but it also technically unchains the

\(^2\) This idealised statement in more true today after the invention of the T-grain technology than it was before. In any case, during the development process silver haloids can clump together forming larger grains of silver, a process more likely to happen in darker areas of the image.

\(^3\) In practice, digital printers for example spray layers of colour onto the paper.
manipulation of the smallest elements by which the image is composed. This is due to the fact that the raster as a grid allows the direct addressing of each individual cell independently, without an overall change to the whole of the image.

Since computer raster graphics are coded numerically and stored in the computer's memory, we need an interface to see images: not as abstract strings of numerical data, but as two dimensional objects that show a distribution of colour density and pattern. In a conventional photograph the silver grain locked into the film's emulsion still functions graphically and can be approached with 'bare eyes'. In the digital realm, computer programs are needed as interpreters of and interfaces to the machine-coded data of the image. Such programs are called 'paint programs', because with their aid one can 'paint' directly into the memory space of the computer. When, for instance, the colour value of one pixel is changed, the paint program interprets this as a change in the numerical value of that pixel and stores it as such. Paint programs are an interface between signs understandable to the human and electro-magnetic signals computable by the machine. Nake has compared such interfacing software to 'skin' as unifying the inside and outside of the computer (Nake in: Coy, Nake, Pflüger, Rolf, Seetzen, Stransfeld and Siefkes 1992).

Fig. 11: Andy Warhol, Deborah Harry, 1986 (Goodman 1987, p. 89)
Because of this, the computer screen can be used like a painter uses the canvas. Particularly when artists became less interested in the materiality of paint on canvas, paint programs offered an alternative to painting itself. The simplest way to use photographics in paint programs is to import a digitised photograph and start painting on that. Andy Warhol did just that with ‘Deborah Harry’ from 1986: He processed her image in such a way as to select ranges of colour and transform these into just 5 or 6 colours subsequently ‘painting’ onto the image a line around her face, his signature and quite probably the red on her lips.

It is important to note that the visibly painted elements of the image, as well as the transformed areas and the marks of the software, do not exhibit any different quality to what might have been left from the original image. In fact, it makes almost no sense to speculate which is which since the original cannot be separated from the painted; both have merged into the same memory space that ‘Deborah Harry’ represents, the ‘soup’ as Lunenfeld had called it. It is up to the viewer to make up his or her mind if the image (or parts of it) is perceived as photographic or painted. In ‘Deborah Harry’, Warhol kept these layers separate, allowing us to identify photographic and painted elements in the image. Going back to Gursky and Wall, their ‘painting’ onto the canvas that is the photograph does not allow the declared infiltration of the painted into the photograph; everything is subsumed into the photographic style. In photographics, the photograph has replaced the painter’s canvas; his or her ‘paint’ has melted with the photograph. The photographic appearance of photographics is a construction between photographic and painterly elements seamlessly merged into the digital whilst preserving the photographic style. Traditional photographs are source material for first digitisation (their subsumption under the grid) and secondly their assemblage and manipulation.

The development of digital technology since the invention of raster graphics has been, whilst wholly relying on the grid as its organisational structure, advocating the grid’s invisibility in pushing it into an increasingly fine layout. Digital photography, for example,
became a valid option only after the resolution of the grid could compete with the delicacy of the silver grain, insuring that digital photography's claim to photographic reality was not obstructed by the grid - at least no more than 'traditional' photography was by the silver grain. Discussions of photographics therefore should not blindly follow the ideology of the invisible grid and should not skip a more fundamental debate in favour of an increased realistic appearance.

The digitisation of photography is first and foremost a question of aesthetics. The gridded raster is not only a technological necessity for raster graphics but also a matter of aesthetic choice. The technological properties of the digital raster grid as discussed above (block structure, indication of surface, separation of image elements), therefore, resonate with concerns familiar from the history of art.

![Fig. 12: Willem de Kooning, Untitled, 1966 (Green 2003, p. 96)](image)

Recently, Richard Shiff discussed examples from the history of painting in relation to vector and raster graphics in an attempt, however, to define photography through its technological determination. In particular, Shiff used de Kooning's drawings from 1966, which the artist had drawn with his eyes closed, as an example of a 'vectorial' approach to painting, whereas Seurat and Chuck Close were, on the contrary, given as examples for a
raster based method. De Kooning’s drawings, according to Shiff, “gave a privileged centrality to all points of contact between his hands and the paper, a type of centrality that a grid or raster would deny.” (Shiff 2003, p. 96) Vectorial painting is reliant on the one-dimensionality of the movement of the artist’s hand, which allows the artist to remain present in the image in a very direct way. Beginning with Seurat, Shiff sees the emergence of an interrupted way of painting that, in avoiding the painted line, found refuge in the two-dimensionality of the rastered painting. This interruption separates the painting from the artist’s hand and, at the same time, promotes the realism of the image. When in its beginning such painted ‘realism’ was still in danger of only hiding the artist’s mediating hand, the advent of the medium of photography, according to Shiff, guaranteed the absence of subjectivity and offered protection against its romantic penetration of reality (Shiff 2003, pp. 102f.).

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 13: Chuck Close, Emma, 2000 (Green 2003, p. 98)

It is not the visibility of the raster but the application of a rastered way of representation that predetermines the manifestation of reality on an image. Photographic, although it replaced the half tone dot of printing or photography’s silver grain with the pixel grid, has inherited through the absence of the artist’s hand a relation to such reality. Modern art, according to Shiff can be used to “test” the construction of this
reality (Shiff 2003, p. 111). Rosalind Krauss' earlier article 'Grids' of 1978 appears to retroactively complete Shiff's idea of such a 'reality check'. Following Krauss, the artist's hand, far from vanishing from the rastered painting, is seen to reappear as perceptual principles of the human eye (the retina as a raster) while reality appears increasingly 'scientified'. According to Krauss "[t]he grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)." (Krauss 1986, p. 12) It seems to do so, by means of the enormous force by which the grid identifies both itself and the surface it is covering. "The physical qualities of the surface, we could say, are mapped onto the aesthetic dimensions of the same surface." (Krauss 1986, p. 10) The grid promises infinitive cover of the surface both outside (as virtually extending infinitively) and inside (as mapping the complete contents) of the frame in an aesthetic operation. The illusion is the belief about the grid's constructed reality as a stable reality within and beyond the picture frame.

The grid's spatial totality is, according to Krauss, matched by its ability to stall any development. This does not extend only to the lack of a painter's gesture within the image, as Shiff discussed it, but it also covers the development of individual artist's careers, who appear to be both attracted to and trapped by the grid (Krauss 1986, p. 9). However, the grid's a-developmental powers, according to Krauss, do not stop here (Krauss 1986, p. 22). The grid is said to symbolise the end of the historical development of art. The grid, thus, installs an ambivalent reality that is filled with infinity but emptied of history. Krauss' allusion to an illusive reality produced by the grid is comparable to what I, at the beginning, have called 'photographic reality' in that this is a believed reality, an ideology. The inner link between the photographic style and the graphic conditions in photographics appears to be in the convergence of both elements as they bring reality into play as aesthetically produced illusion. The photographic real is at the centre of photography's
system of beliefs and only in the uncoupling from its medial definition can we see how little basis the photographic real has in reality.

Nothing can show this more than the loss of history in photographics. History according to Eduardo Cadava’s reading of Walter Benjamin is nothing but a function of photography (Cadava 1998, p. 128). The objectifying act of ‘taking’ a photograph preserves the moment in its loss. If the aesthetical function that the photographic image suggests is taken as reality, photography - or rather its product ‘history’ - affects not only the past but also the present and the future. Photographically, I will think of my future as a past event taken by a retrospective camera with my death as the ultimate vantage point from which my life as a timely event must be seen. The argument is similar to Heidegger’s construction of *Dasein*. *Dasein’s* temporality is described as already contaminated by a historicity gained from the awareness of its coming death (Heidegger 2000, p. 435). To call this perspective, as Cadava does, ‘photography’ is a bold step, but it does fit into Heidegger’s later critique of technology and its power to shape how we imaging the world is.

This is also a notion Roland Barthes entertains in ‘Camera Lucida’. He takes the photograph as proof of the existence of the depicted object at the moment the photographing has taken place. “I can never deny that *the thing has been there.*” (Barthes 1993, p. 76) His statement, however, is filled with his desire to imprint something in history from its image on a photograph. For Barthes in this late and last book, death has overshadowed reality in the terms of his mother’s death, which the famous winter garden photograph historically undoes (her present absence becomes her historical presence), his own awaiting death and the death the photograph represents (Barthes 1993, p. 92). Photography as it operates in ‘Camera Lucida’ is the desire to trust reality, as it historically appears imprinted on a photograph.

Against this historical guarantor of existence, Barthes describes painting as inferior. As much as a painting can appear to be a true representation of something, it could have been done without the thing having ever existed (Barthes 1993, p. 77). In this respect,
photographics is similar to painting. Although its products still appear as photographs, the transformation of the photograph into the pixelated raster opened photography up to the non-historicity of raster-style painting. In this way, photographics, although constructed according to the same principles of photographic reality as photography itself, convinces us of the reality of things that have not existed. This non-existence, however, does not leave a trace disguised as the artist’s hand on the image.

Unlike photography, photographic reality in photographics is devoid of history. It could be that the emptying of history already started when Walker Evans and others took photography from the streets and into their portfolios. It could also be that history, against Barthes’ reassurance, was never quite ‘there’ in a photograph. Or, it could be that only an age that has “forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson 1995, p. IX) could start questioning the past for its relation to history. The photographic style and with it photographic reality, it appears, prevails over such torment.

The term ‘photographics’ is a hybrid. It does not reflect a new medium that became possible with the advent of new media. It describes the changed working methods of photographers resulting from a changed understanding of photography and a changed understanding of graphics in image computation. The results are images that cannot be easily subsumed into computer graphics or painting, because they ultimately carry photography’s unyielding relation to reality. These images can best be described as photographs out of which history has deflated or as paintings in disguise as photographs.

Our culture is challenged by what I have called ‘photographics’. Photographics carries the technological model of control and manipulability right into the heart of the reality of our existence by extending and redefining a process usually associated with photography. It is urgent to develop a critical practice coming from within such a given reality, which can only be achieved if we fundamentally understand the techniques we employ and use them only for what they are and not for what they promise to be. Unfortunately, a large part of contemporary photographic practise appears void of any register for such a
proposition. There are, however, different ways to reach a criticism increasingly in flux, each equipped with their own risks. Although other root bound approaches are equally valid, my personal choice has led me to an investigation of the more formal aspects of techniques and of our technological reality.


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Summary:

This paper proposes the term 'photographics' to indicate the new condition of the photograph in the digital realm. It argues that photography's relation to reality resists photographics's subsumption under the wider notion of 'computer graphics', at the same time as photography's relation to history evaporates.

Biographical details:

Michael Schwab is an artist currently doing a PhD at the Royal College of Art focusing on the intersections between photography and digital media. In 2000, he completed an MA in photography at the London College of Printing. He also gained an MA in philosophy from the University of Hamburg.

Original Abstract:

The proposed paper traces the changed position of photography since the rise of digital imaging technology. This change is understood as a paradigmatic shift from the recorded image of traditional photography to the constructed image of contemporary 'photographics'. This shift is seen as affecting both, the working method of the photographer as well as the socio-cultural status of the photograph. In our culture that has been dominated by photography and its related media since decades it is of some urgency to analyse the transformations that have taken place as the photograph has moved into the digital sphere.
The changed status of the photograph will be discussed by examining Tate Modern’s recent show ‘Cruel and Tender’. ‘Cruel and Tender’ does not only “signal[] Tate’s acknowledgement that photography is a key component of contemporary visual culture”(Tate prospectus), it also signals a shift in the understanding of what a photograph is. By placing Walker Evans’s ‘documentary style’ photographs next to Andreas Gursky’s digital images, it is not so much that Gursky’s images are art historically grounded in the tradition of photography, but rather that the history of especially documentary photography is redefined from our contemporary digital perspective. In *Snap to Grid: A User’s Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* Peter Lunenfeld has called this redefinition of photography the “subsumption of the ‘photo’ to the computer ‘graphic’” (p. 57). Taking this lead, it is apparent that Gursky’s images cannot only be "compared to paintings in their sensuous visual impact" (Tate prospectus) but that they have merged photographic and painterly qualities in the new form of ‘photographics’, a form that the organisers of the exhibition did obviously not realise as such.

Digital images are characterised by the technology that constitutes them. In the history of computing the traditional vector based computer graphics have been replaced by raster graphics since the 1980s. These paired with image processing and paint programs redefined the image as just another canvas to work on. The subsequent digitalisation of the photograph has profoundly changed the photographer’s workspace. The derivative and to a certain degree subversive forms of photographic manipulation and montage have taken central stage. The actual ‘taking’ of the photograph is replaced by the gathering of information as material for the construction of images.

‘Photographics’ can be seen as conflating the distinction Roland Barthes has established between photography and painting in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes describes photography as the medium that guarantees the (past) existence of a depicted object. ‘Photographics’ inherit exactly this confirmation of reality from photography without its historical implications, that is, without the necessity of the object to have existed. The
resulting image, therefore, is neither a photograph nor a painting. It can be described as a photograph out of which history has deflated or as a painting in disguise of a photograph. Fundamentally, it has to be thought of not as a hybrid of past terms, but as a medium in its own right, which has been changing our reality over the last 20 years and will continue to do so.

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