<u>The Questionable Possibility of Representing Truth in Photography.</u>

'Photography can be uncontrollable or wieldy; the image relays governance when there retains dependence to the truth, strengthened by aesthetic or rational habits. Chaotic and un-wieldy if this realism is complete, innovative, and moving with structured thought processes to find its way back to the understanding of time.' (Barthes, R. 1980).

This essays aim is to discuss whether what we see within a photograph is real, or whether we are seeing a manipulated reality, in which pre or post image production and manipulation have altered the perception of the photograph and how also technologies have changed the indexicality of photography. If something has been intentionally manipulated by photographers, then is the image still showing the truth? Photography has changed dramatically over the last generation; technology has vastly transformed the way in which photography is both taken and viewed. The principal rudiments of photography weigh up to create a context in which clouded judgement and loose understanding shape how we comprehend the photographical visual world. Wolfman Tillmans addresses the idea of reality in photography with an ultimatum that finding absolute truth is impossible (2005). Although Tillmans has an affirmative and definite stand point, there seems to be so little ground on such a bold claim. Why is truth important? Is there truth about representing something, or is truth relaying the intentions of artist in reality, furthermore are either of these possibility's conceivable?

Chemistry and mechanical construction make up the fundamentals of the process involved in analogue photography. Analogue photography was viewed as a

scientific means of capturing objectively, the appearance of the world. This dogma has changed since the introduction of the digital image. Surrealists throughout the mid-20th century have tried to testify against the idea that photography withholds any truth at all, and question photography's ability to reproduce truth. They often argue against the realist's idea that photography fantasises about the idea surrounding truth (Brougher, K. 2005, p2). Although a conventional analogue camera is made to take a picture in an objective mechanical way, the photographer has the ability to manipulate the functions of the camera and subject of the image. There is, however, a lack of *absolute* control. This lack of 'absolute' control means that within an image there will always be a degree of objective truth, whether or not the truth had intention the image will still lay fragmented and frozen in time and space. This fragmentation, without the intervention of complex contributions from the mind, holds a truth that is probably transparent to all of us. In '*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.'* Walter Benjamin discusses how a reproduction of a piece of work diminishes the originality and form. This reduction of originality in photography is seen as a weakness, in reality is something is easily reproducible it often looked upon with un-trust (Fried, M 2008). The connection between analogue and digital technologies grows ever more complex with newer and more complicated digital equipment and programs being created. Technology improves and or changes the way photographers, in specific, can create pieces of work. Techniques like digital construction make way into inventing scenes and structure in contemporary photography. This change come with several connotation on the way in which we conceive work, ideas are more complex and are often laid out to make us think.

Technique/technology changes the way artists work, When we examine many artists' work like Man Ray (who use techniques such as combination printing, montage, solarisation, double exposure, and montage), their works evokes a union of dream and reality. When viewing Man Ray's collection of 'Rayographs', using opinion and recognition are imperative in processing the works' abstract shapes and shades. Ray's 'Rayographs' take the viewer to a metaphysical place, where shapes are only loosely distinguishable. 'It is hard to tell which levels of the picture are to be deduced as existing further or closer' (Ray, M 1922). Distorting perceived reality, even a little, can produce intense effects when rationalising imagery and how we regard the concept of what is 'real'.
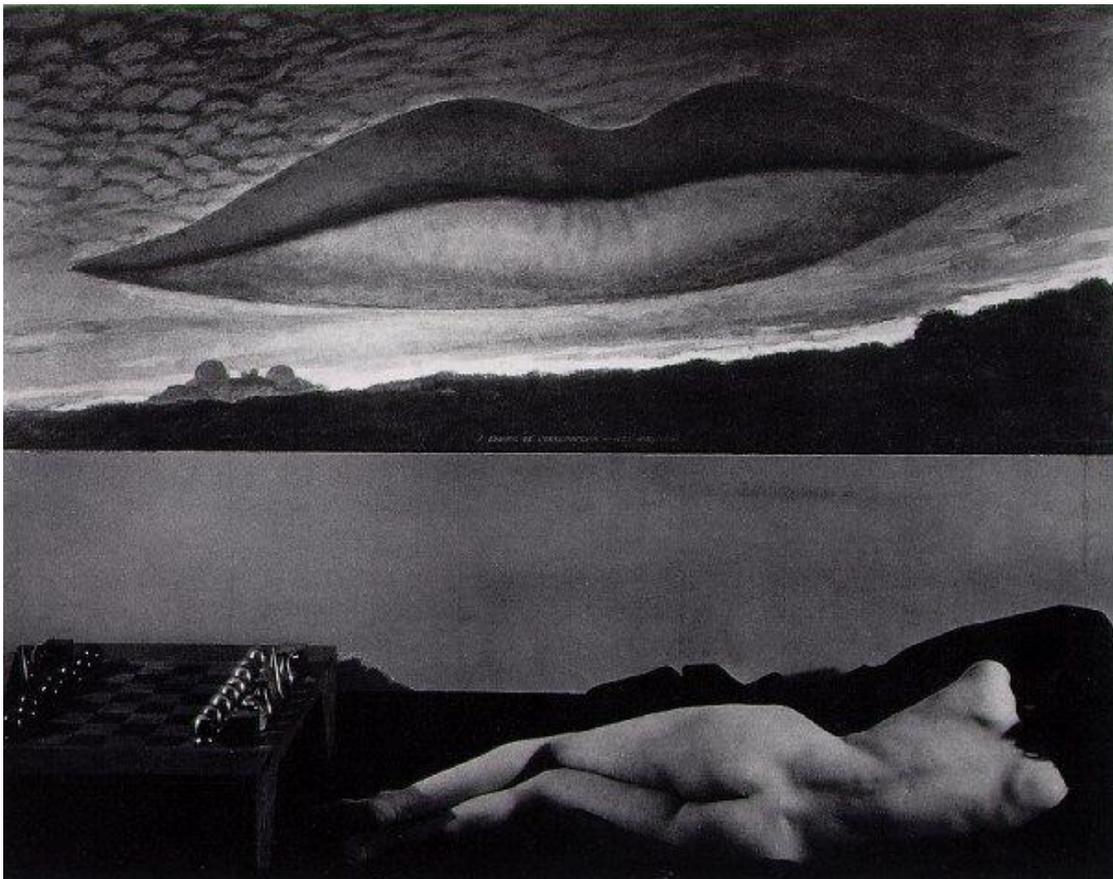
Ray, M. (1936) [electronic print]

When describing truth it is important to understand the ideology behind the real and the metaphysical. In our contemporary age, imagery is continuously placed in areas of existence which we find hard to define. This is because an image represents a time and place that exists in the past; as described by Roland Barthes (1980), 'an image creates a paradox of time in which the photograph has limitation, neither showing the before or after, merely a moment unmoving in time'. This idea that the photograph is a paradox leaves a lot open in terms of subjective opinion for the viewer. 'Photography displays a meagre fraction of space and time, breaking a relationship of the moving world, of which we see and believe to understand as being rational. 'Photography's realism is represented in a way that is broken or imagined, and shows a fragmented version of truth' (Sontag, S. 1977).

'The truth claim,' is a claim by Tom Gunning to define the concept that analogue-photography precisely and truthfully depicts realism. The truth claim is based upon the aesthetic precision and the 'indexicality' of photographs (Gunning, T. 2004). Gunning positions the photograph as having "iconicity". This indication runs adjacent to semiotics. Due to the iconicity of imagery, the image must therefore resemble the object it represents. The change of technology in contemporary practice has inevitably had an effect on the way work is perceived; however, Martin Lister argues that digital imagery appropriates analogue-photography's style and technique. This means that digital adopts a similar approach when tackling reality, to the extent that it relies on photography's historic realism, to gain evidence of truth. (Lister, M. 2007).

When looking at any photograph, a memory will be made of the representation. It is important to discern the intentions of the photographer and how the image is framed. Often a photograph relies on what exists outside the frame and how we analyse what doesn't exist within it (Tagg, J. 2009). A digital image exists as an entity. Digital information makes up what we know as an image, this lack of physical extension creates paradoxes in the way we perceive the print. Photographers like Pedro Meyer attempted to address the photographic memory and how it fails to replicate what was said to exist at the time of the original photographic shoot (Pedro, M. 1995).

When looking at the works of Andreas Gursky and his attempt to document globalisation in metaphorical terms, you can see how photography has made a progression into a state of consciousness, where meanings derived from imagery have taken many different directions. When talking about Gurskys work, Peter Galassi discusses the idea that it revolves around the idea of invented imagination, but when observed, it echoed recognition to the viewer. Gursky makes work in the form of recollection, creations and inventions. The world Gursky creates is a manipulated dream; it purposefully synthesises a realm that is close to our own (Galassi, P. 2001). This closeness represents ideas that are close to the truth.

> *"Photography can only give us knowledge of the world if we accept the world as we see it; this is the opposite of understanding. 'Photographs can give a mental picture, but hide more than they reveal, they require a narration for understanding" (p29. Tagg, J. 2009).*

While fragments of truth run through photography, they lie only within recollections of which we are left to subjectively believe. 'We perceive things based on our past history, present understanding and future hopes/beliefs' (Berger, J. 1972). Our understanding of photography as an objective-truth lies fundamentally within the human psyche. We do not have the innate ability to perceive things with absolute objection. A lot of information reaches the eye, but around 90% of this is lost by the time it reaches the brain (Gregory, R. 1970). Therefore, the brain has to guess what a person sees based on past experiences. We dynamically build our individual version of reality (Gregory, R 1970). Objectively pictures and images hold truths; however the reality of these images is dependent on the perceiver. Often the truths of our photography do not relay the intention and perception we anticipate.

In the book '*Basic critical theory for photographers*', Ashley La Grange discusses Ansell Adams and his regular use of the darkroom to 'intensify reality' (2005). Adams would often use the dark room to manipulate his images to look more grandiose; this is a progression from reality and many aspects of it can be directly linked to 'pictorialism tradition'. Adam's image is not a completely accurate representation of that singular time and place; rather a romantic version of a place. The way the outcome has been manipulated, presenting a more aesthetically pleasing product, offers an interesting insight into a beautiful yet un-absolute documentation of an event/time/place. Regardless of how the image has been edited, the image still encompasses representations of what Adams saw when making works, and resemble the places Adams shoots in his photographs (Adams, A 1985).

Another way to help us define truth in photography is to place a photograph within a category, thus helping us to understand the photograph's intention. For example, if a photograph were to be placed in a newspaper for photojournalistic purposes, the object of the reality in which the photograph is read is changed. It is easier for the viewer to understand the image in context to how the photograph should be read. The concepts we must then tackle are: has the image had any postproduction, has the image been framed in any way to affect the perception, and where has the image been placed? Many different genres of photography try to address the way we see truth in the world. Documentary often attempts to document the truth through a lens accurately as possible.

"Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery/manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of all of these and saved us the trouble" (p. 3, Rosler, M 1981)

Martha Rosler argued that in 1981, documentary had entered a state of representation in which something like shock factor had become an imperative. Documentary photography, as a category, yearns to tell truthful stories to the public eye; however, the media has started to manipulate the way in which we view documentary photography. Sontag Shares a same view: 'the volume of horrifying imagery that exists in the world around us has produced an effect, in which what we see becomes a familiarity, hence inescapable. (Sontag, S. 1977). Day to day documenters use photography as a tool for relaying information to the people, for example, images like the famous Dorothea Lange's 'document' "*Migrant Mother*"

(1936), taken during the great depression, document a specific time, place, and event. Yet the photograph has been discussed at great length about its truthfulness to the 'candid' style in which it's approached and the way in which Lange and the government used the photo as a vehicle to process the public's perceptions. At closer inspection, and with access to a greater detail of information and understanding surrounding any image/picture, what is often found is that our original perception and judgement about a representation often becomes fallacy. A photograph can only show us a thin layer of information. The rest of the information is dependent upon the subjective intuit (Sontag, S. 1977). What a photographer may decide on as a documentary photograph could be twisted by the media. This is a revolving circle that spirals into a projection of warped truth in photography. Although truth might *exist* in documentary photography, defining the truth from the exaggerated truth can often be impossible. In part, this is because technologies have changed the way in which we perceive visual information dramatically.
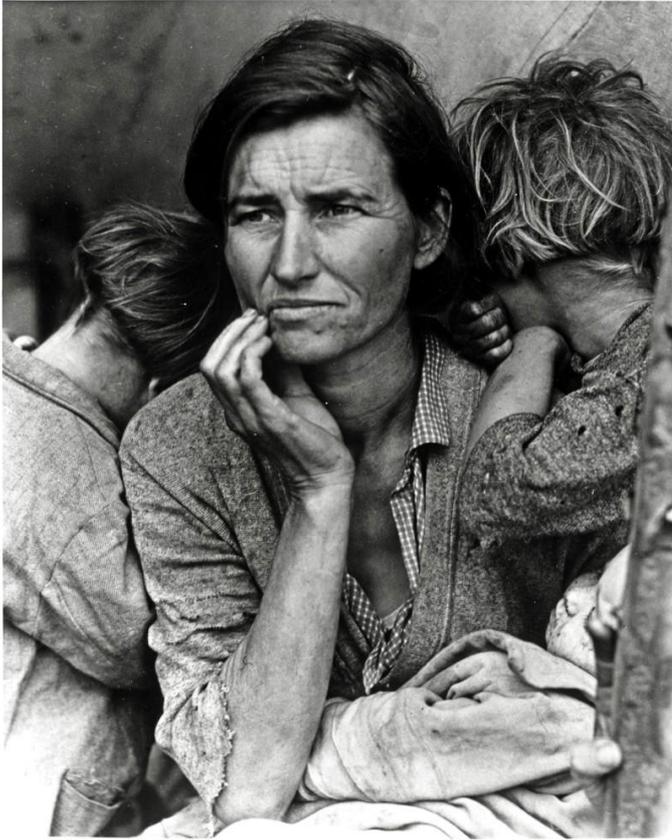
Figure 2: Dorthea Lange – *Migrant Mother*

'In Modern society, life itself has become a series of spectacles and displays'

(Debord, G 1984).

The fundamental differences between a photographic print and a digital image (on a screen or projection) create an effect on how we deduce the truth about a picture. When a photograph exists as a print or picture, it gains a physical objective reality; this physical reality has many objective premises for evidence of an existence. Lev Manovich argues that 'analogue photography is a change of energy arrangement appropriated from the 'real world' (2001). Rene Descartes described something existing as a physical thing, as a way of proving the truth about its existence (Murdoch, D. 1988). This entails many properties which is problematic for digital

photography. The way an image is displayed on a screen now not only relies on the subjective sights of the viewer, but additionally, the digital image relies on many fluid technologies which move in flux. Denis McQuail also discusses that negative film is adept at working the apparent truth in photography communication without losing it's truthfulness (McQuail, D. 2000).

Manovich discusses the potential that digital data is made up of numeracy; to the extent that images can be edited using the information in the most basic form shows how fragile information in the image can be (Manovich, L 2001). In present times we view the vast majority of imagery in a digital format. Steven Skopik (2003) argued that electronic image manipulation has an adverse effect on our perception of the photograph's true value. Digital imagery pertains an anamorphic state, where values of existence are altered with ease; Levinson argues that the change of photography into the digital form alters the very consistency of photography as a taciturn, impartial observer of truth (Levinson, P. 1997). Martin Lister similarly suggests that digital photography is a thing which borrows the idea of analogue photography. Analogue photography is achieved by sensitive chemicals that that transmutes through the operation of the camera (Levinson, P. 1997). The complex difference as Tom Gunning describes the digital image as the development of coding of information constructed around light in a milieu of statistics (2004). It is hard to believe that when viewing photography we are viewing a piece of information, decoded from a form of numbers. These numbers (so easily transformed) change the way in which we perceive the image. This ease of transformation within digital imagery explains the weakness of its ability to convey representational truth, because technology is in flux and often un-reliable, handling and the way in which human

interference of manufacturing in the creation of the photography, enables a level on which reality is left in the background (Levinson, P. 1997). Paul Levinson discusses the latent potential of analogue photography to capture "*a literal energy configuration from the real world*" through a chemical process this idea of analogue photography being a more accurate representation is a common theme that runs throughout the .

Discerning whether photographs are staged is often impossible, as we, the viewers can only understand fragmented realities about image alone. This is important because it means that we cannot guarantee what we are looking at is a thorough representation of the photographer's intention. Richard Billingham's series of photographs of his family in the series *Ray's A Laugh (figure 1)* show a documentation of emotion and insights into his family's existence. Discerning whether or not these stories are real is entirely dependent on the viewer's perceptions; thus making the photographs entirely subjective. The difficulty in understanding Billinghams work, like many other photographers, is that the pictures only let us into a fragmented truth about Billinghams family.
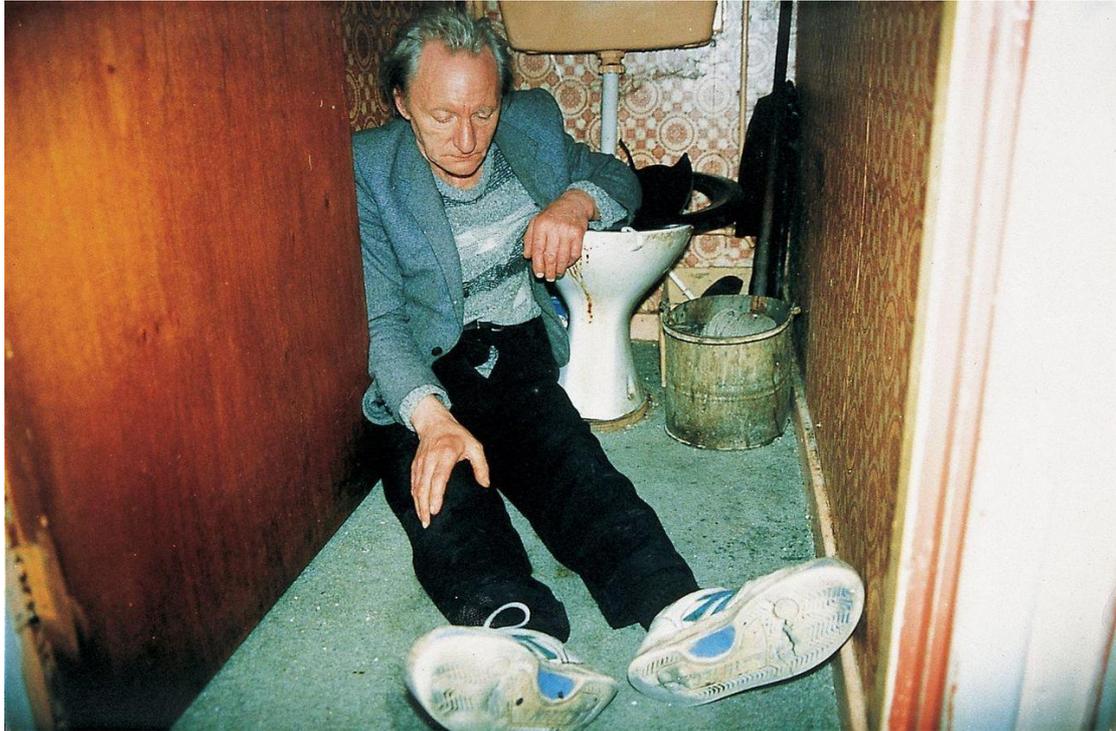
Figure 1: Richard Billingham - *Ray's a Laugh (1996)*

Michael Fried argues that since photography has been formed into art, the relationship between the photograph and the viewer has dramatically changed. Fried explains that certain notions of theatricality have been introduced (2008).

Photography technology has changed dramatically through the last decade; with these changes have come changes in theory, opinions and beliefs. The problem with defining the truth in photography lies within the notion that we are beings with individual thoughts, histories, and, beliefs. The reality that has affected our past, effects our present. Although it is important to realise that these realities are in perpetual flux, setting truth as a waypoint in photography allows us to make more thorough and meaningful observations. The meaning of truth in photography underpins the value at which we understand and see, to attain knowledge of our culture through visuals alone, we have to trust to certain that photography will

represent its index and subject in a truthful way. Photography is un-accurate sphere which creates uncertainties about our world that often challenge us. Photography bases a understanding of cultures places and events around us, for many of us. Staged theatricality and shock factor are common themes and 'side effects' when trying to deduce truths. David Croteau emphasise the pervasiveness of imagery having a indistinct boundary between the object and reality, making reference to the idea happenings start to exist for the production of certain types of photography (2003). While finding absolute truth in photography is often considered impossible by surrealists and realists alike, one often has to assume that metaphors deny the ability to relay truth to us. Photographs relay truths, this is factual. Whether or not the truth has intention, whether or not they are at first not apparent. Susan Sontag argues that 'when viewing object through photography, their themes and topics can become less truthful. Sontag discusses the idea that the aesthetic and the idea surrounding how perceive aesthetic in reality is built into photography the same way it is built into reality.' Sontag, S. (1977). Photography can therefore become *less* truthful however this deduction is not absolute. Understanding and truth have been redefined by photography: Neil Postman puts emphasis on photography as a visual stimulus as being more powerful than a thought process in conveying reality. Postman discusses that the propagation of photography elucidates a form of language that replaces philological with the visual; Postman argues that photography has become our foremost means for constructing, understanding, and testing reality (Postman, N 1993). Sontag has a similar view, stating that perceived conceptions of the world are compatible with governments and organisation relocates information' (Sontag, S.). Jean Baudrillard's idea of 'hyperreality', where reality tends to fold in on its self-creating an intensification, as a result of an exaggerated reality effect, seems to

encompass photography more and more blurring the boundary of truth within a photograph (Baudrillard, J. 2001). 'Photography's significance lies within the sub-genre of what most people categorise in photography as documentary photography. We logically want to observe a photograph as factually and realistically as possible' (Savedoff, B. 2000). One of the main arguments of documentary's ability to define truth in photography (and photography's ability in general), is the lack of *absolute* control the photographer has compared to painters and the comparable freedom they have to relay truths, taking away freedom in any form seems to synthesize a closer relation to reality. Dzenko discusses the difficulty between how it is hard to differentiate between analogue and digital photography (Dzenko, C. 2009). Truth is a fickle thing that we as a society find hard to acknowledge in our day to day lives, and the 'truth' of the matter is that we find it even harder to substantiate truth in photography.

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