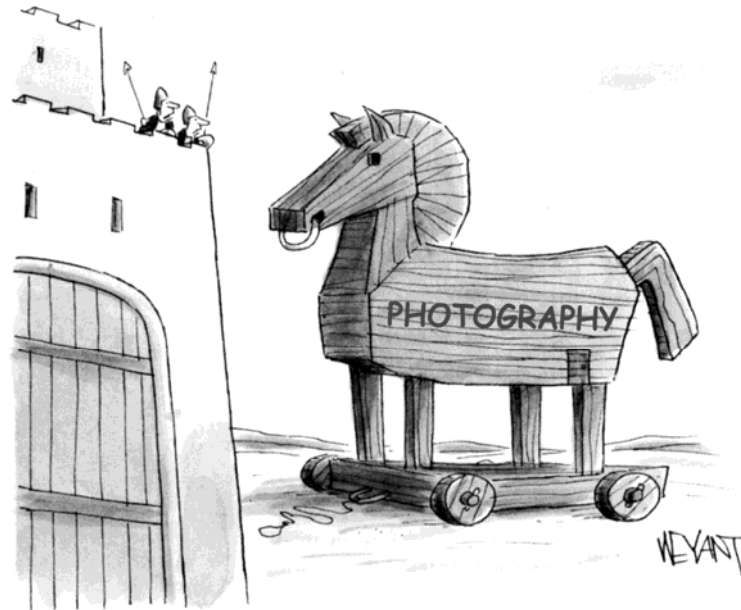


EQUAL BUT SEPARATE, A PLEA FOR LINGUISTIC CLARITY

“Photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging, with an evolving medium hidden inside it as in a Trojan horse, camouflaged, for the moment, as if [emphasis mine] it were nearly identical: its doppelganger, only better.”

-Fred Ritchin, Professor of Photography and Imaging, New York University



“How do we know it's not full of pixels?”

The word “photography” has been hijacked. It’s been hijacked by digital imaging, because digital imaging unthinkingly calls itself “photography.” The term “digital photography” is an oxymoron.

Now, I want my gentle readers to understand that this essay is not about the relative merits of digital imagery as opposed to photography. If anyone is still dwelling on that issue, it’s time to move on. The invention of photography itself provoked whines that painting was dead. Then, from the advent of dry plates and the first hand-held cameras, practitioners have, with every new innovation, complained that *real* photography is ruined. They decried the proliferation of amateurs and ever smaller cameras. These complaints, all eerily similar, have accompanied every innovation from the 1800s to the present. (1)

¹ It is true that the release of the first Kodak box camera by George Eastman in 1888 was accompanied by advertising campaigns for the first time in photography’s short history; all subsequent developments have been, and still are, market-driven. But that is a subject for another essay!

...Most of them [amateurs], instead of elevating our profession, have degraded it...The class I am bitterly opposed to, and which is increasing rapidly, and must ere long force the profession to retire in disgust, will be found at watering-places and pleasure resorts in the summer time. You see them...firing away at anything they may fancy...They cannot develop their plates, or print from negatives....This is the class that is robbing our customers.

Does this sound familiar? This was written by one Robert E. Tramo in 1884!

Rather than addressing the individual merits of each medium, what I am articulating in this essay is that digital imaging is a new, and fundamentally different, medium than photography, and therefore shouldn't be called "photography." Digital practice is the imaging medium of the future, while photography is entering into a comfortable retirement. Digital imaging started out seeming very similar to photography. Digital imaging devices looked just like photographic cameras, and whereas some still do, the majority of imaging devices today don't look like cameras. ("Camera" is Latin for "room" or "box"; digital imaging devices don't need a box).

But at the present time, most people are (understandably) confusing the two media. A good example was the May, 2011 exhibition of elegant scannographs **(2)** called "Illumitones" at the Center for Photographic Art (CPA) in Carmel, by Kim Kauffman. The catalog accompanying the exhibit states that Kauffman's "abstractions are created exclusively through the use of digital tools and materials..." and yet celebrates "the art and craft of photography in its most fundamental and traditionally significant way," a statement that is confusing and misleading. This digitally generated and printed imagery should not be called "photography." (The fact that it is beautiful is not relevant to what I am saying.)

This is not to suggest that CPA exhibit only photography. A more realistic suggestion would be for CPA to consider changing its name, to something like the Center for Photographic and Imaging Art (CPIA). The International Center of Photography (ICP), and all such organizations should consider the same sort of name change, if they continue to exhibit both digital imagery and photography (including mixed media and video), a change New York University has already made; note Fred Ritchin's title at the top of this essay.

Photography West Gallery in Carmel, CA made a resolution to avoid exhibiting "digitography" over a decade ago. The owner, Carol Williams, "became convinced that digitography will eventually become the art medium of the 21st century but it is clearly an entirely separate and distinctive medium from that of photography.... It [digitography] is a very revolutionary detour from photography on several levels."

Language is always in a constant state of flux, but digital technology is developing faster than language can change. People rarely (voluntarily) make themselves think about the language they use. But as digital imagery evolves and morphs, becoming less similar

2 Images made by placing objects onto a scanner and altering the images in Photoshop. "Scannography" is itself a new word, and as yet there isn't agreement on how to spell it—with one or two "n"s.

to photography, it will make more sense to more people to call it something other than photography. It (digital imaging) has its own features, its own *vocabulary*, and an entirely new trajectory.

What are the differences between photography and digital imaging?

On a purely material level, photography, and even the earlier 17th century proto-photography, had/has several features not shared with digital imaging: *substrate plus light-sensitive emulsion*, and *chemistry*. (Note: no camera necessary.) Actinic rays cause photochemical change, visible or latent, to a light-sensitized surface, which is then chemically processed. The bigger, cultural differences-- not only the way images are made, but the way they are distributed and experienced, are becoming more and more pronounced, moving the digital realm further and further away from the photographic.

Right now, Ritchin's Trojan Horse analogy is wonderfully apt. Digital imaging and photography are, for now, quite similar. I like to compare photography to Neanderthal and digital imaging to Homo Sapiens. They both walk upright, swing their arms, but are different species. (Neanderthals had hairy backs.) Luckily for my analogy, it has recently been discovered that Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens interbred (some Homo Sapiens have hairy backs), which would be analogous to the mixed media practices by many artists today, combining digital technology with historical photographic processes.

Ritchin's book *After Photography* (2009) is the best elucidation of the profound differences between photography and digital imaging I have read, but if I were asked to review the book, my only negative criticism would be that he is linguistically inconsistent, using many terms such as "digital imagery," "the new photograph," "the pixelated photograph," and "digital photography," interchangeably, while at the same time stating that these new image-makers will not be called "photographers" at all, but "communicators." (Possibly he was simply striving for linguistic variety. I have written him asking about this issue. He promised to read this essay and respond, but as of this date I've had no answer.) Speaking about the differences in *After Photography*, Ritchin writes:

Both consciously and unconsciously, the emerging imagery will help people to understand the universe through strategies that were relatively inaccessible to analog photography, including multiple temporal and spatial perspectives, nonlinear and relativistic histories, contrasting cultural points of view, internal spaces such as the body, quantum mechanics, artificial life, and genetics. The new photograph will be read and understood differently as people comprehend that it does not descend from the same representational logic either of analog photography or of painting that preceded it.....The pixelated photograph's ephemerality on the screen and its easy linkage, as well as the impression that it is just one communication strategy among many, reduce the individualized impact of the photograph as it appears on a piece of film or paper. Rather than as "photographers" for the most part these kinds of

image-makers will be thought of simply as “communicators.”

Geoffrey Batchen (Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico) who, unlike Ritchin, *does* make the careful linguistic distinction between photography and digital imaging, and who wrote more than 10 years earlier), also speaks about the deeper differences: (The following quote refers to photography using a camera.) In Burning with Desire, The Conception of Photography (1997), Batchen writes:

The main difference is that whereas photography still claims some sort of objectivity, digital imaging remains an overtly fictional process.... For what makes photographs distinctive is that they depend on this original presence, a referent in the material world that at some time really did exist to imprint itself on a sheet of light sensitive paper... As a footprint is to a foot, so is a photograph to its referent.... Where photography is inscribed by the things it represents, digital images may have no origin other than their own computer programs. These images may still be indices of a sort, but their referents are differential circuits and abstracted data banks of information (information that includes, in most cases, the look of the photograph.... Given the advent of new imaging processes, photography may indeed be on the verge of losing its privileged place within modern culture.

Alan Greene, educator and historical process photographer, also differentiates photography from digital imaging. In the preface to his book Primitive Photography, he wrote that as early as 1992, one of his photography professors declared that “soon photography would be supplanted by digital imaging.” In the event that this might be true (so far it isn’t), Greene taught himself calotypy, salt printing and how to build lenses and cameras. (Greene is one of those thinkers who sees photography’s history as a devolution rather than as an evolution, due to market driven forces.)

Another artist, writer, historian and educator who uses language carefully is Robert Hirsch. He uses the terms “digital imaging,” digital technology,” and “digitization,” but not “digital photography:” In Seizing the Light, A Social History of Photography (2009), he writes:

Digital imaging breaks the customary prescription by giving imagemakers the ability to not only determine place and time, but to control space and time. This is possible because images are formed into a binary numerical code that is electronically stored and available for future retrieval.... In a Darwinian twist of Natural Selection, digital imaging has placed the traditional photograph in the same position that the invention of photography put painting.... The great disparities among the working procedures of handmade, digital, and theoretical images has led to the suggestion that they should be regarded as separate ways of working, even if the final results are similar. (Emphasis mine.)

Christopher James, author of The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes (2nd edition, 2009) said in an e-mail to me recently: “There is photography, and this

means you're actually going to have a role in making it. And then there's digital imaging, which means a gust of wind can activate the device to record the impression." Later, he more seriously clarified that he has always felt that : "Digital imaging is one thing, and photography quite another."

OTHER VOICES

I have recently had an interesting and lengthy correspondence with an artist who has made the complete transition from photography to digital imagery. He strenuously objects to my ideas. His objections, boiled down, consisted of:

1. Sending me the Wikipedia definition of Photography.
2. Saying that I am seeking to "marginalize the digital approach to photography, demonstrating my own fears of the medium," and accusing me of attempting to "separate and distance digital photography from your own chosen approach."
3. Saying that I, and others, "lack even the most basic understanding of, and/or experience of the digital approach."
4. Saying that what matters is the image, not how it was made.
5. And finally, saying, rather vaguely, that he remains "altogether unable to divine any useful and/or positive purpose for considering digital photography as being separate of conventional photography for purposes of defining the word photography itself."

His emotional response startled me. People apparently are so accustomed to the old arguments about the relative merits of photography vs. digital imaging, that they are unlikely to hear what I am actually saying. Points #1 (the reliability of Wikipedia) and #4 (product vs process) could be the subjects of separate essays, so I won't address them here.

Another artist and writer, Doug Collins, who practices the cliché-verre technique and chemigrams (both photographic / cameraless processes) told me that he didn't think the differences between digital imaging and photography were important enough to make a linguistic distinction.

Huntington Witherill, former photographer, is the author of "Farewell to the Revolution, Digital Photography Enters the Mainstream," in the Oct./Nov. 2005 issue of "Camera Arts" magazine. In this article he takes a decidedly adversarial stance, and argues that " 'digital photography' is here to stay" and refers to "a few holdouts [continuing to] grumble at the new kids on the block."

CONCLUSION,

I'll return to Fred Ritchin, who, in spite of his linguistic inconsistency, makes the best case for separating the two media, and warns people about conflating photography and digital imagery (emphasis mine):

"For those who see the digital as comprising a markedly different environment than

*the analog, what we are currently observing is no less than a revolution.... **We should be suspicious of the easy melding of photography into digital photography, focusing on initial similarities.***"

And, to repeat his words: Digital imagery "does not descend from the same representational logic either of analog photography or of painting that preceded it."

Right now, when a person says she's a "photographer," I don't know what that means, because there is no consensus on what terminology to use. When someone asks me what I do, and I answer "photography," he probably doesn't know what I mean. All we can safely assume is that if someone makes a living from image-making with a camera, or an imaging device, it is most likely digital, not photographic. And most likely, a "snap-shooter" will also be using a digital device.

Another recent confusing linguistic situation: RayKo Photo Center in San Francisco had a juried show of "Camera-less Photography" in June, 2011. In the entry rules, they suggested that entries could include many photographic processes, such as photograms, chemigrams, lumens, etc. They also included something called "laptopograms." Then, they insisted that "all work must be original." Assuming that "laptopograms" would be similar to the scannographs referred to at the beginning of this essay, I would suggest that, with digital imagery, there are no originals, only infinite numbers of clones. [Follow-up: I saw the show, and, as wonderful as it was, it was mostly mixed media (photographic originals digitally scanned and printed) or all digital (scannographs), which pieces I would not call photographs at all. *The minority of the pieces were photographic originals: i.e., one-of-a-kind photograms, lumens, chemigrams, cyanotypes, etc.*]

Now that digital imagery has taken over all of the practical, scientific, commercial, and "snapshot" applications of photography, all that photography has left, for the first time in its short life, is ART. This could be considered good news for photographers, as the tired old argument about whether photography is an art or not has finally been rendered lifeless.. Interest in photography, especially in its early processes, has been experiencing a revival in response to the rise of digital technology. Moreover digital technology has introduced many exciting new mixed media possibilities, devices, and entirely new art directions, many of them not yet explored or imagined. It is indeed an exciting time when one can choose between a daguerreotype (photographic) workshop with Jerry Spagnoli, or a cell-phone (digital imaging) workshop with Dan Burkholder!

So, to conclude this essay, I'll reiterate: I am not speaking about the relative merits of the two media, but I am making a plea for linguistic clarity, for terming, defining, and describing photography and digital imaging differently.

- Martha Casanave, June, 2011