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Article: What is a Photograph?

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# WHAT IS A PHOTOGRAPH?

GRANT ROMER

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In the early 1970s the conservation of photographs began to define itself within the conservation profession as a distinctly separate specialty. The pioneers of the field argued then that the unifying and essential nature of the true photographs was a common origin in chemical response to radiant energy, no matter how varied in materials or structure, or how much they might resemble other forms of graphic imagery. Further, they made the case that it was the photograph as object, not just as image, that required special conservation approach beyond what the photographic industry and paper conservation was offering. The new professional specialty established itself by being able to clearly define the photograph.

Today, as if struck with a confusion of tongues, the many conservation specialists who speak for the photograph do not agree upon a common answer to “What is a photograph?” For some, this is no problem at all. For others, it indicates a grave confusion in the craft, which threatens the very definition and effectiveness of the specialty profession. Indeed, some begin to question, “What is photograph conservation?” Without a clear definition of “photograph,” commonly held by the profession, can it be possible to establish the domain of the photograph conservator?

The stretching and blurring of the definition of “photograph” is a direct result of the evolution of electronic imaging, which has profoundly disrupted the traditional photographic industry. Daily, the convergence of information and imaging technology is establishing a new industry and culture, spawning new words and altering old definitions.

The more than 150-year dominance of silver-halide technology is rapidly diminishing. An analogous, but essentially different technology, increasingly serves in the stead of traditional chemical imaging systems: digital cameras replace cameras that use film; for some uses, scanners replace cameras; printers replace darkrooms; bathrooms that had been converted to darkrooms are being converted back into bathrooms. The truly marvelous new technologies are seen by most who embrace them as the natural evolutionary progress of photography. Some, however, see it as something entirely different. For those who express unease or regret at change, advocates of progress point out that photographic technology has always been transforming since its commercial introduction in 1839. One process has yielded to another, over and over again, as improvements have been made. What we are experiencing now, they say, is just “the closing of another chapter in the history of photography.” But, it is the last chapter in the book. One has only to look at the news of the behavior of those companies that established themselves on silver-halide technology to see that they are in the process of dividing their businesses.

“Photography,” meaning “writing with light,” was perhaps never a sufficiently good word to describe the totality of the technology it intended to encompass. Resorting to dictionaries will reveal a disturbing variance of definitions for such a profoundly present

and influential technology. In common usage, “photography” and “photograph” are used as synonyms, quite incorrectly. The profession inconsistently is referred to as “photography conservation,” “photographic conservation,” and “photograph conservation.” They are not the same thing. The sufficiently vague “photo conservation” gains popularity, but implies only “the conservation of light.” The more careful avoid the problem by referring to “photographic materials” as their professional conservation purview. But does “photographic materials” include such things as magnetic and electronic media? The confusion of language indicates a confusion of concept, for which there are many reasons. That confusion is growing.

The lessons of photographic history teach that there is an astonishingly rapid loss of knowledge and skill attending the usurpation of one commercially dominant system of photography by another. Much research effort in photograph conservation has been, is, and will be devoted to rediscovering and exploring past methods. Historic process recreation is a fundament of photograph conservation education. Today, it is appropriate to view silver-halide based photography as an historic process, even though it is still with us. The loss of knowledge of the craft of traditional photography is now ongoing. The experience of developing a latent image by chemistry will soon be unknown to most. It is evident that the conservation specialty devoted to photographs, however it defines “photograph,” must preserve the knowledge of the ways in which photographs have been made. To adopt too loose a definition of “photograph” at this time, with the encouragement of the pied pipers of the “new,” is to hasten that obliteration process and further encumber our ability to effectively conserve the vast heritage of chemical imaging technology.

Those who make a profession out of conserving photographs must be clear to themselves and others about the definition of both conservator and photograph. Without those definitions, who may be recognized, by themselves or others, as a photograph conservator? Due to the diverse nature and long history of chemical imaging technology, its products, and its many contexts of valuation, photograph conservators must increasingly specialize. Those charged with educating photograph conservators already know the impossibility of training general practitioners in light of current knowledge. Adding to this existing challenge, the task of understanding a new and most complex technology must necessarily fragment the profession further. The photographic industry has forgotten its history and will someday be, itself, forgotten.

“Info-imaging” has been proposed as the new name appropriate for the new industry. It is thus possible that someday there will be info-imaging conservation. Whatever its name will be, a new profession is evolving because of revolutionary changes in technology. But it cannot call itself photograph conservation. The meaning of the word photograph cannot be infinitely stretched to describe the products of the new technology without damaging understanding of the older. Not everything that looks like a photograph is truly a photograph to a true photograph conservator.

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