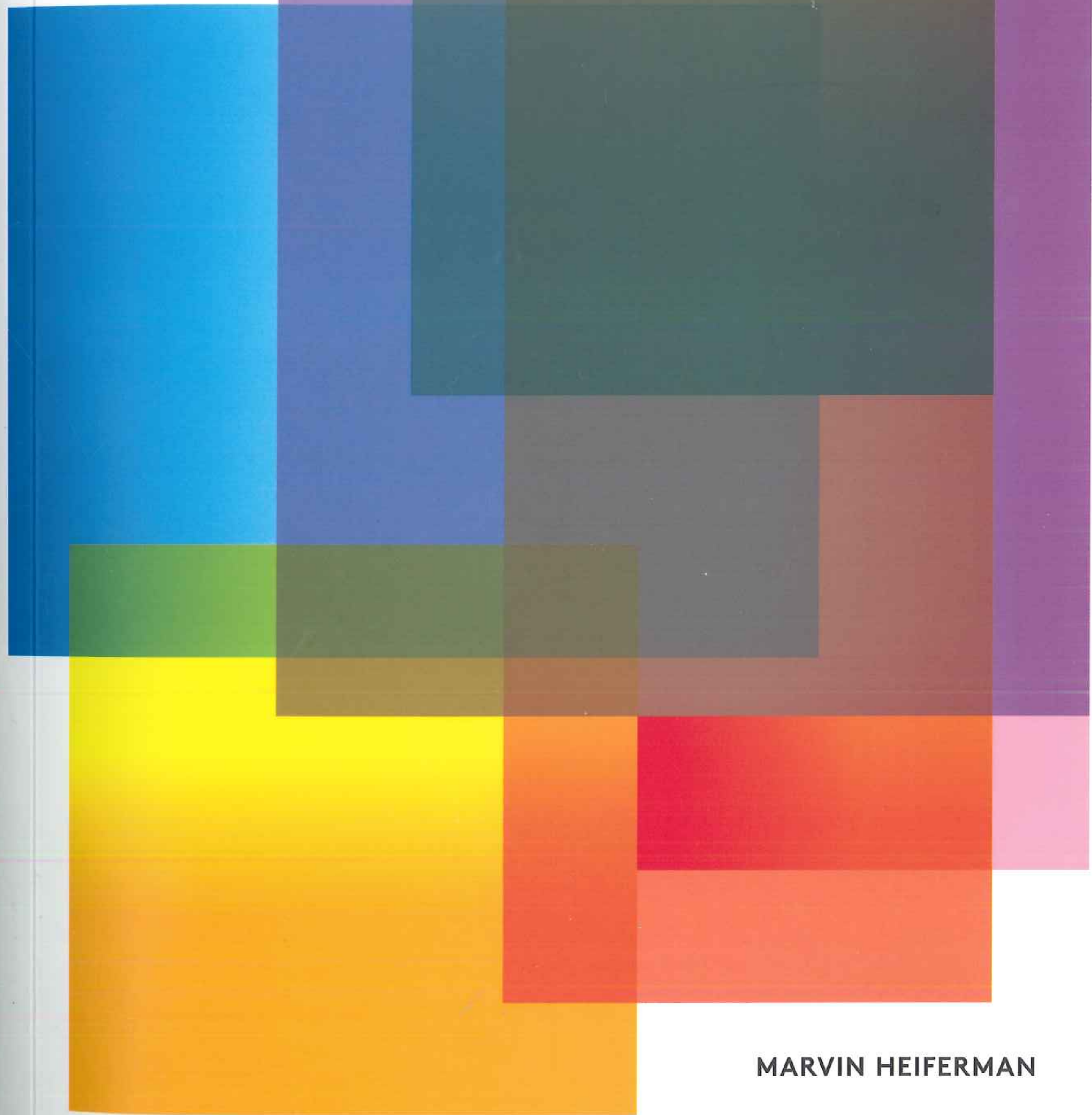
PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES EVERYTHING



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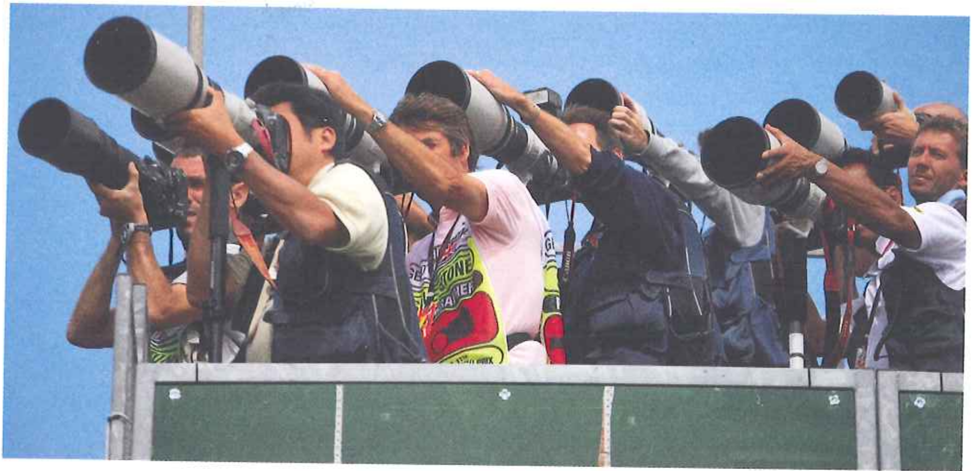


TOP:
Ann McKelvie, Track photographers at the British Grand Prix, 2007

BOTTOM:
Erik Kessels, Installation view at FOAM, Amsterdam, featuring printouts of twenty-four hours worth of photographs that were uploaded to Flickr, 2011

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES EVERYTHING

MARVIN HEIFERMAN

THERE IS NO SINGLE OR SIMPLE STORY TO TELL ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY. So many photographs have been made for so many reasons that tidy narratives about the medium are impossible to construct or support. Since its introduction in the early nineteenth century, photography, in all of its forms and guises, has been notoriously difficult to assess, a predicament that Urs Stahel, director of Switzerland's Fotomuseum Winterthur, dramatized in a lecture entitled "Well, What Is Photography?"

> Without hesitation, people take a deep breath and announce in a booming voice: "This is photography!" "No, this is photography!" "This isn't photography anymore!" "You are wrong, this is photography!" The more forceful the claim, the more likely it is that someone is standing nearby ready to declare the same three words just as emphatically but with a different meaning in mind.[1]

That photography resists being shaped by any single set of imperatives or standards—as it literally permeates our public and private and our rational and fantasy lives—renders it, by its very nature, unruly and hard to define.

Ask a food stylist what a good photograph is, what it takes to make a plate of fresh food look fresher, and you'll hear about fashion photography tricks that have been appropriated to trigger a different kind of hunger. Ask physicists who specialize in particle acceleration how photography works for them and they're likely to produce images of neutrinos slamming into targets coated with photo-emulsion. Ask Anthony Weiner about photography—he lost his seat in the U.S. Congress in 2011 after the sexually explicit images he sent to a few female Twitter followers went viral—and you'll get a very different response about the explosive force of images.

We need, use, and respond to photographs in their myriad forms for all sorts of reasons—from the search for information about life itself to the confirmation of events or the inevitable creep of mortality that compels us to pay respects to all that is fugitive. Photography excites us to the point that it makes us greedy to see more. The idea that we need to see more in order to know more, for example, was something Henry Luce capitalized on in the mid-1930s, when he described the medium's power in a prospectus for the wildly successful mid-century picture magazine, *Life*:

> To see life, to see the world, to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon, to see man's work—his paintings, towers, and discoveries, to see things thousands of miles

away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to . . . to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.[2]

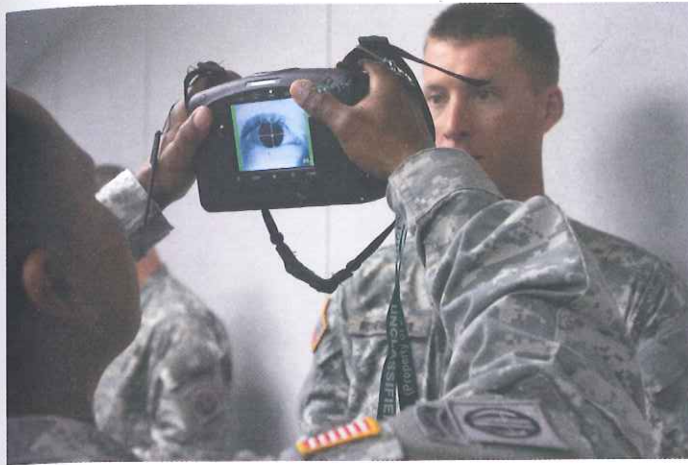
To see and experience the world, we don't only look at images; we take them, and often. Last year, it was reported that Facebook's 750 million users uploaded and shared 100 million photos every day. The constant demand for and production of photographic images expands exponentially. We are defined and emboldened by the photographs we view, make, use, share, and respond to. Our love of and need for photographs and the breadth of photography's reach, authority, and power are, with no exaggeration, awesome. "The more I thought about what photographs are," Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography* (1977), "the more complex and suggestive they became."[3]

Many of us keep trying to figure photography out. In late 2004, I was invited to participate in a series of informal conversations that were being sponsored by the Smithsonian Photography Initiative. Under the direction of Merry A. Foresta, the Initiative was charged with developing programming that would create greater interest in, and easier access to, the Smithsonian's estimated 14 million photographs, rich repositories of images made with the widest imaginable range of intentions. They are housed in hundreds of collections defined by their varied but specific disciplinary interests and dispersed among nineteen separate Smithsonian museums and research institutions.

It was at one of those meetings, when a small, but eclectic group of people met around a table in the Smithsonian's Castle building, that the idea that shaped *Photography Changes Everything* began to emerge. Among those present were the former director of a major art museum, a noted astrophysicist, a geographer and, somewhat surprisingly, an information analyst from the CIA, whose job was to analyze aerial thermographic images of parking lots, which visually register the emanation of heat, in order to create timelines that detailed when suspected drug dealers last turned off their car ignitions. As we talked over the course of one day, two things became clear. Photography was essential to each of our pursuits. And each person in the room, because of his or her training, responsibilities, or interests, used and spoke about photography differently. What made for an effective, good, or even beautiful picture depended entirely on who was doing the looking and the talking.

What struck me as I sat there was the fact that in recent decades the most sustained and promoted discourse about photography—a tool central to so many aspects of our everyday lives—has tended to focus on a specific category of images: those made as art, as well as the handful of vernacular images that managed to get upgraded to the status of art. While the championing of photography as art by photographers, galleries, art museum photography departments, art historians, and MFA programs, has helped foster serious consideration of the medium, it has also created something of a roadblock. As art historian Geoffrey Batchen described it, photography, "a sprawling cultural phenomenon inhabiting virtually every aspect of modern life," is "consistently left out of its own history (for only a few select photographs qualify for inclusion in an art history of the medium)."[4]

In my work, I've often thought about how to talk about all those other images out there. Not the ones made by photographers and artists, but the less pedigreed ones that play equally important and vital roles in our lives—the photographs that don't get framed, but which deliver the news, sell clothes, get you a date, cause parking tickets to be written,



TOP:
U.S. Army, Staff Sergeant Luis A. Arryo Avila, of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, uses handheld interagency identifying detection equipment to record the iris of Private First Class Eric V. Rothenberger during a battlefield forensics class at the Joint Readiness Training Center rotation at Fork Polk, Louisiana, 2009

BOTTOM:
Byrion Smith, Google street view car in Bristol, England, 2008

and save lives. Self-conscious and artful photographs can trigger aesthetic appreciation and arguments, and may even touch on social and cultural issues and provoke philosophical debate. But so can, and so *do*, many of the seemingly banal and workaday images of and in the world.

What my Smithsonian experience reinforced for me was the sense that now—as digital imaging further democratizes the accessibility and reach of the medium—there is much more to be said about and learned from photography. But we need to take a few steps back to be able to consider, in a broader way, how the medium functions in the greater world of images. Conventional perspectives on the role, history, and art of photography need to be revisited—on personal and particularly on institutional levels—to more accurately reflect our increasingly sophisticated and frequent interactions with all kinds of photographic imagery.

The urgency of this inquiry rests on the turning point we have now reached with regard to our relationship to and use of photography. People talk about this turning point as the "digital revolution," but that's not quite the same thing. Digitization did not happen suddenly; it's been decades in the making. The first digital camera was introduced in 1975, almost forty years ago. And its coconspirator in the visual revolution, the personal

Derek Jensen, Red light camera system at the Springfield, Ohio, intersection of Limestone Street and Leffel Lane, 2006

computer, made its way into the culture in the early 1980s. But from the general public's perspective, it's the more recent availability of camera-equipped cell- and smart phones, and the images we make with and distribute from them, that are radically altering the form, content, transmission, and impact of camera images.

Last year, as camera sales dropped by 17 percent, the number of photographs made on camera-phones rose by 27 percent. If photographers in the past were respected as skilled professionals and idealized as romantic truth-seekers, today's model is more democratic. *WE ARE ALL PHOTOGRAPHERS NOW!* proclaimed the boldly lettered title of a 2007 exhibition of visitor-contributed digital content at the Musee de l'Elysée in Lausanne, Switzerland. Once-specialized photographic activities like the post-production, distribution, and archiving of images have become domesticated and everyday events. Amateurs have been making snapshots for well over a century, but their photographs are no longer confined to the documentation of special events and destined for local audiences. Still photographs are being made in record numbers; an estimated 1.3 billion new photographic images are made daily—close to half a trillion every year—and they can span the world in seconds.

We take more pictures because we can. Our phones, with advanced image technology bundled into them, are always with us. We take pictures, now, of things or circumstances we think are curious or cool, and for reasons we probably can't or would rather not articulate. Photography is not only more accessible as an activity, it has become more interesting to more people as a practice, a phenomenon predicted by the media theorist Marshall McLuhan nearly half a century ago:

> In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.[5]

The increase in the numbers of images made by us, and the enthusiasm with which we share them through social media, underscore the fact that we are forging a new relationship to photography. So do the unsettling quantities of photographic images that are continually being made *of* us—in mass-transit hubs, when we're stopped in our cars at traffic lights, as we shop, when we enter or leave the buildings. As photography is being transformed, so too is the implicit (but often unexamined) contract between images, reality, and viewers.

We know that photographs work, but not quite how they do. We pay lip service to visual literacy, but don't bother to teach it. In schools, at home or work, in our day-to-day lives, we don't give much time or thought to assessing what makes photography such an effective medium. We should. "The more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images)," as social critic Roland Barthes observed, "the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given image."[6]

We should spend less time focusing on what makes photographs good and more time figuring out how they do their work. It was with that in mind that the goal for *Photography Changes Everything* became clearer, to create an opportunity to explore the medium's active role in our lives and world. Easier said than done, as art historian John Tagg pointed out when he described the medium's slipperiness:

> Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. . . . Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.[7]

Geoff Wong, Tourists with their camera-phones, 2008

TOP:
NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Hurricane Catarina hits Brazil, 2010

BOTTOM:
ESA's Mars Express spacecraft (MEX), Aram Chaos (North to the right), 2004

So, thinking about workable projects for the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, what I proposed and was settled upon was a structure that we hoped would encourage people to think more broadly about photography by talking more specifically about photographs as agents of change. By its very nature, photography slows time to a standstill in order to corral and flash-freeze information. But just as impressively and importantly, photography is active; it keeps things moving, something the people invited to take part in the project, who use photography often and for a variety of reasons, repeatedly confirmed.

Photographs don't only show us things, they *do* things. They engage us optically, neurologically, intellectually, emotionally, viscerally, physically. They demand our scrutiny and interpretation. Photographs seduce and motivate us; they promote ideas, embed values, and shape public opinion. We look at certain photographs because they calm or excite us. Others solve problems or create them, empower or demean us. Photographs may foster empathy, but can be equally effective at distancing us from whatever they depict.

To explore the breadth of what images look like and do—and because the project's goal was to advocate for a more accurate reassessment of photography's utility and power—we made lists of people we hoped to engage and whose inclusion would bridge a range of experiences and interests. While some project participants were affiliated with

the Smithsonian, others came from contexts and institutions beyond the museums that line the National Mall. We reached out to artists, visual anthropologists, and adoption specialists. We talked with experts in the media, merchandizing, and medicine. We sought out photographic and digital innovators and inventors. We worked with eighth-grade language-arts students in Des Moines, and a network of educators who teach K-12 and university level classes, and were part of a National Writing Project summer program. We targeted experts in visual studies who study photography's role in culture and everyday life, as well as people who rely heavily on photographic imaging in their work, but are seldom asked to talk about when or why or how they do. Visitors to the Photography Initiative's website were encouraged to contribute content, too.

Each project participant was asked to consider how photography transformed their personal life or field of professional interest. The stories they tell and the images they share reveal that photography, far from being a shared language, is subject to rules, specific criteria, and expectations that vary from one context and field to another. The information and values encoded in photographs, and the meaning we extract from them, always depends upon the needs, questions, and perspectives we bring to them.

More than two and a half years—and nearly one hundred stories and many more images later—one fact, as startling as it was basic, was confirmed again and again in every entry in this volume: far from being a passive recording technology, photography is catalytic. While we tend to think of photographs as rearview mirrors, the reality is that photography aggressively moves us forward and changes *everything*.

Of course *everything*, like photography itself, is hard to quantify. Still, as the project progressed, a workable organizational structure emerged organically. The narratives and images coming in from project contributors tended to sort themselves out into the six distinct categories that now organize this book:

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHAT WE WANT: Photographs influence how we define our needs, and give us permission to explore desire. Whether we are struggling for justice or equality, seeking titillation, searching for intimacy or spectacle, or attempting to visualize beauty, happiness, or success, photography plays a pivotal role in our quest. Images confirm what we've attained and set up goal posts for what we hope to achieve. The cravings we feel for experiences or things are fueled, and sometimes satisfied, by the images we encounter, seek out, and sometimes obsess over.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHAT WE SEE: Photography shows us what the human eye cannot see—things that are too big or small; change that is too fast or too slow; phenomena and events that, for one reason or another, lie beyond our sight. Our visual experiences in and knowledge of the world are largely propelled by the fact that we look at and look for what we already anticipate we'll see. Photography challenges our assumptions and the limits of our perception by revealing to us what would otherwise easily go unnoticed.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHO WE ARE: Photography is fundamental to the ways we define and understand who we are. How we choose to represent ourselves as individuals or in groups, and what happens when we are photographed by others, all contribute to the shaping of self-image and stereotypes, and influence how people relate to us. We are photographed often, with and without our collaboration or consent.

TOP:
Thomas Smillie, the Smithsonian's first staff photographer and photography curator, documented important events and research trips, museum installations and mundane objects, and created reproductions for use as printed illustrations, 1890

BOTTOM:
Thomas Smillie, Installation view of Smithsonian exhibition, which he mounted on the history of photography to showcase the remarkable advancements that had been made in the field, but which he feared had already been forgotten, 1913

As a result, we are equally fascinated with and wary of photographs of ourselves and of others.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHAT WE DO: Photography does more than document what we've done; it shapes much of what we decide to do. Cameras, as Diane Arbus said, give us "a kind of license,"[8] and photography just as generously frees us to follow our curiosity and impulses, even as it enables us to fulfill our responsibilities. Engineering and politics are just two examples of fields that have been radically transformed by photography. Photographic images shape how we communicate, learn, and interact. Photography often supplies us with the information we need to determine what needs to happen next.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHERE WE GO: Photographs can transport us to worlds beyond the borders of everyday experience. In the nineteenth century, images of the American West, monuments of ancient civilizations, colonial outposts, and expeditions to far-flung places made armchair tourism possible and popular. Since then, photography has mapped the insides of our bodies, the ocean's floor, the topography of Mars, and confirmed the existence of black holes millions of light years further out in the universe. Photographs embolden and turn us all into explorers as they define and inevitably domesticate all that once was thought to be exotic.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHAT WE REMEMBER: Memory is slippery and mutable. And while photography is too, we still depend upon the medium to keep track of what has happened to us. Now that we have round-the-clock access to vast archives of digital information and images, some critics suggest that we are, paradoxically, creating a culture of forgetting. We continually refer back to photographs, which function as prompts and talismans. Photographs are not simply vessels of memory but "have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a culture."[9]

Read one at a time, the individual stories collected here offer up vivid, quirky, and sometimes poignant examples of the ways photographic images demand and hold our attention, raise or dash our hopes, and act as agents of transformation and change. Taken together, these short essays acknowledge and celebrate the protean nature of photography itself. When William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the medium's early pioneers, published *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–46), featuring the tipped-in photographic prints he said were drawn by light and called "sun pictures," he hoped to prove that "one advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation."[10] Today, the more photographic images we encounter and get to work with, the less certainty we have about the nature or possibility of photographic truth.

What cameras take in, we're just starting to better understand, is only what they've been engineered to record. And even if, for argument's sake, photography, the "pencil of nature," were able to capture all the world's details with accuracy, we humans would have a hard time seeing that clearly; the result of what neurologists and psychologists call "inattentional blindness." No matter how carefully we make or critically study any photograph, we will never fully register or process all the information in it. Because we are wired to start looking for one specific thing when we come upon an image, it's virtually

guaranteed that we will fail to notice much of the other content that is embedded in it.

"Photographs never have a singular meaning; neither, it turns out, does photography as a whole," as Geoffrey Batchen has observed.[11] Photographs made for one reason are destined to be valued differently and repurposed by others with a lesser or a different stake in them. The meanings of photographs are provisional, but one thing is certain about photography, as this book illustrates and confirms: the medium not only compels us to look but to act. We reminisce over snapshots, but walk away rethinking past relationships. We worry or sigh with relief when we're shown X-rays or MRIs, because of what they indicate should happen next. We scrutinize images of models or celebrities to discern how thoroughly their images have been worked over, in order to more carefully discern the photographic dividing line between photographic fact and fiction. Photographs can be banal or newsworthy, pleasurable or upsetting, measurable or misleading. In any case, we keep looking. We're hooked. "Since our technology is really just an extension of ourselves," novelist Jonathan Franzen wrote, "we don't have to have contempt for its manipulability in the way we might with actual people. It's all one big endless loop. We like the mirror and the mirror likes us."[12]

Locked as we are into a cycle of making, viewing, and using photographs, it is important to recognize that as photography changes everything, it changes itself as well. What cameras are capable of seeing is changing. The look and format of photographs are changing. What we believe to be the acceptable content of images is changing. And so, too, are our notions of what photographs themselves actually are, or might be. We once considered them to be somewhat fragile things; material objects that, as anthropologists Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart put it, could be "transported, relocated, dispersed or damaged, torn and cropped . . . because viewing implies one or several physical interactions."[13] Even now, when photographic images appear to have dematerialized and we encounter them in their brilliantly backlit and digital formats, they remain vulnerable, subject to damage, file corruption, or the kind of loss that results from something as quick and irrevocable as an errant keyboard click.

As we look at and think about images now—the ones that have survived, the few we print out, the ones we shuttle from one digital device to another—what, exactly, does it mean to call something a photograph? Is a photograph something you hold in your hand or that gets laminated onto a mug or the top of a birthday cake? Is a photograph something that gets inked onto paper or plays a cameo role in a documentary film? Is a photograph a collection of ones and zeroes stored on a hard drive or in a digital cloud until it is summoned up and shipped out to be reconstituted elsewhere? Is it the mammoth-scaled luxury item that is auctioned off for millions of dollars and to a round of applause?

If the answer is unclear, one thing remains constant: as photography evolves, so will the ways we engage with and talk about the medium. As production and transmission options for camera imagery grow more sophisticated, so should the conversation about the impact of photography. Given the pivotal role the medium plays in describing and transforming our lives, it is a mistake to take photographic imaging lightly or for granted. Conventional perspectives about the history, authority, and consequences of photography need to be revisited. New research and future predictions about the medium are worth

tracking, if only to shake us out of our complacency about the types of photographic images we already know. Large, but far from encyclopedic, this project is meant to explore not only how our lives have been changed by photography, but to remind us that change will continue, whatever the medium comes to be or to mean.

Notes

1. Urs Stahel, *Well, What Is Photography?: A Lecture on Photography on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Fotomuseum Winterthur* (Zurich: Scalo, 2003).
2. Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2011), p. 214.
3. Susan Sontag, "Introduction," in *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973).
4. Geoffrey Batchen, "When This You See: Photography, History, Memory" (lecture, Dutch Eyes, Amsterdam, January 20, 2005).
5. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 23.
6. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 44.
7. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), p. 118.
8. "Diane Arbus," in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), p. 191.
9. Marita Sturken, "The Image as Memorial: Personal Photographs in Cultural Memory," in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 178.
10. Robert Lassam, *Fox Talbot, Photographer* (Wiltshire: Compton Press, 1979), p. 18.
11. Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 78.
12. Jonathan Franzen, "Liking Is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts," *New York Times*, May 28, 2011.
13. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, "Introduction," in *Photographs Objects Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2004).