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## APRIL DAWN FRIGES

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### *Photography's Nostalgic Present*

Photography is a social tool and we are on the forefront of huge cultural shifts. I believe photography is now a part of our bodies, an extension of us physically. We're all a part of the discussion around the medium, its evolution, and it requires no background experience - we come to photography with our own understanding of it, whether its a record of our birth, a reminder to memories of a past or those who have passed, family members we have never met. The camera serves as a ubiquitous tool to record struggles and (mostly) celebrations with 'say cheese' optimism.

The medium poses a lot of tough questions because it appears in multiple forms. For instance, in a woke present, it has quickly demonstrated its ability to transform into one of the most powerful tools by acting as little brother, assisting to build the framework for cultural criticism, in an already established big brother surveillance-ridden society. This constant act of the medium turning in on itself lies within its young upbringing, built physically and conceptually within our contemporary digital society.

Storytelling is vital to how we understand photography. Photography can feel realistic, I am infatuated with earnest citations of *nostalgia* within the definition of the medium; memories of a moment in time, a family and history, and the possibilities of passing on this visual narrative of ones own past - launching it two-dimensionally into the future. I find myself impulsively reorganizing my feelings from fact, that photography is also ambiguous and cryptic. Within the role of visual storytelling, these sites and subjects require different methods of entry.

Ironing out the balance of subjective and objective truth can be dizzying. Ideas and facts around the medium of photography, its past, its present *and* its future will never be linear; because the meaning behind photographs shape-shift over time. Within my pedagogical practice, I introduce this non-linear concept to second year photography majors, within *History of Photography*, utilizing what many refer to as the most famous photograph in the world, a portrait of of Ernesto Guevara 'Ché', Guerrillero Heroico, by Alberto Korda.



Korda captured this iconic image of the Cuban revolutionary by chance. Public Domain

There are several textbook definitions of the exact same image of Che, and while the photograph was taken factually in 1960, objective truth, it never made its way into the mainstream until much later. Just like the way his personal identity went through continual deification, the photographic image itself and the endless subjective meanings attached, have seemingly mutated and morphed alongside him throughout time. This image of a hardcore militant Marxist icon, who fought endlessly to convey his anti-capitalist beliefs, became the very symbol of capitalism,<sup>1</sup> turned into one of the most reproduced images to this day. The photograph became “The face that launched a thousand T-shirts,” displayed on stickers and beanies, key chains, and even printed on money itself, ready for consumer consumption – which directly contradicts Ernesto Rafael “Che” Guevara de la Serna’s lifelong philosophies. This is a clear demonstration of how photographs can have a life outside of the singular perspective and may be out of the originator’s control to contain. Our discussions don’t just end there, because there are layers of discourse on the transmission of photography, and the technology available to even allow for this shape-shifting narrative to exist. Lastly, with the Che image commercially hijacked, the power of this photograph additionally formed a global collective identity about an entire nation, Cuba. Another subjective truth is how photography has the power to persuade other nations that Cuba is a symbol of global inspiration. Meanwhile, very little Latinx artists are featured within the history of American photography. It was not until 2020 that the first Latinx photography book<sup>2</sup> was released as a comprehensive visual history. And while some contemporary photo history books continue to convey the photograph of Che with an objective truth:<sup>3</sup> relating only to site, brand of camera used to take the photograph and even marking upon the distinct photographic point of view (the angle) which is mimicked visually later in other iconic photographs, such as former Presidents John F. Kennedy or Barack Obama– it’s imperative today that photographers understand that in fact they are our future creators, who embody the power to not just adapt conflicting meanings into a complex discourse, but open up their own discourse to allow for a greater perspective around the subject. The image can be taken away from the originator, the narrative surrounding the image can also be changed, all out of their control, no matter the artist’s intent. If students lean in early on, they have the ability to work through these themes in their work. It is near impossible to cite only objective truth without considering the narrative of subjective truth, which can parallel and also contradict the image and whatever its original meaning may have been.

Photography is a tool that is used to debunk itself, photographic technology is being used to disprove its own history. I find it fascinating now to reflect upon my own ideas about photography in the past and how I pivoted from what feels like a once-understood photographic truth reinforced by my mostly-modern undergraduate upbringing. During my critical postgraduate studies (UCI '07-'10), early war photographs from photographers such as Capa and Fenton were being dismantled in the present, with newer digital photographic technologies available, it continues to allow us to deconstruct what was once considered *truth*. This strong interest in Photography’s complicated future came from my independent research supported by Dr. Sally Stein. Stein’s graduate-level *Revisiting Photography* course within visual studies aimed to examine how the past three decades have generated significant revisions of theories of photographic history and meaning and speculate where we are heading.

While John Szarkowski and Roland Barthes concentrated on what photography *does*, John Tagg stated that, ‘photography as such has no identity as a practice depends on the institutions which

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<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the subjective truth Susan Bright and Hedy van Erp interprets through this photograph in their book titled *Photography Decoded*, published in 2019

<sup>2</sup> Ferrer, Elizabeth, *Latinx Photography in the United States: A Visual History*, 2020

<sup>3</sup> This limiting objective truth narrative can be found in *The Short Story of Photography* P104-105 “Che Guevara” published in 2018

define it and set it to work... its history has no unity.”<sup>4</sup> What Tagg envisioned in the 1980s was that the future of photography has no history, only histories, and no photography, only diverse deployments of it. Baudelairian post-modern theory about photography’s ubiquity, i.e. the ‘avalanche of pictures’ can be adapted today, standing as a metaphor for contemporary society in relationship to the industrial age. Perhaps this is why Andreas Gursky’s 1999, *The Rhine II*, held rank as the most expensive photograph sold at auction for over a decade; demonstrating that manipulation can enhance the original.

Photography requires attention to detail, equal to that required for a compelling story. Much like the use of words, such as literature, photography is not static. Photography is open, constantly changing. From the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have to also consider post-internet art in our field. As Postmodern photography has passed, the rise of social networking has become one of the main ways we experience photography today, our private lives made public. In crisis, students attend class virtually from bed; our private lives couldn’t be any more revealed. I relate to the camera as a metaphorical ‘extension of the body’ – this entails performativeness and the process of making. It stands to exhibit photography’s abilities as a social empowerment tool, such as the early instagram works of Amalia Ulman. Photography can shift from a medium of memory to one of experience.

In the past decade, digital technology has surpassed traditional artistic boundaries and challenged the definitions of our thoughts, lifestyles, cultural identities, and appearance. To be a part of photography’s future, this medium requires contributors who offer a wider global understanding of the implications of the image to study ways in which our new digital interconnectedness has tempered photography. Alan Sekula transcends this uniquely American/European discourse of the medium within *The Body and the Archive*,<sup>5</sup> unpacking the misunderstandings about the body and representation, and uncover the topic of surveillance through the panopticon (panoptic surveillance). Additionally, the works of Trevor Paglen reveal how images are being weaponized against humans<sup>6</sup> and the environment by AI Machines. perhaps here we can begin to predict some aspects in the future of this medium.

However, if photography’s future is predictable within photography’s own past, then we should all know that we cannot rely on photography as sole archive to the history of any isolated subject, especially if the photographer has not dedicated themselves fully to that subject; I call this photojournalistic aesthetic a product of *parachute journalism*. Today, acting as a roving photographer like Mary Ellen Mark once did is simply implausible.

Within the discourse of the technical tools, almost every photography student entering our introductory black and white classes have never worked with *film*. Less than a decade ago that was not the case. Without understanding how photographic tools work - the materials, the chemistry - photography’s meaning can also become diluted. In many institutions, the use of one technology (digital) has all but erased another (analog), overlooking the ramifications for philosophical and intellectual perception about tangible things in time and space. I believe that we are living history of this change, and this is an amazing time for artists to investigate and commingle with these topics. It’s the freedom of choice,

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<sup>4</sup> Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on the Photographies and Histories*, 1993

<sup>5</sup> Sekula, Allan. “The Body and the Archive.” *October*, vol. 39, 1986, pp. 3–64

Perhaps a lesser known text by Sekula, Dr. Stein provided me with this journal article from *October* magazine in 2010. originally issued *Vol.39 (Winter, 1986)*, citing the ways in which the photographic archives have become ‘central to a bewildering range of empirical disciplines, ranging from art history to military intelligence (p. 59).’

<sup>6</sup> Paglan, Trevor. “Operational Images,” *E-Flux*, no. 59, Nov. 2014

having the ability to hybridize, collaborate and integrate interdisciplinary techniques, both historically and contemporary, onto this medium that is so exhilarating.

In conclusion, perhaps there is one image that can serve as a holistic example of photography's present role in society and art: 1965 Josef Kosuth's One and Three Chairs, asking us to unpack semiotics of art, appropriated in 2021 as One and Three Bernies.<sup>7</sup> This confiscation of the original adds more layers to the complex discourse, as the meaning transcends within itself, into the concepts of metamodernism.



Lending Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* new context: Image posted via Maura Callahan (@\_maura\_callahan) for Twitter, January 20, 2021

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<sup>7</sup> Greenberger, Alex. "Bernie Sanders Stars in Art History's Greatest Artworks in New Viral Meme," ARTnews. Jan. 2021