

# Mailing 1: **Undisclosed Images**

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seeing abstractly

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**“Abstraction demands more from me than realism. Instead of reproducing something outside of me, now I go inward and use everything I've learned thus far in my life.” - Susan Avishai**

## Preamble

This first mailing of the semester reports on readings about photographic abstraction, a topic directly linked to my studio project **“deconstructed reality.”** It is important to remember that we do not see objects; rather we see the electromagnetic energy that reflects off objects. In this framework, visual reality is always abstract, dealing with an indirectly observed quantity. As with so much in life that sustains us, light is a complex phenomenon, with unanswered questions and unproven theories.



From the “Ocular Tunnel”

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**“The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography”** by Lyle Rexer  
Light is a fundamental universal force, capable of modifying the ordinary, the real, and the

known. Photography, as a recorder of light, simultaneously investigates reality and investigates the method of investigating that reality. This leads to novel seeing, producing a vision of things previously unseen. “Abstract photographs refuse to disclose fully the images they contain.”

There are no complete final answers. At its most extreme, photography presents objects defined by their concrete, material existence, referring to nothing external. Experience manifests unities that are not logically, immediately, or easily understood. The photograph itself is a sort of

performance art, and the performer is light - radiation reflecting from, absorbing in, and transmitting through material interaction.

Photography works forward in time from some initial event, and then backward in time when pondered. Each step in this image progression removes it from “direct representation” and solicits the artist to intervene and to deviate from a disclosure mandate. This fundamental non-naturalism is what author Mary Price calls “the strange, confined space” of the photograph.

Photography questions what “is seen” and what is understood about what “is seen.” It is intriguing not because it shows how the world looks, but rather shows what the world looks like photographed: framed, fixed, and abstracted.

Pure photography is most concerned with its means, not with its meanings or associations.

Because issues of disclosure, ambiguity, and abstraction are intrinsic to photography, examples are available everywhere. Sometimes overlapping, there are two main categories of abstract or undisclosed photographs:

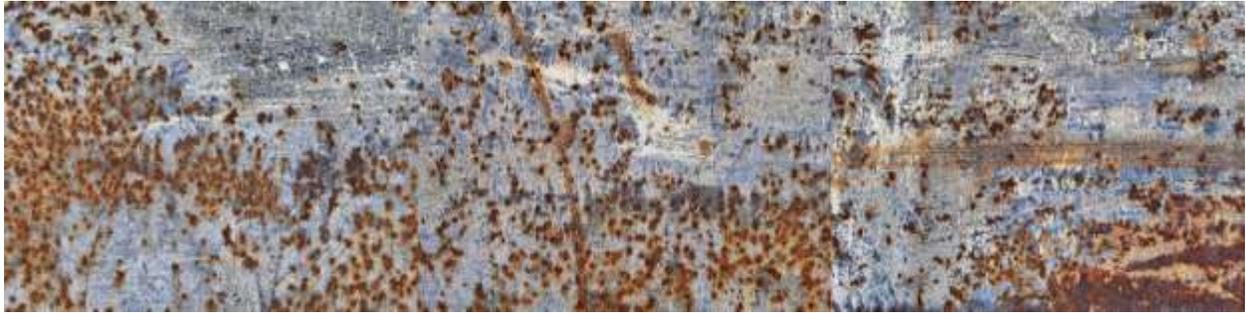
1. Accentuate the camera’s own data-gathering capabilities to frame unfamiliar views of the recognizable.



From the “Vortoscope”

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2. Create artifacts of photographic processes or events, with no denotative content, to produce objects that bear little visual relation to antecedent reality.



“ArtFact”

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Photographs as objects are what they are. However, they are also much more, emphasizing concepts and relations of time, energy, matter, space, chance, and agency, with potential to advance human consciousness. Photography gives expression to the understanding that what “is seen” is always only a suggestion of reality.

*“Photography deals exquisitely with appearances, but nothing is what it appears to be.” - Duane Michals*

### **“Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling” by Rosalyn Deutsche from the text “James Welling - Abstract”**

Welling’s abstract imagery address photography and its relation to existence. Many of his artworks are photograms, images without any exterior referent. In some of his imagery, light is the central subject, as both an object and condition of realization. In this way, Welling reminds us “photography is the inscription of light.”

The work of Welling gained prominence as art critics began theorizing the meaning of postmodernism in the visual arts. As such, it was positioned to unsettle established aesthetic paradigms and alter prevailing art understanding. It questioned the myth that a visual image reveals meanings located in the subject represented. It also rejected the notion of art as a self-contained totality transcending the circumstances of its existence. Welling attempts to reveal social functions rather than fixed truths of cultural objects. By exploring how meaning is

produced by civilizing structures, image meaning outside society becomes an illusion. In this way, internal image relationships are not as important as relationships between the image and what lies outside its frame, including the viewer. So images **produce** meaning rather than **reveal** meaning. In this context, postmodernism does not question reality as a world external to thought, but rather questions the meaning of image representation. A postmodern gesture is to make visible the uncertainty that is the condition of representation, by acknowledging the viewer's presence and revealing the image's relational character. Associated questions which are asked: Why do we look? What are we looking for?

Welling is interested in involving the viewer in an ambiguous undulation between intangible and real image interpretations. Therefore, the subject of the work becomes the viewer's quest for meaning in the image. The conditions of photographic representation found in his work forces uncertainty. An image is a representation of an absent object, eroding the security of any presumed boundary between the abstract and actual. Photographic meaning is fundamentally arbitrary and contingent upon the conditions of interpretation. Knowledge, vision, and photography are vulnerable to endless repeated abstraction, where abstraction is a state in which both the subject and the clarity of the image are detached.



“Visible Uncertainty”

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## **“The Photography Reader” by Liz Wells, Section two: Photographic Seeing - including essays from Hubert Damisch, Ossip Brik, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, John Szarkowski, and Edward Weston**

The writings in this section focus on form and aesthetics, sometimes linking aesthetic experimentation with social change, covering a period from 1920 to 1940. In this timeframe, Walter Benjamin suggested that an expressive medium comes of age with its interrogation, rather than the excitement over its newness and faith in its progress. This interrogation of photography emphasized mechanical and objective characteristics over allegorical themes, soft-focus, and lyrical light. Avant-garde creative experiments included technical invention and new ways of seeing, in terms of camera angle, focus, geometry, perception and cultural understanding. Socially accepted as art in the United States by 1940, photography’s aesthetic was determined by its own characteristic essentials. This concern to consider photography relative to medium specificity is a broader characteristic of modernism in art.

### **Hubert Damisch, Five notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image**

Photography is a process of recording a stable image generated by radiant energy. By this definition, it does not presume a need for a camera, nor does it imply the resultant image is of an object or external scene. The photographic image does not belong to the natural world. It is a product of human labor, a cultural object. However, as a cultural object, it is a source of “reality” supposition, as the result can appear as the very trace of an object or scene from the real. A photograph is therefore a paradoxical image, utterly unreal but with a reality interpretation. The camera is neither neutral nor impartial, but rather is a tool constructed to reproduce established image conventions of space and objectivity. It began with attempts to make permanent the already well-known *camera obscura* convention.

The mechanical nature of photography renders image making as essentially industrial within a social value exchange system. In this system, a photograph only has value relative to its sale

price as a commercial consumable. Photography aspires to art only when it calls into question its essence and historical roles.

### **Ossip Brik, What the Eye does Not See**

Writing in context of the early years of Soviet revolution, Brik discusses how camera technologies might be used to further aesthetic revolution.

The task of the camera is not to imitate the human eye, but to see and record what the human eye normally cannot see. Unexpected viewpoints, unusual configurations, break out beyond the customary radius of the normal human eye. With photography, it is possible to see concrete reality as it never has been seen before.

### **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, A new instrument of Vision**

Working in Germany, associated with the Bauhaus movement, Moholy-Nagy postulated that photography has the unique potential for drawing attention to social experience in terms of time and space, extending human perception. He emphasizes using photography to create a new mode of vision, much more than only an instrument for reproduction. The photogram embodies the unique nature of photography as the most completely dematerialized medium. Photography is unsurpassed in its ability to render tonalities, a psychological transformation of our eyesight. There are eight varieties of photographic vision: abstract seeing, exact seeing, rapid seeing, slow seeing, intensified seeing, penetrative seeing, simultaneous seeing, and distorted seeing. These modalities are as yet not fully realized, and the most astonishing possibilities remain to be discovered in the raw material of photography. Its own basic laws, not the opinions of art critics, will provide the only valid measure of its future worth.

### **John Szarkowski, Introduction to the Photographer's Eye**

Photography needs to establish its own particular way of making meaning, a vision belonging to no aesthetic theory other than to itself. A shared photographic vocabulary will function over the

diversity of themes, contexts and artistic intentions. Photography is based on selection not synthesis. From its beginning, photography was part of a massive assault on our traditional habits of seeing. Photography always deals with the actual. But the factuality of photographs, no matter how convincing and unarguable, is a different thing than reality itself. Although they culturally may seem so, the subject and the picture are not the same thing. Nevertheless, soon after its invention, society participants gave more credence to the camera image than to their own eyes. Additionally, the image often survives the subject and becomes remembered reality.

Choosing and eliminating is the essential act of photography, forcing awareness on the image frame edge - the line that separates in from out - and on the interior shape relationships that are thus formed.

All photographs are time studies, exposures of shorter or longer duration, and each describes a discrete temporal packet. Uniquely a photograph portrays only that period of time in which it was made. The photographic ability to challenge and reject our schematized notions of reality is still innovative. An artist often seeks new structures in which to communicate a personal understanding of reality.



**Trifurcation**

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## **Edward Weston, Seeing Photographically**

Weston argues for a specificity of photographic seeing that transcends painterly conventions. He also emphasizes pre-conceptualization of the image along with an experimental approach to composition, exposure, developing, and printing. He believes photography has potential to reveal and offer emotional insight into the nature of the world.

Each medium of expression imposes its own limitations on the artist. The limitations of painting and photography are necessarily different. Photography is unique because of its time-based recording process, capable of extreme precision of definition and tonality gradation. To interrupt these characteristics is to destroy the integrity of photography.

Additionally, the photographer must visualize the result in advance, and adjust procedures accordingly. Otherwise, the result will be just a mechanical accident. Hence, the photographer's most important and most difficult task is to see photographically - to respond to the subject in terms of the capacities of tools and processes, to translate the elements and values into the desired image. Moreover, the only legitimate photographic tools are optical and chemical, which are of considerable magnitude.

Photography is honest and looks deeply into the essential essence of things, presenting subjects in terms of their basic reality, perhaps becoming more real and comprehensible than the actual object referenced.

Good composition is best understood as the strongest way of seeing a subject and cannot be taught. To discover and reveal the nature of existence, the photographer must avoid all formula, art-dogma, rules, and taboos.

## **Response Integration**

All photographs are abstractions made by humans responding to stimulus through a physical manifestation resulting from controlling the imaging process. Any given visual statement may

call for more or less control depending on intent. I do not feel constrained to limit my approach to image making by thinking only certain controls have validity.

Our perception of reality is always extremely narrow, as it must be based on limited sensory physiology tempered by experience. Change is the most persistent feature of human experience, and its boundaries are flexible.

**"What you see is real - but only on the particular level to which you've developed your sense of seeing. You can expand your reality by developing new ways of perceiving". - Wynn Bullock**

Art is a way of life based on the need to create something in response to sensation, perception, cognition, and experience. It is an eternal process contributing to understanding and perpetuates growth and development. A work of art is an end in itself, but also indicates the path taken and the progress made. In this journey, abstraction offers a language of pure “thought” expression.



**“Pure Thought”**

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