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Art in the Time of Robots

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Fine Art

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**Art in the Time of Robots:
An Analysis of Artistic Reactions to the Epidemic of Technology**

Abigail Hitchcock

Abstract

This dissertation explores landmarks within the invention of photography, a reappraisal of photographic criticism and sentiment in the late 1900s, and the similarities of contemporary public and academic reactions which can be found in AI. History is a precious resource, and fear is often only quelled by knowledge. The first chapter explores initial photographic dispute, controversy and one of the first photographic lies. The second chapter focuses on photography's place within a capitalist society, and contradictory reactions from academics about the Photograph. The third chapter examines AI as a medium and agent within art, anthropocentric bias against AI art, and the implications of a generative AI piece winning a photographic competition. The conclusion at the end of this document will provide a summarisation of everything discussed and established, which will combine to offer a greater understanding of the trajectory of art in the time of robots.

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Introduction

This dissertation, comprised of extensive research into academic literature, peer-reviewed journals and literary reviews, seeks to query and examine artistic response to progress. This document forms an original contribution to knowledge by highlighting stress points in artistic technological progress, both historic and contemporary, in order to investigate similarities, and discuss whether such reactions are proven reasonable by time. In chapter one, the dissertation will provide context for the genesis of photography, drawn from texts such as Dr. Aaron Scharf's (1922-1993) *Art and Photography* and Geoffrey Batchen's (b.1956) *Burning with Desire*, and further examine artistic and academic critique at the time of its invention. Chapter two explores Susan Sontag's (1933-2004) *On Photography* (1979) and Roland Barthes (1915-1980) *Camera Lucida* (1980) which will be compared with one another in order to illustrate the echoes of initial photographic critique after being transformed by decades of technological improvements. The chapter will conclude by examining the political ramifications of photography in a society built on capitalism. Building upon this, chapter three will attempt to parse if political critique of photography follows into criticism of artificial intelligence. In chapter three, the dissertation will move to explore the future of artistic technology – using books written by Kate Crawford (b.1974), *Atlas of AI*, and Jill Walker Rettberg (b.1971), *Machine Vision*, as a basis for greater questions about the use of AI as an artistic tool and the extent which it is feared by artists. This investigation will query if these fears have historical precedent by examining contemporary reception of generative art within peer-reviewed studies. In exploration of these texts, secondary sources will be produced to counter and support the views of the authors, and dig further into their ideas. This dissertation will include supplementary visual analysis of relevant artworks and photographs, in order to fully investigate the significance of these technologies upon artists and artworks, ranging from historic heliographs to digitally rendered AI art. Whilst the basis of the historical and contemporary study is centralised almost completely in the west, the dissertation attempts to provide a partially comprehensive picture of art's collusion (and transformation) with technology.

Chapter 1

1.1 The Gold Rush

In *Art and Photography*, Dr. Aaron Scharf unravels the genesis of photography as it is known today, and, building upon it, investigates relatively untouched theories about photography's effect upon the landscape of art (Webb, 1969). *Art and Photography* has significantly impacted the focus of this dissertation, which draws upon Dr. Scharf's historical accounts to create links between the past and modern day.

The work of Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, has also been essential in the recreation of the past photographic landscape. Batchen is described by Joel Snyder as refusing, 'to adopt the received history of photography's origins...' (Snyder, 1999) in his work. Within the book, Batchen outlines his aim to prove the impact of the historic upon the present (Batchen, 1999, pp. III), an effort which this dissertation will attempt to support.

Photography was *discovered* in 1839, by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. His invention was backed by a member of the Chamber of Deputies, François Arago, and introduced to the French government on the 7 January meeting of the Académie des Sciences (Scharf, 1968). Arago purportedly suggested the government compensate the inventor and, 'nobly give to the whole world this discovery...' (Arago, 1839, quoted in Scharf, 1968, pp. 7). Notably, Daguerre would later patent his work in England and her colonies; quite ostensibly falling short in his vow of worldwide enlightenment. Many aspects of Daguerre's creation of the daguerreotype were mired in suspicion, such as the obfuscation of Hippolyte Bayard's work during Daguerre's bid for government support, and the early death of his tentative partner, Joseph-Nicéphore Niépce (Scharf, 1968). In *Burning with Desire*, Geoffrey Batchen writes that, 'virtually every history of photography reproduces [an] image by Nicéphore Niépce as the world's first photograph.' (1999, pp. 123). The work, entitled, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, was created sometime in 1827. The photograph itself was lost for decades before finally being uncovered in a trunk in 1952, in England (Art In Print Review, 2002, pp. 24), a fact corroborated by Batchen, who names Gernsheim as the person who discovered the image (1999, pp. 125). It depicts a view from Niépce's home, gazing across roofs and a hazy skyline. The flinching immediacy of the subject, so close in proximity to Niépce's materials and research, masks the lengthy process of the exposure and experimentation which would have led to the photograph's conception. The accessibility of cameras and photography in modern society arguably casts a strange fugue over

the oldest photograph documented, with a subject so eerily similar to that of modern photographs.



Fig.1.1: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, c. 1826-27, heliograph on pewter, 6.57 x 8 inches

To create the *View from the Window at Le Gras*, Niépce used a pane of pewter soaked in a fine layer of bitumen, and exposed this at his window for over eight hours. The outcome was given the name of heliograph (Art in Print Review, 2002). Geoffrey Batchen points out that the image ‘propagated as the first photograph... is in fact a painting after a drawing!’ (1999, pp. 127). Done by Gernsheim, after finding fault in the reproduction created by the Kodak Research Laboratory (Batchen, 1999). This reiterates the malleability of history, for the image that most contemporary audiences are exposed to as *View from the Window at Le Gras*, is actually a deceitful replication of the truth. This question, of the unwarranted truth most ascribe photograph, is one which will thread itself throughout this dissertation.

Building upon Niépce's original method of heliography, Daguerre invented the daguerreotype. Both processes were done upon metal, an incongruence in comparison to modern day photography prints. There, William Henry Fox Talbot's calotypes are thought to be the ascendent oeuvre of photography. In the view of Dr. Scharf, the domination of Talbot's method is due to its reproductive capability. Where the daguerreotype was irreplicable, the calotype was prime for print (Scharf, 1968).

Talbot publicised his invention a few weeks after Daguerre, attempting to patent every adaptation and solicitation of the calotype shortly after its release to public knowledge. A year later, the practice of photography within Britain was found to be notably curtailed by the patenting of the inventors; whereupon William Henry Fox Talbot relented, in 1852, to the delight of British artists and scientists, and relinquished many of his patents (Scharf, 1968).

Despite Talbot's and Daguerre's two methods sharing the use of a camera obscura and silver nitrate, the daguerreotype was extremely detailed where the calotype was fuzzy. As stated before, the only advantage of the calotype was its potential for reproduction, which was achieved by utilising the translucency of the paper and shining a light through the original "negative", placed atop a different sensitised piece of paper, to create a "positive", and making multiple "positives" via this method (Kelsey, 2015). It was his use of paper instead of metal which arguably gave Talbot the edge in the relevance of his invention in the years to come.

1.2 The Drowning of Hippolyte Bayard

The supremacy of paper was not true for everyone; Hippolyte Bayard was a practician of the calotype method, in which the photographer wets paper with silver nitrate and salt and exposes this to a camera obscura in order to fix their photographs (Sapir, 1994) – and yet, unlike Talbot, history has largely neglected him. Often denounced as less significant or successful than his photographic peers and contemporaries (Niepce, Daguerre, Talbot), (Challine, 2024, p.61). Bayard's 'rediscovery' in 1913 by Georges Potonniée sought to question this narrative. Potonniée (1913, quoted in Challine, 2024, p. 63) wondered, 'How... Talbot is famous and Bayard unknown, while it is photography on paper, invented by Bayard, which made Talbot famous?'. A statement which is viewed as incorrect by most academics, including Batchen, who argues that Talbot was the inventor of photography on paper, and whose initial images date as far back as 1835 (Batchen, 1999, pp. 144). Though Bayard's method came after Talbot's, it was (as Talbot's was) materially more similar to modern photography than

Daguerre's – however, his process failed to produce the micro realism and holding power desirous of photographs at the time, for uses of “evidence” and irrefutable knowledge (Sapir, 1994).

It is undoubtable that Bayard created *Self Portrait of a Drowned Man*, dated 1840, in response to the French authorities' apparent support of Daguerre's photographic methods above any other. The year prior, in July of 1839, Bayard held what is 'considered by some to be the first ever photographic exhibition...' (Sapir, 1994). This occurred four months after Daguerre announced his discovery of photography to the Académie des Sciences (Batchen, 1999). Furthermore, upon the back of his self-portrait, Bayard wrote a suicide note containing the following: 'The Government, which has supported M. Daguerre more than is necessary, declared itself unable to do anything for M. Bayard, and the unhappy man threw himself into the water in despair. Oh, human fickleness!' (1840, quoted in Sapir, 1994). Evidentially, the dramatic act of Bayard posing himself as a victim of suicide, and playing within the very confines of the newly established medium of photography, was fuelled by revenge against the very man who would become synonymous with the birth of it.

In *Self Portrait of a Drowned Man*, Bayard styles himself as a man driven to suicide for lack of recognition. He poses himself in an awkward, stiff way which forces viewers to think about the length of the photographic process, amongst still-life *mise-en-scène* which appear absurd in the context of his death, like the round hat which hangs beside his body (Lerner, 2024).

It is thought that Bayard's posing imitates that of unidentified bodies at the Paris morgue – complete with personal effects in their vicinity to hopefully indicate their identity and their partially draped, lolling bodies (Kaplan and Passafiume, 2024).

Bayard's self-portrait contains a lie so blatant it arguably becomes honest: The first depiction of falsehood through photography does not seek to trick, but question. The suicide note upon the back speaks to this intent; The dyssynchronous message creates a physical distance between the work and its meaning – for one cannot read it and look at the picture at once. Upon looking at the back, it reads,

The corpse of the gentleman that you see here on the back is that of M. Bayard... To my knowledge, for about three years this ingenious and indefatigable researcher has been working to perfect his invention... 18 October

1840, H.B [signed] (1840, Bayard)

Stylistically, the use of third person, the present-tense of its demands, and the incongruity of ‘seeing here’ wherein the image is concealed, along with the artists signature, suggests the satirical and sensationalist nature of the missive (Sapir, 1994).

The year that Bayard created *Self Portrait of a Drowned Man*, and those following, saw him brook little acknowledgement or celebration for his works by the institutions which he sought these from (Batchen, 1999). Bayard’s legacy was recovered in modern society, among greater questions of deep fakes, doctored images and fake news – where we see a reappraisal of the first artwork to question photographic truth.



Fig 1.2: Hippolyte Bayard, *Self Portrait of a Drowned Man*, 1840, negative print

1.3 Artistic Distaste

Perhaps it is more salient to start at the very beginning, with the camera obscura. The daguerreotype and its ilk were not, in their conception, exceptionally more controversial than the tools which predated them. The camera obscura is an earlier exemplar of both the technology used in methods of photography, and the reactions of artists to such technology. William Hogarth (1753, quoted in Scharf, 1968) dismissed the tool as diminutive, and even destructive, to the artist's perspective – though for a remarkable volume of artists, the camera obscura became a tool for the improvement of artistic skill. Among those who used the technology were, rather expectedly, Talbot and Daguerre. The gracious sentiment around the camera obscura was such that it gained similar authority in matters of reality as would later be bestowed upon the photograph (Scharf, 1968). Although many artists were adapting to the uses of the camera obscura, and treated the tool as a medium for exploration, Hogarth rejected it decisively: '...what ever [I] saw, was more truly to me a picture than one seen by a camera obscura.' (1753, quoted in Scharf, 1968). Despite Hogarth's evident distaste for the camera obscura, he was correct in his assertion that it warped the vision of the human eye. Descriptors noted the colours of nature to be brightened, the shadows rendered more dramatic, by the lens of the camera obscura – to varying effect. For some, (Gravesande, 1740, quoted in Scharf, 1968) this discrepancy was pronounced a sour illusion, which would undoubtedly ill-affect the product of artists and remove the use of their discerning eyes, while others, (Algarotti, 1764, quoted in Scharf, 1968) saw the obscura as an encouragement to heighten and improve the reality of nature, and indeed to widen the human scope of vision in art.

Discourse around the camera obscura, both positive and negative, seems to have informed the critics and admirers of photography; the dialogue in years following the creation of the daguerreotype and calotype was as broadly mutable as it had been prior. Artists known to employ photography in the creation of their artworks faced great stigma – as such, many took pains to conceal their photographic references (Scharf, 1968). Those who adapted to photography often attempted to replicate its effects within their works, and some artists were concerned that the medium would replace them wholly. Others, such as the critic Jules Janin, felt markedly different, and celebrated the generative practice that photography would herald for the artist (Scharf, 1968). Such a notion would have been unsettling, however, for the engravers, who, at the time of photographic insurgence, became cogs in a far more mechanised industry. In the view of Gary Beegan, their work 'was emptied of the confidence embodied on

the lines of the old engravings.’ (1995). Evidently, the shifts necessary in accommodating for the process of photography were tricky and, for some, destructive to artistic expression: However, the industries around photography still thrived, through adaptation, sheer will, and the very present acknowledgement that art is evolutionary.

Chapter 2

2.1 *On Photography and Camera Lucida*

Controversy was maintained in the decades which succeeded the invention of photography, perhaps seeded by the effect of Hippolyte's drowning. Academics in the late 1900s questioned whether photographs were inherently real or false. By looking at two books which seek to answer such a question, *On Photography*, by Susan Sontag, and *Camera Lucida*, by Roland Barthes, this dissertation hopes to explore the dual answers to the question which has haunted the medium since its creation.

The view of Abigail Solomon-Godeau (2005), is that throughout history, photography has been acknowledged as a matter demanding academic examination thrice; as it was born; seventy years later, appearing within the works of 'Bazin, Benjamin, Siegfried, Kracauer, Paul Valéry...' (Solomon-Godeau, 2005); and three decades later, as it was renewed in theoretical discussion by Susan Sontag's book, *On Photography*.

On Photography is a text which helped pioneer critical analysis of the entire medium, instead of limiting discussion to a specific form of photography. Its author, Susan Sontag, is credited with the re-attraction of academic interest to the field of photography in the 1970s, and the subsequent controversies which her opinionated literature sparked (Epstein, 2018). Sontag's view was exclusive, – being that of a journalistic outsider to the photographic establishment – but *On Photography* gathered dispute due to Sontag's assertive writing style and the popular notion from ruffled photographers (and academics) that Sontag had stood herself 'against' the medium of photography (Solomon-Godeau, 2005).

At the beginning of *On Photography*, Sontag asserts that, 'Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still revelling, it's age-old habit, in mere images of truth.' (1979, pp). Her initial verdict is that photography, beneath the gaze of a capitalist society, is ineffective in propagating actual truth. Photographs can be bought and staged and sold – but are believed by society to be untouchable fact, as those cave-dwellers in Plato's allegory believe the shadows to be truth.

This notion is disputed by Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*. He scorns the 'fashionable' (1980, pp.88) notion that all photographs are falsified, transforming the real into effigies, and argues that, 'in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.' (1980, pp.89).

Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, was approached with the personal at the forefront (Fried, 2005); within the book, he speaks at length about the engagement of photographs in terms of *Punctum* and *studium*, the latter described by Michael Fried as, 'the general basis of that subject's presumed interest for an average viewer,' (2005, pp. 539), the former explained as, 'a concrete, seemingly ordinary detail within the photograph, which... takes on unexplained resonances,' (Friedlander, 2008, pp. 152) by Jennifer Friedlander. Much of Roland Barthes' writing lingers on his own experience of these photographs, but the underlying argument of *Camera Lucida* is both of inherent realism in the Photograph, and the ties which photographs have to death, time and memory (Barthes, 1980).

In Friedlander's writing, she argues that Barthes' *Punctum* is tied to what Jaques Lacan names the 'Real', the Photograph – if owning the *Punctum* which Barthes sought – functioning as a portal to truth and static existence (2008, pp. 153).

Despite having inherently different perspectives on the 'reality' of the Photograph, Barthes and Sontag can both agree that photography has become a commodity; Sontag bemoans the accessibility of the medium as, 'the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and making it obsolete.' (1979, pp. 195). The saturation of meaningless, or perhaps more significantly, instantaneous photographs, have grown exponentially since the authorship of *On Photography*, and her worries would be well nurtured by the immediate nothing which a photograph can become in contemporary society.

Michael Fried submits that Barthes had the same notion within *Camera Lucida*, of mourning the loss of photographs as miraculous artefacts, portholes to history (2005). Barthes' lament is more personal than Sontag's, '...And no doubt, the astonishment of 'that-has-been' will also disappear. It has already disappeared.' (1980), which is a harsher criticism of an audience's reaction to the Photograph than it is an indictment of photographs themselves. In looking at both pieces of literature, it is evident that worries of replaced jobs and the imminent death of creative vision were vanquished by concerns of greater social decay and the unrecognisable form which photography had taken.

2.2 Diane Arbus and Subject

It is the view of Sontag that Diane Arbus' work is a byproduct of photography, the voyeurism of 'other'. She derides Arbus as, 'concentrating on victims... without... compassionate purpose' (Sontag, 1979). In Sontag's view, her work becomes voyeuristic and exploitative

upon the understanding – and portrayal – of her subjects as ‘object’ and ‘outlandish’ instead of people. They are unconscious of their own spectacle; their own strangeness, which, in Arbus’ mind, does not exist beyond the idea of fanaticism and interest. In her words, ‘Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot... I just used to adore them.’ (Arbus, quoted in Greer, 2005). Some critics, namely Peter C. Bunnell, (1973, pp.128-30) dispute Sontag’s claims and tout Arbus’ work as psychologically ‘honest’, non-voyeuristic and complex. The difference, it seems, is in the portrayal of the creator as a separate viewer, or as a partner in the creation. In Sontag’s perspective, Arbus is a sheltered woman seeking excitement, danger, and the desensitisation of spectacle, which she procures by making art out of people she considers to be troubled (Sontag, 1979). Bunnell draws attention to Arbus’ suicide and the latent misinterpretation of her art after death; He interprets her work a solidarity, wherein both subject and artist dwell in the same intent; ‘immorality is not the well from which these people, or Arbus, found nourishment.’ (Bunnell, 1973, pp.129).

The below photograph, *Feminist in her hotel room*, is stylistically similar to Arbus’ other portraits, with subject facing the camera unabashedly, posed without being excessively so, frank and almost vulnerable beneath the harsh lens of Arbus’ camera. The woman appears confident, encased in the four walls of the photograph, though as Sontag intimates, there is something innately cruel about it, perhaps the unflattering angle, the lack of body and the silent suggestion that the woman is spectacle. In a Guardian article entitled, ‘Wrestling with Diane Arbus,’ (2005) Germaine Greer recalls being the subject of this portrait. She explains that the feeling of being Arbus’ subject was one of forced exposure, that Arbus sought the revealing ‘mask off’ moment, which, in her insistence of it, became its own ‘clumsy ill-drawn mask’ (Greer, 2005). Indeed, Germaine Greer points to Arbus’ titling of her photos as an indication of her sentiment towards her subject, for she neglects name and outlines these people as she sees them; Greer asides that, *Nudist Lady with Swan Glasses*, another Arbus portrait, would have ‘looked far less ridiculous if the picture had been called After The Swim or La Baigneuse.’ (Greer, 2005). The perspective of one beneath the lens seems sharper, more coherent than the eyes of Sontag, who critiques from a detached view of ethical photography. Greer does not claim that Arbus’ art suffered for her disgust, but that her works allow us to venture deeper into our own limitations and lack of empathy (Greer, 2005). The detachment from subject is a reminder of the Photograph.



Fig 2.1: Diane Arbus, *Feminist in Her Hotel Room*, N.Y.C, 1971

2.3 Engorged Time

The Photograph, for Roland Barthes, is an extender of time amongst other things. He likens the photograph, *Portrait of Lewis Payne*, which was taken by Alexander Gardner before Payne's imminent death, as a held breath (Barthes, 1980). Barthes asserts that his emotions are the same, looking at the image of his dead mother and *Portrait of Lewis Payne* for he is simultaneously aware of their death, and their once being. (1980, pp. 96) In the view of Margaret Olin, Barthes believes photographs to be remnants which contain traces of their referent (2002, pp. 100). Michael Fried distinguishes that whilst Barthes asserts that time is a

punctum of its own, strong enough to induce a reaction, he contradictorily muses that ‘modern society has made of the photograph precisely a means of “flattening” death.’ (Fried, 2005, pp. 561). This indicates that Barthes viewed the *punctum* of time as both an inducement to consider one’s own life and an inducement to detach from it. As Sontag points out, ‘Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle’ (1979, pp.119), which illustrates well the ‘flattening’ described previously. For Sontag, time and memories captured by photographs become relics instead of experiences. Barthes believes through the *punctum*, the experience is renewed (Barthes, 1980).

The below image, *Portrait of Lewis Payne*, depicts a man awaiting his imminent execution. He has both been dead for many decades, and remains patiently awaiting his fate within the four walls of the Photograph. Interestingly, though Barthes neglects to outline the history behind the photograph further than ‘...young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W.H Steward.’ (Barthes, 1980, pp. 96). The man, Lewis Payne (Powell was his real surname), was a confederate soldier, and as Damian Sutton points out, ‘Barthes’ use of image relies to some extent on the obscurity of Payne in history’ (2024, pp. 35) to get from the audience a sense of ‘uncomplicated loss’, (Sutton, 2024) where introducing the complexities of the real man would destroy the *Punctum*. This calls into question the ethical nature of the photograph, which would have been taken with some intent by Alexander Gardner, and adds additional tension to Barthes assertion of reality in the Photograph. The politics inherent in an image, or the context of the image, is a matter which Sontag touches upon extensively in *On Photography*, (1979, pp.?) and although Barthes makes very little mention of it, perhaps an extent of the *punctum* is the depoliticising of the Photograph, which allows the audience to connect with the aesthetic above the contextual, as Sutton indicates. (2024)

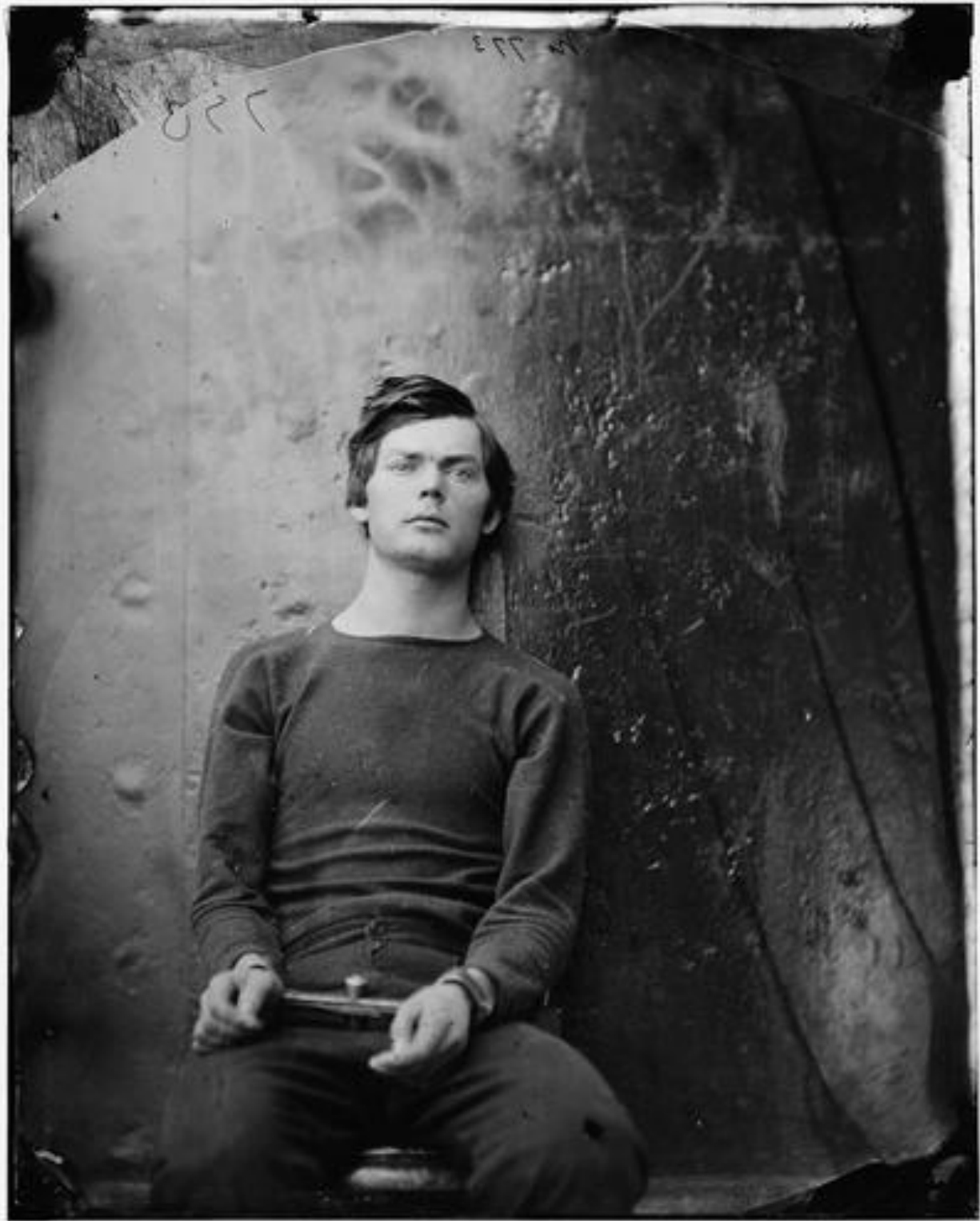


Fig 2.2: Alexander Gardner, *Portrait of Lewis Payne*, 1865. Wet collodion negative on glass, 7.5" x 9.75"

2.4 The Politics

The same matter which Sontag and Barthes agree upon is enshrined within the politics of capitalism. Photograph as a commodity, decentred from reality and consumed as spectacle, is ‘essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society’, (Sontag, 1979). Sontag continues to explain that it is a mixture of this disseminated reality and surveillance which empower the ruling class (1979). Barthes applies much less political relevance and ramification to the Photograph, explaining that, ‘Photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing... never as to its existence.’ (1980, pp. 87). This statement seems to neglect the lie of omission, which, in contradicting the existence of a different truth, can easily be depicted within a photograph.

Significantly, the state of politics being enmeshed within photography could be said to have begun during the initial battle for the title of photography’s inventor, won through Daguerre’s ultimate recognition by government (Scharf, 1968).

If we accept that photographs are viewed by the public as *reality*, outlined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* as, ‘never distinguished from its deferent... *immediately*’ (1980, pp.), whether manipulated or not, it stands to reason that they can be weaponised by those in power. Sontag asserts that photographs are an excellent substitution for social change and awareness, which detach the viewer from subject by distance and medium. She meditates, ‘if one considers in what contexts photographic images are seen, what dependencies they create... that is, what institutions they buttress...’ This leading line of thought implies that should the scrutiny of reality falter, those who stand to benefit from this are those in control of the media, those who dispense the supposed reality of photographs and news.

These ideas would not be unfamiliar in the landscape of Artificial Intelligence. Indeed, Kate Crawford’s *The Atlas of AI*, explores the dominance of corporations and government within the creation and marketing of AI (2021). She points to AI as a contemporary currency of power, and examines the motivations of pioneers seeking to settle public concern at the prospect of humanity-wide job insecurity (Crawford, 2021). Liv Hausken points out that the use of AI in the creation of ‘deepfakes’ is a new strain of intrusion; our post-truth society is rendered defenceless against the onslaught of fake information, the very same which photography perpetuated decades prior (Hausken, 2024, pp. 2). Hausken goes on to explain that the public reactions to AI images do not match their concern for ‘real’ photographs, despite how these may also be manipulated to suit a narrative and push a ‘truth’ upon the public (2024). These

concerns are eerily analogous with those of Sontag and Barthes, and indicate the intrusive power of realism and belief.

Chapter 3

3.1 Mimicry

The reactions of artists and academics to the conception and life of photography have been varied, as seen within the historical basis provided by chapter one. In its reappraisal in the late 1900s, reactions became concerned with studying and critiquing the wider context of the photographic field, and artists grew more interested in breaking out of the stylistic capabilities of the medium, than reinforcing it (Ogundipe, 2025). In ‘Generative AI, agency and aesthetic disruption in photographic art’, Anne Ogundipe points out that non-human agents have played a role in the creation of photography prior to the rise of generative AI, which is displayed concisely within the work of André Kertész pictured below.



Fig 3.1: André Kertész, *Broken Plate, Paris 1929* (printed ca. 1970). Gelatin silver print.

Broken Plate originated from a negative taken in 1929, which, after being left by the artist in Paris for many years, cracked in its solitude. Kertész, upon finding the piece, chose to print it. Jennifer Friedlander queries if this accident rendered the work more or less realistic. The crack renders the suspension of scene, and therefore the photograph, unreal, and yet is also a testament to a *real* accident (Friedlander, 2008). The confusing reality of the piece is reflected in its visual dissonance, as the audience's eyeline is drawn back and forth between the notion of an untainted image and the glaring fault in its corner. Ogundipe asserts that the image, 'decentres the human artist' (2025, pp.18), by expressing an agent of creation which is inherently inhuman – an accident (Ogundipe, 2025, pp.18). Interestingly, Sontag corroborates this notion, 'most photographers have always had... an almost superstitious confidence in the lucky accident.' (Sontag, 1979, pp.126). The disruption of medium displayed in *Broken Plate* seeks to unsettle a well-known boundary, but before the boundaries of photography were known, disruption looked markedly different. Engraving was a growing industry at the time of photography's invention, which spiked in the 1850s during printing demand for images, and sustained itself until the 1880s, whereafter engravers were forced to fight for jobs amidst the widening accessibility of photographs. (Beegan, 1995, pp. 257-271) During the spike of great demand for engraving, facsimile was in popular demand – and draughtsmen were forced to translate calotype and daguerreotypes into wood engravings (Beegan, 1995). The intrinsic art of the medium was questionably lessened by their adherence to mimicry, as they attempted the near-impossible task of rendering photographs upon an unwieldy surface, while likely fearing for their imminent replacement. Disruption was not upon the field of photography, but upon the industries which it would later swallow. These concerns feel replicated in contemporary society, wherein artists face the prospect of replacement by a cheaper, more efficient process of art. Generative Artificial Intelligence, such as Midjourney and DALL-E, are tools designed to generate images from a dataset. They base their creations on captioned images from the internet (Rettberg, 2023, pp. 7). It might initially seem ludicrous to conflate historic technology with the massive shadow of AI looming over contemporary society, but many academics question whether our reliance upon technology is a modern one. For example, in *Machine Vision*, Jill Rettberg claims that, '...human agency is far more entwined with our technologies than we may imagine. These technologies are more than just tools; they affect us.' (2023, pp. 20), in the context of humanities extensive history, she explains that visual augmentations have been evolutionary, and are essential in understanding how humans interact with technology now (Rettberg, 2023, pp.27). Van Anh Le argues that historic reaction to photographic copyright law should be the template for our reaction to 'AI-assisted creation'. Le claims that

the current laws are enough should we frame AI as ‘technological mediation’ (Le, 2025) in the creation of art. These sentiments seem to ascribe AI the same influence which photography had upon the landscape of art in its burgeoning state, and, in Van Anh Le’s case, the same ability to be absorbed into the field of creation. Viewed in this perspective, the fears that artists and critics have, seem minimised by the scope of history. But how truthful is this notion?

3.2 Artificial Intelligence

The nascent development of Artificial Intelligence began in the 1950s, with Frank Rosenblatt’s ‘Perceptron’, and consisted of ‘Two main strands’ of potential intelligence (Rettberg, 2023). One, ‘symbolic AI’ maintained that a rationale could be formed using defined boundaries and algorithmic rule. The other, ‘sub-symbolic AI’ was built on the process of ‘machine learning’, which is described in *Machine Vision*, as ‘a computer programme... written to analyse a dataset and infer its own rules from patterns it finds in the data.’ (Rettberg, 2023) In the wake of the internet it became evident that, of the two methods, sub-symbolic AI would reign supreme. The focus on ‘intelligence’ seems to signify this shift, as inferences made by the sub-symbolic computer programme are perceived as rational and analytical where the symbolic rule-built algorithm is viewed as robotic. Contradictorily, in *Machine Vision*, Jill W. Rettberg asserts that, ‘AI can be said to *cognise* rather than think in a self-reflective way as humans do.’ (2023, pp.4) Despite the fact that process of information and cognitive function differs greatly between machine and human, the title applied to the tool, ‘*Artificial intelligence*’, speaks to a science fiction-level understanding of clever supercomputers capable of human logic, one which has been disputed by academics in the field who denote AI as ‘machine learning’ (Crawford, 2021, pp.9). Kate Crawford dissects this notion in *The Atlas of AI*, the second book which this dissertation will reference in order to examine the complexities of AI, wherein Crawford denotes AI as, ‘neither *artificial* nor *intelligent*.’ (2021, pp.8). She explains that the application of autonomy upon what is essentially a ‘registry of power’ (Crawford, 2021) can become dangerous.

We see this danger begin to manifest after 70 years of computational innovation. AI has become an expansive, and ever-changing, industry, newly marketed with deference by a throng of companies which require its efficiency and publicly established genius to function (Crawford, 2021). Ultimately, AI’s constant appearances in society on the micro level, such as those within search engines and artworks, might signify that the public are being trained to accept it on the

macro, as mouthpieces of power. The reason this narrative is dangerous, as both Rettberg and Crawford point out, is that artificial intelligence cannot be created without some bias or propaganda. Rettberg explains that,

A neural network trained on internet images with English captions will re-create the bias in the training data, generating images and propagating a version of a world where humans are almost always white, nurses are women, doctors are men and terrorists look Arabic. (2023, pp.2)

Crawford's view is similar. She argues that 'If AI is defined by consumer brands for corporate infrastructure, then marketing and advertising have predetermined the horizon' (2021, pp.8). In this sense, AI models would be manufactured to corroborate and enforce the intention and perspective of their masters – the governments and companies which control them (Crawford, 2021, pp. 211), and marketed as forms of almighty genius. These thoughts are concerning when considering the possible applications of AI in fields of medicine, law and policing, but become more abstract when applied to the field of art.

3.3 Anthropocentric Bias

In the so-called, 'Fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab, 2017, quoted in Buehler et al., 2023) we see the saturation of AI artworks within the art market. Copies of old masters, and 'original' artistic styles, are sold at auction for respectable prices (Buehler et al., 2023). Data found in the field of computational creativity imply that AI is even capable of 'genuine' artistic creation. (Buehler et al., 2023). This, however, is disputed by Kate Crawford, who makes the claim that, 'AI... are not... able to discern anything without extensive, computationally intensive training with large datasets.' (2021, pp. 8). Which signifies their inability to 'create', and their further inability to do so 'genuinely'. As to the societal reception of these pieces; testing has revealed them to be 'often indistinguishable' (Buehler et al., 2023) from their human-made counterparts. This has incited understandable concerns, such as worries that 'AI [will] decrease the value of human labour as has happened in so many other industrial revolutions of the past.' (Blaine Horton Jr, C. et al., 2023). Relevant fears have colluded to become, essentially, a phenomenon – two peer-reviewed studies have explored an anthropologic bias which assign creativity and value to human artworks, and devalue art created with AI. Within the first study, entitled, 'Defending Humankind: Anthropocentric bias in the appreciation of AI art', four rounds of study were carried out, using research pools ranging from 206 for the initial hypothesis to 800

for the final, conclusive examination. To determine the bias, in Study 2, both artworks were human-made, and in Study 3, both were created with artificial intelligence (Beuhler et al., 2023, pp.4). The three studies merged in the fourth, to conclude that humans are predisposed to characterise supposed 'human-created' artworks as more creative, original and valuable than their AI counterparts (Beuhler et al., 2023). However, this outcome is susceptible to change depending on anthropologic bias within the individual, as those scoring higher on 'anthropocentric creativity beliefs' (Beuhler et al., 2023, pp.3), are more likely to negatively value computer-generated art, and those exhibiting less bias are more likely to value both similarly. (Beuhler et al., 2023, pp.6) The second study, 'Bias against AI art can enhance perceptions of human creativity', alleges that 'recent research suggests humanizing autonomous technologies can help mitigate aversion to algorithms' (Blaine Horton Jr, C. et al., 2023, pp.2). With philosophical context, such as the assertion that 'art [is what] makes us human' by scientist Brian Greene (2010, quoted in Blaine Horton Jr, C. et al., 2023), it seems unsettling that art is a main point of focus upon which Artificial Intelligence corporations have settled; for, indeed, if they succeed in creating art indistinguishable from human works, and if these are socially accepted as such, the difference between machine and human thought will grow ever narrower. It is upon these speculations which the study is built, and its findings support and expand upon those of the first study (Blaine Horton Jr, C. et al., 2023). Over the course of six experiments, the study found that people are generally more likely to devalue (both monetarily and creatively) AI art, that comparison between AI and human-made work enhances the perceived creativity of the human-made art, there is no significant difference in the distaste of AI between those in the art industry and those not, and that collaboratively made AI-art is still viewed as less creative and valuable than human made work, though considered more valuable than the singularly AI artworks (Blaine Horton Jr, C. et al., 2023). These discoveries, some in support of the first Studies findings, signify an almost biological resistance to seeing AI as capable of creation. Considering the fears arising in the field of fine art around technological domination, these findings could be both a warning and a comfort. If indeed mechanical trust should depend on the AI's humanisation and alleged creativity, the conditioning of this would be tricky. If current tests are taken at face value, fine art has little to fear and much to gain from its comparison (and competition) with artificial intelligence, as long as safeguarding is introduced to clarify AI art as such.

3.4 The Electrician

The Electrician could be considered a contemporary mirror to *The Drowning of Hippolyte Bayard*. Both works were attempts to stir public outcry and draw attention to the implications of new technology and ownership. Bayard's was created in answer to his personal grievances with the patenting of Daguerre's invention and acclaimed status as inventor of photography, given to Daguerre by the French Government (Sapir, 1994). In contrast, Eldagsen's *The Electrician* is, by virtue of winning the Sony World Photo awards and Eldagsen's subsequent refusal of it (Eldagsen, 2025), empowered with commentary about the distinguishment of AI within art competitions. Chiara Spaggiari details the reasoning behind Eldagsen's refusal as concerning, 'the media origin of the winning image... which is not a photograph but an artwork created entirely with DALL-E' (2025, pp.282). Eldagsen is evidently adept with Generative AI, being an 'internationally recognized expert' (Eldagsen, 2025) in AI creation. *The Electrician* sharply exposes latent concerns within the artistic field by ultimately winning a competition amongst real photographs. The quality of AI Generated works, and inherent artistic taste was flung into question by Eldagsen's provocative decision. Whether or not the Sony judges understood that *The Electrician* was created with AI is up for debate, though their stance is that they indeed knew beforehand (Williams, 2023). Ultimately, both pieces reflect the instability of the field which they inhabit.



Fig 3.2: “The Electrician”, DALLE2, Boris Eldagsen, 2022

The Electrician, a single work in a series entitled ‘Pseudomnesia’, which is classic Greek for ‘fake memory’, (Eldagsen, 2025) exhibits two women in a disconcerting embrace, their figures stilted and posed without recognition of any supposed camera. Hands appear from strange angles, like clawed blurry shapes; their solidity and form are rendered bizarrely. In the top

corner, a streaked mark mimics ‘what happens when light “leaks” into the chamber of the camera and exposes parts of the film...’ (Ogundipe, 2025, pp. 11), and gives a glancing audience the perception that they are looking at an old photograph; the dress, colour and texture of the work all encourage this assessment. Perhaps it is not immediately evident that this is an Artificially generated work, but it simultaneously does not intend to be realistic. It is the view of Liv Hausken that the image performs photo-realism without the photography, and this type of mimetic work is concerning because it reiterates the impossibility of discernment in the arts (Hausken, 2024). However, the piece ultimately fails to be completely indiscernible; any photographer can immediately recognise the inexplicable depth of field, which allows both women’s eyes to be in focus. Ogundipe points out that hands are notoriously difficult for generative AI to replicate, and wonders if, ‘the hands... might be a result of the weaknesses of... Gen AI, or a carefully crafted artistic choice—or both.’ (2025, pp. 15). In this sense, everything that might be incoherent or rather ‘unrealistic’ about *The Electrician* instead lingers in the space between choice and mistake, as Eldagsen’s intent is made almost irrelevant by the method of its creation. In the artist’s own words, ‘Just as photography replaced painting in the reproduction of reality, AI will replace photography. Don’t be afraid of the future. It will just be more obvious that our mind always created the world that makes it suffer.’ (2025). This is the statement placed above Eldagsen’s *Pseudomnesia* works on his website. Although his alleged intent around *The Electrician* is to incite conversation around safeguarding, his own words seem to blur this message.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the field of art has been excited and disturbed by all manner of tools. In an age of technological advancement and the transcendence of the Machine, many industries have been suffocated. The question of this dissertation, ultimately, is whether this will happen to traditional art. Although peer-reviewed studies suggest that humans have an innate bias against AI generated art, the issue it faces now is one of distinguishment, which hinges on the transparency by which AI art is generated and dispersed. A lie can be of omission, and the threat of an artificial intelligence which can create indiscriminately, thought of as a human, looms over the traditional arts. *The Electrician* stands to be a warning, a signpost of the unstable future and stopgaps which must be introduced to the field to ensure its continued existence. History is a reminder of how easily progress and technology can kill burgeoning industries; though the mediums are wildly different, there is much to be learned from the integration of photography into the fine arts, and much to be heeded from the death of engraving. The decades which came after this, and the photographic criticisms which arose in the works of Sontag and Barthes, could be viewed as signposts for the wider matter of political interference and conglomerate control in AI. The truthful image, which Barthes may defend, (1980) is named a lie by Sontag (1979). In contemporary society, Rettberg and Crawford worry about the pioneers of a technology which can be used to hammer biases into code. Rettberg ends *Machine Vision* with a message of hope, to curtail the dread which an unknowable future must produce (2023, pp. 157). Perhaps the most heartening thought to take from this dissertation is that humanity is predisposed to prefer the idea of a human labouring over art than the efficiency of a programme creating it.

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