



Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History Part III, March 25 - 26, 2011 Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Index Marks the Spot: Photography's Archival Traces

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The following is the method of obtaining the Calotype pictures. Preparation of the Paper. Take a sheet of the best writing paper, having a smooth surface, and a close and even texture. The watermark, if any, should be cut off, lest it should injure the appearance of the picture.

Talbot's admonition to neophyte calotypists that watermarks be excised from the sheets of writing paper then widely used is perhaps the earliest indication of an ongoing uneasiness about the incursion of external graphical marks into the photographic field. This inauguration makes all the more striking the current status of the watermark in photographic practice, and its integral relationship to the archive as both a physical locus of scholarly research and as a conceptual apparatus reflective of some of modern culture's most fraught empirical tendencies. The digital watermark today is an assertion of property rights, emblazoned across the center of most images that already operating within an archival repository. The prominence of the watermark is intended to disfigure the picture, and to dissuade the unauthorized reproduction of the image by making it ostensibly unusable. There is, however, a contradiction inherent in this approach, for the assertion of the image's authenticity—that is, its authorized reproduction from its legitimate source—comes only by way of making that image into something entirely different. The indexical relation of the photograph to its archive can only be securely claimed by transforming the photograph into an image which makes it unlike its 'original', distinct from the property that is claimed. The way we know for certain that we are looking at an authentic iteration of the archival image is, paradoxically, not through a visual identity between the two, but rather by confronting an image that has been corrupted by the addition of the archive's graphical logo.

This paper will explore a genealogy of the current paradox by examining a particular subset of archival photographs that sought to reconcile the necessary infiltration of external graphical marks with the privileged referentiality of non-intervention. The photographically-saturated newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s sought to balance readers' thirst for images of death and destruction with the inevitable belatedness of the photographer's arrival on the scene, and accomplished this with the refinement of a peculiar genre: the photo-diagram. Tabloid and mainstream papers alike served their viewers a steady diet of post-facto reconstructions of catastrophic accidents and grisly discoveries.

These images, more often than not, were insufficiently decipherable to serve the evidentiary claims for which they were adduced, and an elaborate system of arrows, daggers, circles, and crosses were graphically added in paint or ink by hand to help guide the viewer's attention to the salient detail. The photo-diagram is such a disruptive genre because of its refusal to sublimate the marks of its creation to either the conventional verisimilitude of photography or the broader archival program with which that verisimilitude has been in accord. It announces the insufficiency of the image for comprehending the world, and insists upon the indispensability of supplementary information, the very thing that is endangered by the kind of current digitization projects that are rightly being interrogated by scholarly organizations. In this strangely hybrid idiom of the photo-diagram, photography's indexicality and its multiplicity seek reconciliation in ways that indicate something germane about the digital crossroads at which we now find ourselves.

Biographical Note

Jordan Bear is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto. He was previously Lecturer in Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, where he completed his doctorate on an ACLS/Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship. He has also served as the Chester Dale Fellow in the Department of Photographs at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. His scholarship, published in *History of Photography*, *Cabinet*, *Bookforum*, *Photography and Culture* and *Visual Resources*, among other venues, has focused on the historical intersection of photography, knowledge and belief. He is currently revising his dissertation, titled *Without a Trace: Photography and the History of Visual Objectivity, 1848–1875*, for publication.