

Film 099

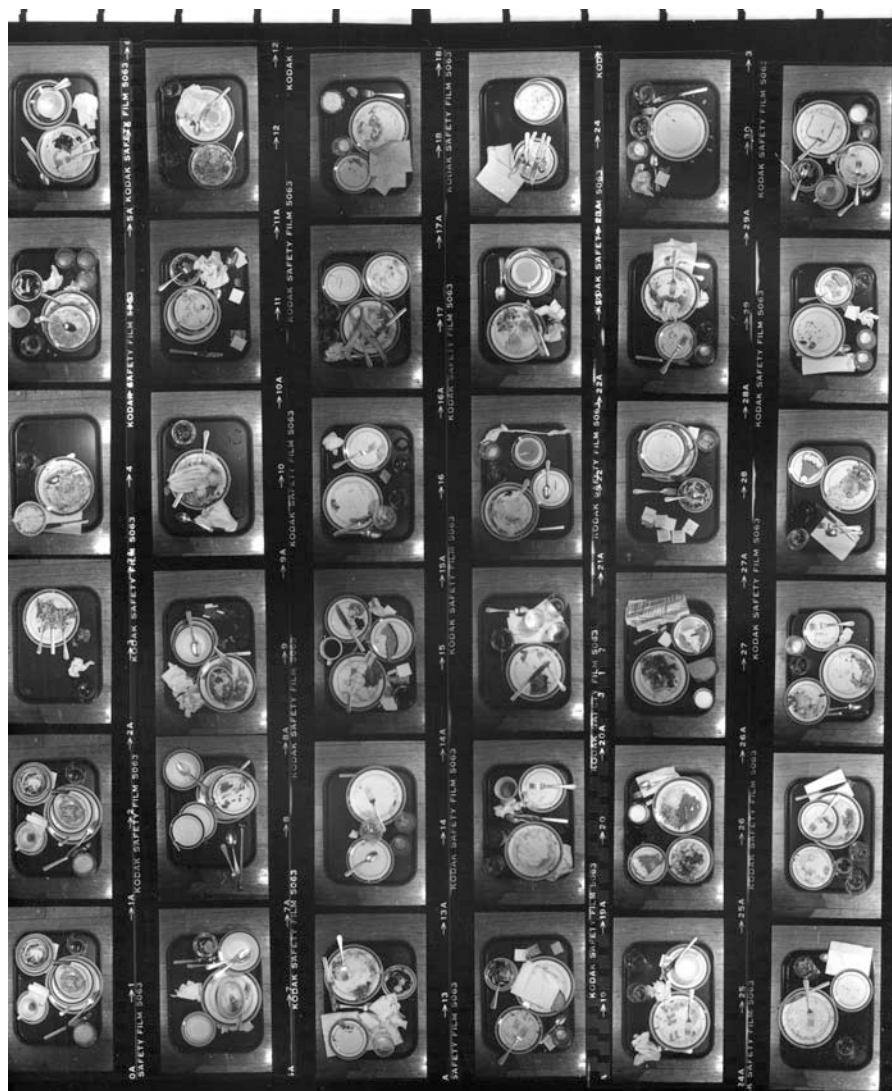
Professor Dudley Andrew

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Hannah Shearer

### The Photograph: A Personal Exploration

by Hannah Shearer

The first photograph I remember is of a plate of half-eaten food.\* It was actually a large series of photographs taken by my father while he was working at his college dining hall; it now spans the height of our dining room wall. As a child I would stare at it while I ate, imagining the



*Dining Hall Trays, Peter Shearer (1977)*

faces that belonged to each plate, wondering who had unknowingly given my father a fragment of their lives—their leftovers. Who had left the table so many years ago, carrying most of their omelet in their stomach, but leaving a few eggy remains for me to contemplate over my own breakfast? I was revolted, yet intrigued, already a voyeur before I knew what the word meant.

Thus for me photography was always a disturbing phenomenon. It felt as though my father had captured and imprisoned a private, unglamorous moment that wasn't meant to be seen by an audience apart from the busboys. By taking a picture of those unwashed plates that are normally shoved out of sight, he had paralyzed the natural order of things. Barthes argues that this paralysis occurs in all photographs. He believes taking a picture “arrests”<sup>1</sup> time, isolating a single moment and confining it to a piece of paper. To describe how photography transmutes motion to stillness, Barthes uses the analogy of a butterfly pinned beneath a glass display case<sup>2</sup>, but a number of similar images spring to mind. A smashed insect stuck to a car windshield, thousand-year-old body cavities in Pompeian soil, mosquitoes trapped in amber: photography does to its subject what death does to every living being. It kills and then—to use Bazin's word—“embalms,” ensuring immortality in the form of an enduring image. It is a tradition the Egyptians started with art designed for the sole purpose of protecting the body and reputation after death.<sup>3</sup> But my father's trays of food are mummies not of pharaohs but of garbage. No one *wants* the cigarette they extinguished in their coffee cup to be remembered, but here it is for all eternity.\* The camera makes no distinctions between what is and what is not worth keeping; it is simply a mechanized instrument of death and preservation.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*. Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: U California P, 1967), p. 9.



*Close up: Tray with Cigarette, Peter Shearer (1977)*

A camera and a gun: is it a coincidence that they both “shoot”? My friends and I sometimes play a game called photo roulette. One of us holds the camera while the other gesticulates wildly until—click!—a random moment is frozen.\* As in a game of Russian roulette, a shot is fired, but it is a unit of time rather than a person that is subject to the risk of death. Playing the game correctly, the victim has no control over what the resultant image will look like: her veins might bulge, her skin might wrinkle, her hair might hide her face, or her mouth might twist itself into a strange grimace. (The result is often like rigor mortis—the stiffening of facial muscles after death.) The camera’s job, in the game and in general, is to capture a certain instant and allow it to persist forever; the only other instrument with a similar job description is the instrument of destruction—the gun.



Lisl plays photo roulette (I took the picture)

Of course, ordinary photographs are usually meticulously posed, not left up to chance, but the metaphor of camera as gun is still valid. Edward Weston offers the following description of his photographic studies of nature:

*The hour is late, the light is failing, I could not expose another film. So there stands my camera focused, trained like a gun, commanding the shells not to move a hair's breath. And death to anyone who jars out of place what I know shall be a very important negative.*<sup>4</sup>

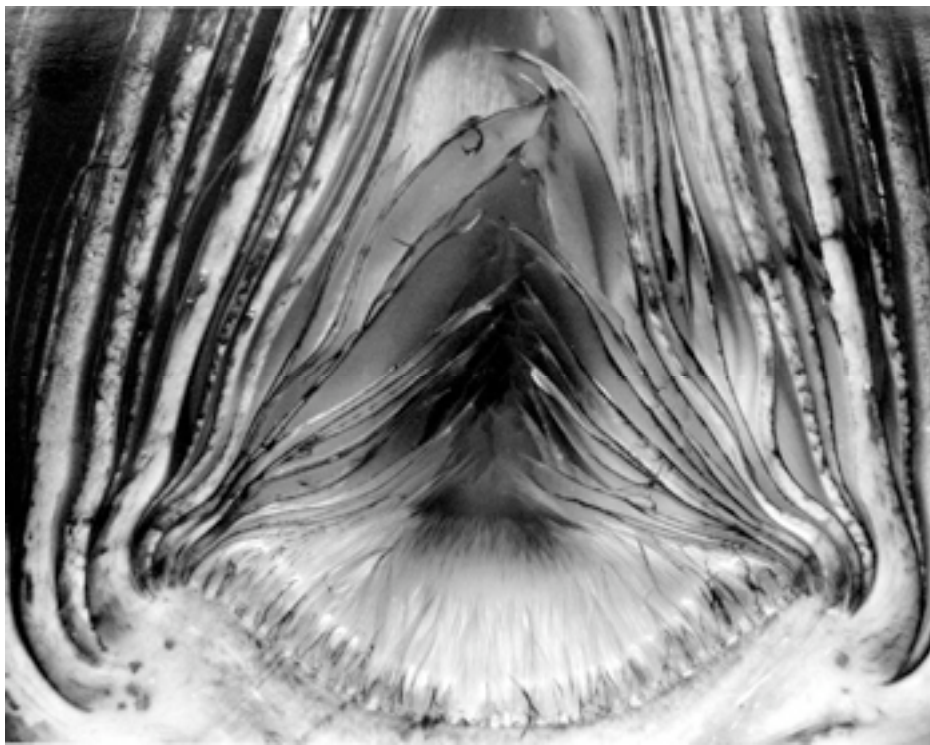
Weston is a hunter stalking his prey, waiting for the world to align itself to his liking so he can possess that alignment forever, as one might keep a stuffed moose head on top of the

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*. Ed. Nancy Newhall. (New York: Aperture, 1991.)



mantelpiece. The power of my favorite of Weston's images, "Artichoke Halved,"\*\* is its overwhelming exactitude: any curve could slightly billow or buckle and it would be a different moment, a different photograph—his bullet would not have reached this particular target. Without photography's unique ability to isolate and preserve minute details—in this case the abstract undulations of the artichoke—much of the world's beauty would go unnoticed and unappreciated.



"Artichoke Halved," Edward Weston (1930)

Indeed the human memory is undoubtedly inferior to the photograph in terms of the "resolution" of its images: the memory could never conjure up the intricate interlocking leaves of Weston's artichoke. As an example let us examine a photograph of myself\* sitting in the apartment in England where I was born but don't remember. My wispy, baby hair is blond, the hands clutching my foot are fat and dimpled, and my eyes are like pale blue marbles, round with innocence. When I came across the photograph as a brown-haired, dark-eyed child, I recognized

nothing about it and refused to believe that it was really me. It was frightening that I failed to recollect an instant that had surely occurred, and that in fact the picture was evidence of the time before my memory had begun working properly! We had to bring baby pictures in to school and guess which belonged to whom, and not a single one of my fellow fifth-graders matched me with my photograph. I felt violated, as if the photograph had deceived everyone, but also victorious: I had “won” the game by tricking my classmates.



No one knows who took this picture of me.

Does photography, then, lie? Does it, as Barthes says, alter our memories<sup>5</sup>, artificially forcing us to remember what we were perhaps meant to forget—such as the blue eyes of childhood that have long since faded to grey? At least a painting makes no pretensions of

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<sup>5</sup> Barthes, p. 91.

presenting absolute truth. Hanging in my grandmother's house is a life-size portrait of a boy with a solemn gaze dressed in Civil War blues. "He never came home from the war—he was already dead when this picture was painted," my grandmother explained to me. "This is his sister, wearing his uniform, with her hair tucked under the hat." Such a painting admittedly and falsely recreates an impossible past, but my baby photograph shows a true past that I ordinarily would not have remembered—which is in many ways just as deceitful. Painting approximates the imperfect workings of memory, while photography chemically preserves a moment more precisely than is humanly possible. Thus while photography—more so than any art—*is* nature, it is also a violation of nature. Systematically categorizing and collecting objects, like dirty plates, artichokes and even babies, contradicts the human characteristic of natural selection, of eliminating non-essential information. Perhaps instead of mummification a more fitting metaphor for photography would be cryonic deep-freezing—not an artistic extension of the instant of death, but a relentless and unnatural "stasis."<sup>6</sup>

The Surrealists understood and exploited this sensation of stasis.<sup>7</sup> Their philosophy maintains that our world—especially the unconscious world of dreams—is so fantastically bizarre that it is the only subject worthy of painting, and it deserves to be rendered realistically (or rather, with the amplified realism that the word *surrealism* implies). Dali, with his intricately detailed paintings of melting watches and disassembled corpses, is ultimately trying to *photograph* the inside of his mind, and make tangible and permanent the fleeting, illogical images and intuitive bursts of information that compose the brain. There is a distinct element of preservation at work; after all, Dali's most famous piece is titled "The Persistence of Memory." Instead of the "memory" that most paintings present, Surrealism and photography give us the

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<sup>6</sup> Barthes, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Bazin, pp. 15-16.

unnatural *persistence* of memory, comparable to a recurring dream, or the flashbacks from a drug-induced delirium. Barthes borrows from Bazin the idea of the photograph as a “shared hallucination,” an image that defies our perception of reality yet is undeniably real.<sup>8</sup>

We are forced to conclude that photography, like a drug, does alter the memory. But in doing so it introduces us to and incorporates us into a force larger than ourselves: a kind of collective memory. Sontag characterizes this connectedness as the light from a single star that touches all humans<sup>9</sup>; Barthes prefers the image of an umbilical cord—a bond between humans and their ancestors and “anyone who has been photographed.”<sup>10</sup> Looking at Sally Mann’s photograph, “At Twelve,”\* one understands what it means to be twelve years old, forever. The almost supernatural clarity of the girl’s face, especially with respect to the hazy background, gives the photograph a hallucinogenic power. This is a dream of a summer day that certainly didn’t happen to me, or you, or even to the subject herself (if this is indeed as posed as it appears), but it is a particularly vivid dream that causes us to rethink the very nature of our existence. We get the feeling that it is she who is examining us, she who is killing us with her eyes as her twelve-year-and-some-number-of-seconds-old self was killed by the camera. It is a precise age that will never happen again but, in the photograph, happens always.

Such is the contradictory nature of photography: the butterfly behind the pin manages to prick the person watching from the other side of the glass.

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), p 157.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, p. 81.





"At Twelve," Sally Mann (1989). *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women*. New York: Aperture, 1991.