

GLOBAL PHOTOGRAPHY



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GLOBAL PHOTOGRAPHY

A Critical History

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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to learn about photography's histories. One method is simply to look at images—lots of them—in places like museums, galleries, books, or on social media platforms. Written histories of the medium, such as this one, provide another. Yet as knowledge about the geographic scope of photography's past expands and as an increasing number of disciplines begin to incorporate aspects of photography's histories into their own methods of understanding the world, how such a written history should look or be organized becomes a complex and political question. No single text can address all aspects of photography's rich history, but to us what feels essential is an investigative approach that is at once capacious in scope, critical in its specificity, and aware of its own limitations. With this need in mind, we have organized *Global Photography: A Critical History* around a set of analytical framings that encompass a variety of historical contexts, a diversity of locations, and a plurality of producers. By widening—geographically and conceptually—historical points of reference and contemporary points of entry, our book takes a critical approach to the multivalent practices and discourses that compose photography's histories across time and space.

Teaching introductory surveys on the history of photography to undergraduate students can present unique pedagogical challenges. If one elects to use a textbook, Mary Warner Marien's *Photography: A Cultural History* (currently in its 4th edition) is a popular choice, and her chronologically structured survey offers a broad overview of photography's varied and complicated histories. However, when classes are populated by photography, studio art, and design majors, all of whom tend to identify more readily with contemporary uses of the medium, teleological models that place such examples at the end of the book can alienate students who long for discussion organized around more current practices. Moreover, the separation of the contemporary from the historical results in a relevance gap: chronological surveys too easily lose sight of how historical antecedents inform and relate to contemporary questions, approaches, and practices. Naomi Rosenblum's *A World History of Photography* (in its 5th edition) presents many of the same drawbacks as Marien's text. Though admirably international in scope, and with a new section devoted to photography at the start of the twenty-first century, the book's structure nonetheless remains solidly linear and thus the pedagogical challenges posed by a chronological model remain as well. Additionally, chronologically organized texts tend to emphasize completeness over criticality, and even though we know comprehensiveness is impossible, the structure of a teleological survey with its discrete and contained bits of information make the reader feel a sense of completeness.

Global Photography addresses the problems inherent to exhaustive chronological studies in a number of ways. To begin with, rather than isolate international contemporary photographic practices from their historical pasts, we consider the two in relation to each other so as to bring out important and often overlooked interconnections and convergences. This approach aligns with a significant shift in teaching survey courses more generally. Over the past twenty years, a re-evaluation of the traditional survey course has been taking place in disciplines ranging from art history to American studies, and from design

history to the history of cinema.¹ For many, the teleological chronology, upon which many of these surveys is based, has become an outdated resource. One solution to this problem is to organize the survey thematically. Such an approach, in fact, has become a new standard for teaching the history of photography, with Liz Wells's *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (also currently in its 4th edition) as a leading model. Yet, despite the relevance and importance of Wells's edited survey, its focus on primarily U.S. and Euro-centric examples marginalizes global perspectives, thereby situating artists and projects from countries in the Global South (when mentioned at all) as ancillary to the mainstream.

More recently, scholars have begun a more explicit questioning of Euro-centric preconceptions surrounding photography's history. Photographer and historian Boris Kossoy and Latin American scholar Natalia Brizuela, for instance, have both sought to reframe photography's frequently recited Euro-centric origin story by turning to the groundbreaking photographic experiments that Hercule Florence conducted in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1833, independent of those of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot in Europe.² Likewise, American studies scholar Sissy Helff and historian Stefanie Michel's edited collection, *Global Photographies: Memories—History—Archives* (2018), challenges conventional and normative narratives of the medium's history, particularly through their assertion that "Photography never belonged solely to the West nor was the idea of creating a likeness of a thing or person an exclusively western or modern notion."³ *Global Photography* adds to this "global turn," and seeks to expand on what this new history might look like. We hope the chapters that follow here will continue to open the field, offering a myriad of case studies, rather than an exhaustive world history, that testify to the instability of, and unexpected possibilities within, the history of photography more broadly.

Admittedly, we recognize certain fundamental limitations to our positions as scholars of art history and visual studies writing from the perspective of the Global North. Scholarship on photography's global histories has grown in recent decades, yet as art historian Gael Newton points out, practical issues, including funding for travel, means that many scholars must nonetheless "rely heavily on biographies, collections and publications accessible in Euroamerica."⁴ To contend with this constraint, some argue that a geographical emphasis on specific areas allows for greater cross-cultural understanding of photography's histories. The many geographically delineated histories of photography recently published, especially by Reaktion Books, which focus on a continent or country, are prime examples of this model.⁵

We understand the value of such studies, particularly after experiencing various geographic restrictions in our own research and writing. For instance, while it was relatively easy to find contemporary global examples to include in our chapters, we had more difficulty locating English language resources on international historical figures. Furthermore, our linguistic limitations threw into relief the inevitable concern one encounters when taking a global approach to history writing: losing specificity within the larger whole, or not dealing with cultural difference in as much depth as it requires. Aware of these drawbacks, we avoid claims to universalism and further believe, as Mark Miller Graham argued over twenty years ago in relation to the future of the art history survey, that we art historians should "stop fetishizing completeness."⁶ For this reason, we adopt a thematic organization in which, through a series of critical framings, we connect past and present within various global contexts. The chapters in our volume also reference but do not claim the superiority of so-called canonical figures and "important" artworks often found in teleological surveys of photography's history. We believe this innovative and inclusive approach is more relevant and exciting to current students.

At the same time, we recognize that a thematic model is not everyone's preferred approach for teaching the history of photography. To those who continue to employ—for any number of reasons—a chronological approach, *Global Photography* still offers useful insights and ways for understanding how that knowledge might be deployed or organized. Our chapters, and even sub-chapters, while integrated into the larger framework of the book, can easily be taken apart and used as assigned readings in both lower level and upper level classes in art history, studio art, art education, and design, among other disciplines. The target audience for the book is undergraduate students, yet our emphasis on criticality should likewise appeal to graduate students as well as scholars interested in thinking about the global possibilities of photography's diverse and complicated histories.

It is important to note that the field we refer to as “global” photography is distinct from, though related to, globalization. These terms are often taken as synonymous. *Global Photography* seeks to problematize those assumptions. For instance, photography historian David Bate has convincingly argued that globalization “offers a new paradigm for thinking about photography,”⁷ and he has offered a compelling account of how the global circulation of photographs affects meaning. But the flow of pictures across international borders forms only one facet of our inquiry into the global status of photography. Whereas globalization refers primarily to the interconnectedness of the world's economies, the “global” turn in art emerged after many decades of postcolonial approaches to art history and visual culture. The “global” method in art history, as for us, is preoccupied foremost with decolonizing or moving away from monolithic timelines and narratives.⁸ It “requires,” as photography theorist Ariella Azoulay explains, “one to abandon the imperial linear temporality and the way it separates tenses: past, present, and future,”⁹ and instead find ways to remap and reimagine the wider field of art.

This reorientation, however, does not mean that we disregard how photographs are made at specific times and places by practitioners who identify themselves in terms of particular nations and regions. Martinique-born, postcolonial poet and theoretician Édouard Glissant's conception of “globality,” and the crucial need to recognize difference among cultures in spite of being drawn into ever closer relations, provides a helpful model in this regard. For Glissant, globality marks a world that conceives of itself as “multiple and single,” with responsibilities to “face the density (opacity) of the other.”¹⁰ This mode of interrelationships or, as photography historian Tanya Sheehan significantly writes, “the challenges of bringing into dialogue the global and local, the national and transnational, majorities and minorities, cultural identity and cultural difference,”¹¹ undergirds the project of *Global Photography*.

Our book is organized into six thematic units: Realisms, Evidence, Ethics, Art, Collections, and the Expanded field. The themes correspond to issues, genres, and approaches that we understand to have global relevance both today and in the past.

Realisms

Photography's presumed indexicality forms the framework for the chapters in the unit on Realisms. Though scholars have long debated this characteristic of photography, what photography's indexicality in general implies is that the medium holds not only a similarity with or a resemblance to what it depicts—its referent—but is also said to have been directly caused by this referent and thereby could not exist without it. The chapters in this unit seek to destabilize and complicate this causal relationship between a photograph and its referent through an exploration of the medium's abstract and staged qualities.

Evidence

This portion of the text builds on the insights of the Realism unit, in that it embraces the idea of representational instability. Here, however, this instability is talked about in relation to how artists mobilize photographic images (because of their indexical nature) to make arguments about the world around them. Paradoxically, part of this process involves breaking down photographs to show how histories, conflicts, and ideologies can be embedded within seemingly neutral views of people and land. The chapters in this unit thus address what artist and critic Hito Steyerl calls the “paradox of truth”¹²—that is, the challenge to understand photographic images as pictures that simultaneously provide historical truth and are manipulatable and opaque.

Ethics

The unit on ethics considers the ways that photographs propose a moral encounter with the viewer. Specifically, the chapters in this unit explore the politics of representation and conflict photography through questions concerning the subjective dimensions of objectivity and the difficulty of capturing a “truthful” image. The role of photography in bearing witness and making visible is critically deliberated here, especially within situations characterized by crisis and suffering. The chapters in this unit reject the view of documentary photography as neutral and instead encourage ethical questions regarding how (and for whom) particular subjects are framed and viewed.

Art

Of course, one of the key discourses of photography is art. As such, this unit looks at how aesthetic practices and considerations distinguish themselves (or not) from other discourses such as science, reportage, and documentary. By dealing with the theme and strategy of appropriation in art practices that use photography, across several time periods and locations, as well as thinking deeply about form as both the material and subject of photography, these chapters tackle how photography simultaneously troubles and identifies as art.

Collections

Because of their reproducibility, photographs function not only as objects to be collected but also as a means to collect objects in the world. The chapters in this unit therefore take up the subject of the collections history of photographs and by extension their history as collected objects. To explore these dual functions of photography, each chapter highlights two distinct institutional sites of photographic collections and collecting: museums and archives. The chapters come together in their inclusion of photographers, curators, and exhibitions, both contemporary and historical, which engage with and raise questions around photography’s broader collections history.

Expanded field

The photographic image operates in multiples fields, including art, anthropology, science, medicine, law, film, and fashion, to name only a few. Such multiplicity has been a part of photography identity (even if sometimes suppressed) since its “invention” in 1839 when Daguerre presented his daguerreotype process to a joint session of the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Art in Paris, France. This unit investigates photography’s discursive promiscuity and inherent multiplicity by looking at two areas—fashion and cinema—that intersect with discussions of art photography but are often left out of traditional accounts. The chapters here, then, challenge photography’s accepted boundaries, in formal as well as social terms. How, for instance, does the relationship between still and moving images disrupt photography’s temporal ordering? Or, how does fashion photography push at the edges of acceptable cultural expression?

Overlaps between subsections and themes recur usefully throughout the book. Photography’s assumed realism, for instance, is a thread that runs across many of the chapters. And, though “art” headlines just one thematic unit, the featured examples in the book are predominantly art photography. Likewise, while there is no dedicated thematic unit on either photography’s temporality or materiality, these characteristics of the medium are taken up in many of the chapters in the book, including “Description and abstraction” and “Photography and the cinematic.” We see such overlap as a strength in that such layering encourages readers to think more holistically about contemporary photographic practices and their multifaceted relationships to the past.

Each of the twelve chapters examines a diverse group of photographers working at varying points in their careers, including well-known historical and contemporary figures and younger emerging artists. This means that many of the photographers we include are canonical, artists whose work is widely known and generally considered influential. At the same time, we have employed other standards for selecting artists, such as geographic location and critical engagement with the themes covered in the book. We find such criteria to be as important as prominence or validation through the art market because our book seeks to contribute to the construction of a more diverse and genuinely global history of photography than currently exists. Perhaps most importantly, however, we engage fewer photographers than most other introductory history of photography texts. We made this decision intentionally. Our choice of work allows us to demonstrate, especially to student readers, the practice and importance of looking critically, and the merits of placing their own art-making practices in historical and global terms. Our examples, then, are not intended to be either all-inclusive or comprehensive. Instead, they are designed to provide a flexible structure in which salient themes can be used in terms of the photographers we consider or with others. In so doing, our book provides a much needed historical, methodological, as well as practical model for readers.

The number of scholars and critics writing about photography has grown exponentially in the past decade and a half. We have attempted to incorporate some of these newer thinkers into the chapter narratives while also referencing more established historical and theoretical writings that remain relevant to the field. Still, there are many voices missing. In order to reflect some of the diversity of these more recent approaches, while maintaining a coherent overall narrative, each chapter of the book also includes a boxed focus study designed to highlight a new area of research or form of practice around the globe. These focus studies, which consist of short interviews, curatorial statements, and brief reflections written by prominent and emerging scholars and critics, but also photographers, serve to integrate the discussion of photography’s history and critical voices of its practice in a manner unlike other textbooks. Additional

pedagogical features at the conclusion of each chapter further support our emphasis on critical looking. These include chapter summaries that ensure the book's contents and structure are accessible and meaningful for introductory survey courses, suggested discussion points, as well as further case studies and suggested further reading.

The field of photography studies continues to shift and expand. But with this forward momentum, there is always the risk of loss. Writing in 1940, shortly before his untimely death while escaping the Nazis, literary theorist Walter Benjamin penned a text questioning the integral and immanent connection between history and time. One well-known passage from this work, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," speaks directly to our project: "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."¹³ In this quotation and throughout the essay, Benjamin understands time as radically fragmented and cautions that, without care, the past will "flit by," vanishing into the ether. The historian's task, for him, is thus to establish a relation between history's fragments and to safeguard against its disappearance. *Global Photography* likewise grapples with the threat of history's irretrievable disappearance by looking for the past's appearance in and relevance to the present. Our hope is that the pointed thematic issues selected across these pages will offer multiple viewpoints, provoke investigation, and spark reassessments of photography's vast history, as a means of propelling fresh-eyed and critically-engaged directions in current photography practice, research, and criticism. Our approach, in other words, is to situate the past in the present by searching for historical antecedents in today's contemporary image world. This method serves as a guardrail against forgetting: it is a way to keep historical knowledge forward-facing.

Summary

- An accessible thematic overview designed for introductory and upper-level undergraduate photography majors but also suitable for other related majors, including art history, studio art, art education, and design, among others.
- Structured as required or recommended reading for semester-long undergraduate courses, its thematic organization also makes individual chapters and sub-chapters suitable for courses dealing with the particular subject areas of those chapters.
- Covers a broad range of international historical and contemporary photographers, including emerging practitioners, and positions contemporary photographic practices and issues in terms of relevant historical antecedents.
- In addition to the main chapter narrative and focus box, each chapter includes the following pedagogical features: chapter summary, discussion points, further case studies, and suggested further reading.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Sarah A. Lichtman, "Reconsidering the History of Design Survey," *Journal of Design History* 22, no. 4 (2009): 341–51; Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Towards a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358–70; Frank P. Tomasulo, "What Kind of Film History

- Do We Teach? The Introductory Survey Course as Pedagogical Opportunity,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2001); Bradford R. Collins, ed., “Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey: A Practical, Somewhat Theoretical, and Inspirational Guide,” special issue, *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995).
- 2 See Boris Kossoy, *The Pioneering Photographic Work of Hercule Florence* (London: Routledge, 2018); and Natalia Brizuela, “Light Writing in the Tropics,” *Aperture* 215 (Summer 2014): 32–7.
 - 3 Stephanie Michels, “Re-framing Photography – Some Thoughts,” in Sissy Helff and Stefanie Michels (eds), *Global Photographies: Memory—History—Archives* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018), 9.
 - 4 Gael Newton, “Other World Histories of Photography: The First Century of Photography in Asia,” in Moritz Neumüller (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 87.
 - 5 See, for instance, Karen Fraser, *Photography and Japan* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Justin Carville, *Photography and Ireland* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); and Andrés Mario Zervigón, *Photography and Germany* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).
 - 6 Mark Miller Graham, “The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey,” *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 33.
 - 7 David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 189–90.
 - 8 See, for example, Jill H. Casid and Aruna D’Souza, eds., *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Williamstown, MA, and New Haven, CT: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2014).
 - 9 Ariella Azoulay, “Unlearning Images of Destruction,” Foto Museum, September 17, 2018, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/155283_unlearning_images_of_destruction.
 - 10 Édouard Glissant, *L’intention poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 24.
 - 11 Tanya Sheehan, “Introduction: Questions of Difference,” in *Photography, History, Difference* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 6.
 - 12 Hito Steyerl, “Documentarism as Politics of Truth,” trans. Aileen Derieg, *transversal* (May 2003), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>. See also, Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *A Prior* 15 (2007), <http://re-visiones.net/anteriores/spip.php%3Farticle37.html>.
 - 13 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Hannah Arendt (ed.) and Harry Zohn (trans.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

Selected further reading

- Bate, David. *Photography: The Key Concepts*. 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
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