

Vol. 18 No. 2

DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS

Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA BRITISH
SOCIETY OF
AESTHETICS

Vol. 18 No. 2
December 2024

Edited by Claire Anscomb

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Claire Anscomb and Harry Drummond

Proofreading
Oli Odoffin and Harry Drummond

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Avenir, designed by Adrian Frutiger

Cover
Photograph of Old Faithful Geyser Erupting in Yellowstone
National Park from Ansel Adams Photographs of National Parks and
Monuments, compiled 1941 - 1942, documenting the period ca.
1933 – 1942 (image courtesy of Department of the Interior. National
Park Service. Branch of Still and Motion Pictures)

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ISSN 2514-6637

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REALISM, OBJECTIVITY, AND THE NATURE OF EPISTEMIC MERIT IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Kim Schreier

Like the real world, works of art are open to multiple viewpoints and interpretations. Rich and complex, and at the same time available to the senses, photographic images are a distinct form of visual art. Any philosophical theory about the nature of the photographic process should be able to explain both its artistic value and epistemic merits. The current debate concerns delineating photography's potential to record events as an unbiased witness and use the automation of the image-making process to justify its epistemic virtue without losing its artistic potential. In general, its reliability as a source of knowledge has been explained by the mind-independent part of the process, when information from the light image is recorded. Since there are many ways to influence how the final photograph will look, we tend to rely more on the norms of social practices to govern the photographic process as well as expert opinions to rate them and justify their use. Whether an image will be valued for its epistemic or artistic properties, or both, ultimately depends on how the recorded information is interpreted, which itself depends on its further use.

Imagine an abandoned East London apartment, with windows covered in sheets of cardboard, and a lens strategically placed in a small cutout. The light funnelled through this hole projects a light image of what is in front of the lens onto the back wall, transforming the darkened room into a giant camera obscura. In collaboration with a group of young adults, artist Brendan Barry used four different flats to make large paper negatives of the view. The negatives were placed onto photographic paper and exposed to light to make contact prints. Concept Lund Point¹, as the project is called, created photographic images documenting London at a certain time and place. They are considered works of art. These images effortlessly reconcile photography's epistemic power with its expressive potential—a feat that philosophers of art struggle to find a consensus on. To be more specific, we can't seem to agree on what is sufficient for a photograph to come into being (Costello 2019, 315). So, should we stop looking for a highly generic essence of photography?

Imagine the participants had traced the light image projected onto the wall with a pencil to render it permanent instead of letting light mark a photo-sensitive surface, and that they applied chemicals to make a negative and contact printed it to produce a photographic image. No doubt, the image would have been accepted as a work of art. It would not, however, have been so readily accepted as a document that warrants true beliefs about East London's skyline. Drawings do not have the same effect on our belief system. Something about the immediacy of light marking a photosensitive surface makes us trust these images more. The question arises whether the epistemic privilege we grant them is always deserved or justified.

In general, we justify the trust we place in photographic images by referring to the reliability of the photographic mechanism: objectivity is guaranteed by the electrochemical process set in motion when a photosensitive surface is exposed to light. The mechanical nature of the

1 <https://brendanbarry.co.uk/projects/lund-point>

applied technology explains its epistemic privilege. The precursor to our modern camera, the camera obscura, has been used in most cultures to produce upside-down images of the world. Once portable versions with a mirror were produced, the optical device became very popular among artists. They used it to trace and draw lifelike depictions of a scene. When it was finally possible to fixate the ephemeral light image on a photosensitive surface, the depictions thus produced were admired for their tremendous precision in showing even the smallest of details and praised for their realism. Realistic, as an adjective, states something about the accuracy of a depiction. A realistic or faithful image is not necessarily an objective or impartial one. Objectivity implies that the emotions, beliefs, or values of a person do not influence the method or medium used to produce the picture.

Soon after its invention, photography as a recording medium became all but synonymous with the word 'objectivity' for the population at large. Photographic images were praised as 'nature imprinting itself through the agency of light'. Many early commentators on photography used a vocabulary of evidence to point out the photograph's capacity to prove facts and its trustworthiness as a witness (Mnookin 1998, 18). According to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007), this concurs with a paradigm shift in the sciences during the mid-nineteenth century when epistemic virtue changed from truth-to-nature to mechanical objectivity. Objectivity became a code of values aimed to quiet the observer so nature could be heard:

By mechanical objectivity we mean the insistent drive to repress the wilful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would, as it were, move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically. (Daston and Galison 2007, 121)

Scientific illustrations representing the essence of a rose with its thorns,

roots, blossom, and flower were superseded by photographic reproductions of a typical instance of a rose, uncontaminated by human interpretation. The mechanical objectivity of the equipment explained photography's epistemic privilege: a causal recording medium that relies on belief-independent feature tracking to create automated and reproducible images that can warrant beliefs about the world, or an unmediated transcription of reality to prove matter of facts. The myth of perfection in a picture was created.

Within the art world, such claims were challenged right from the start. Photographers and art historians alike objected to the idea that photography was an automated photochemical process producing machine-made truths. They emphasized how technical decisions like choosing the focal length of a lens affected the image; and how the positioning of the subject, the angle, the preparation of the plate, the complexity of proper lighting, and the skills involved in darkroom manipulation influenced the outcome. In his famous essay *Seeing Photographically*, Edward Weston likened the idea that a photograph was purely the product of a machine and therefore not art, to convincing musicians that the sounds they produced through their machines could not be art because of the mechanical nature of their instruments (Weston 1980, 171). On the scientific side, photography's epistemic merit was often seen as debatable. Daston and Galison emphasized how the scientific community favoured photography because of its capacity to freeze detail with negligible labour or talent, which was very different from how scientific illustrators worked. Photographers and scientists, as well as their audiences, were perfectly aware that photographs could be faked, retouched, or otherwise manipulated (Daston and Galison 2007, 133).

Although the public believed photographic depictions to be objective truth-telling images, scientists and artists considered them a representation, not a replication. As such, they could be manipulable, partial, and

potentially misleading. The law agreed with them, as legal scholar Jennifer Mnookin explains in her paper about the status of photographic evidence in our court system (Mnookin 1998, 23). She cites 'Judicial Photography' from 1872:

[I]t is no exaggeration to say that an artist and practised manipulator combined can do with the pencil of light pretty much the same as a painter who works with his brush and badger softener ... a photograph is not necessarily a faithful portrait.

In *Cowley vs. the People of the state of New York*, a judge admitted photographic evidence as, to his knowledge, it did not differ in kind of proof from the pictures of a painter. Even though he defines them as the products of natural laws and scientific process, "it is the skill of the operator that takes care of this [fair resemblance of the object], as it is the skill of the artist that makes a correct drawing of features" (Cowley 1881). He added that a spoken or written testimony about someone's appearance was just as acceptable as a portrait or a picture of that person, as the portrait and the photograph may err, and so may the witness. That is an infirmity to which all human testimony is lamentably liable. He also stated that when care is taken first to verify that the process by which the photograph was taken was conducted with skill and under favourable circumstances, the produced image may, in many of the issues for a jury, be an aid to determination. If taken by a skilled, trustworthy person under the right conditions, they were a form of illustrative testimony that could aid the witness in communicating his point. By the mid-1880s, the doctrine governing photographic evidence had stabilized, and it was aligned with other constructed visual aids that a witness could use to illustrate his testimony, like maps, models, and diagrams (Mnookin 1998, 43). By the end of the nineteenth century, these visual representations were labelled demonstrative evidence that supported or clarified the oral testimony.

Significantly, the judge ruled that photographic images are allowed to aid a witness in giving a statement only if authenticated by other testimony and when care is taken to first verify that the process by which the photograph was taken, was conducted with skill and under favourable circumstances. Illustrative testimony can be used in court as a source of knowledge only if certain conditions about how it came into being and is used in court are met. In *Art and Knowledge*, James Young states something similar about the epistemic merit of illustrative testimony of works of art:

A bare statement or an unsupported illustration is not, however, by itself, a source of knowledge. Statements can be false, illustrations deceptive and justification is a necessary condition of propositional knowledge. Testimony can, however, be justified by the reliability of the person who produces it or by the reliability of the process in accordance with which the documentation of testimony is produced. (Young 2001, 67)

Images are not considered an autonomous source of knowledge. They are complex and multivalent, and cannot make any direct claims about truths in this world. Their implied propositions remain vague. A photographic image of a man holding a knife shows us exactly that: a man holding a knife, cut from its larger environment, framed from a certain perspective in a certain place at a certain time. The image needs to be contextualized by conceptual statements for us to understand what it shows: 'This is a picture of the defendant holding the murder weapon that was used to stab his wife.' Additionally, the judge or juror looking at the picture needs to know what grounds he has to accept it as genuine and reliable evidence. The mind-independent part of photography has very often been given as a warrant for its reliability. The legal system decided against this. Justification must come from elsewhere, as photographic images cannot guarantee their truthfulness. This additional source can be an expert's opinion, who can deem a picture a piece of

evidence and admit it in court to create justified true beliefs about the case. Their justification as a source of knowledge is not based on the reliability of the photographic process itself, but on the trust we place in the people and institutions that use or provide us with these images.

Likewise, the epistemic privilege photojournalism enjoys is based on our knowledge of how papers and news channels work. The editor guarantees the professional conduct of his photographers. He has norms in place governing the photographic process and will not publish pictures by photographers that are not sincere and competent. Dominic Lopes argues that such norms or socially imposed restrictions within epistemic photographic practices are why we continue to trust photographs (Lopes 2016, 110 and Walden 2008, 91–110).

Because of imposed norms, we trust images used in court, standard legal, forensic, scientific, medical, or diagnostic practices to be a reliable sources of knowledge. Moreover, we can learn about the world via these photographs, even when they are not accompanied by words or expert testimony, because we often already have true beliefs about the scenes they depict. Their epistemic merit is not warranted by the photograph presented to us, but by what Scott Walden (2005) calls second-order beliefs, or what Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin (2008) call background beliefs. These second-order or background beliefs themselves require a warrant, which is provided by the norms governing photographic practice. Nevertheless, when all these conditions are met, photographic images provide detailed and meaningful testimony about the visual appearance of things in a distinctive way for this image-making process. Objectivity seems to be part of a complex system responsible for the formation of justified true beliefs.

This raises the question: If we need other sources of knowledge to justify using a photographic image as a source of knowledge, does that imply that the epistemic merit of a photographic image is not intrinsic to the nature of the photographic process? If we acknowledge Walden's

proposal, the photographic process is characteristically objective, which forms the groundwork for increased confidence in beliefs formed as a result of looking at photographic images. Not only do these photographic images frequently enable us to form true beliefs, they also enable us to have confidence in those beliefs (Walden 2008, 108). Walden explains photography as an objective process, which excludes the image-maker's mental states from the process that maps features of the original scene onto features of the image. Since most viewers assume that objectively formed images provide better reasons for accepting certain beliefs about this world than subjectively formed ones, they epistemically value these more. Walden cautions us to be wary about beliefs formed via any pictures, photographs included, because it subtends an epistemic arrangement that falls short of certainty. He seems to have a valid point.

Dawn M. Wilson rejects the idea that photography is characteristically objective (Wilson 2021). She claims that the objective part, the registration of the light image on a photosensitive plate, doesn't constitute a photographic image. Neither the formation nor the recording of a light image are sufficient to generate a photographic image. A subsequent step must be made that separates the photographic register from the photographic image and gives it its visible image-bearing properties. In general, this stage is performed by the person who enters a darkroom to develop the film or opens digitally encoded information stored on an SD card using software algorithms. The person controls the outcome in a way that fully depends on their beliefs and skills. The same can be said about what happens more 'upstream' when the photographer chooses the subject through his viewfinder and decides which lenses and camera variables to use (Costello 2017, 450). Belief-based choices are made before and after the photographic event.

According to this New Theory of Photography, a photograph is an image output by a mark-making process that takes input from an electrochem-

ical event that records information from a light image of a pro-photographic scene (Lopes 2016, 81 and Abell 2018, 209). What distinguishes photography from other image-making processes is how light marks a photosensitive material to record information about the pro-photographic event. What happens before or after this moment is entirely up to the person who intends to use this medium to record and represent. Therefore, the mind-dependent stages of the process override the mind-independent recording of visual information.

To make matters even more complex, Lopes argues that objectivity is not reserved for photography. Many scientific illustrators, from biology to archaeology, can mind-independently track features as if they were calibrated drawing instruments. Lopes's argument includes the practice of archaeological drawings that are made by highly specialized artists following strict rules that are laid down in textbooks. Yes, there is a potential for degradation of the quality of visible features, but a faulty camera or dirty lens can cause similar problems. For the expert, these properly drawn artefacts invariably provide more information about prehistoric workmanship, the artefact's form, and diagnostic features than photographs (Lopes 2016, 112). Moreover, drawing and photography are not mutually exclusive. Artists and scientists alike can use information from a photographic recording event to mark a surface and create mixed-media images. The epistemic privilege these images enjoy is based on a mixture of our experiences with the photographic medium and our background beliefs about the objective component of the process.

We know we cannot trust every photographic image to be a truthful depiction of reality, yet we generally tend to trust them more than other images. Milton Gendel's 1982 photo of Leo Castelli shows the contemporary art dealer meticulously dressed in perfect focus with a Jasper Johns *Flag* behind him. At first glance, the picture seems to be a testimony of Castello's visual appearance. Gendel decided to commit to realism and

resemblance. We see an elderly man sitting in front of a painting. If he were still among us, we could probably recognize the person in real life based on this picture. The epistemic merit this photograph holds seems evident. Its reliability as a source of knowledge is partly invoked by the objective character of the photographic process used by Gendel, partly based on what we know about the way Gendel worked, and partly based on our knowledge of socially imposed restrictions by the institutions that published and displayed his work.

Yet, it does so much more than document. This is not a spontaneous snapshot. Even the most minute detail of what would be in the final photo was carefully considered before taking the shot. The presented composition was constructed, not found. Maynard argues that we experience a photographic image as something that is made and something that is made to shape our perception (Maynard 2008, 206). It is about seeing, knowing what one is seeing, and why. The picture counts three elements: the wall, the painting, and the man. Purposely placed, contrasted, and combined, these elements guide our perception. Since we know this picture was intentionally made by using recordings of a light image, we look at it differently from how we do when we consider it as drawn, natural, or accidental. We wonder why it shows the gallery owner in a certain light and why *Flag* and Castelli are placed in the same frame. We get a sense of connection between the gallerist and the work of art; we want to follow the artist's line of thought, and in doing so, take interest in what goes beyond the visual depiction. The photograph shows a reality so minutely cut out of the real world—untouched by space and time—that it creates a new photographic reality. It reveals a connection or an unseen truth that our eyes would have overlooked otherwise. I argue that creating this new understanding of our world has its own epistemic merit. The picture expresses beliefs about the world and that Gendel had about the gallerist, and it warrants beliefs about his visual appearance and deepens our understanding of the connection between Castelli and Jasper Johns. It is appreciated as a

work of art, not despite its epistemic merits, but because of it, held in the balance Gendel created between expressiveness, objectivity, and understanding.

Returning to Lund Point, is the epistemic privilege we grant photographs always deserved or justified? Because photography as an image-producing medium is not always a reliable source of information, I do not believe it is. Very often, the mind-dependent stages of the process override the mind-independent recording of visual information. This is why we need additional sources of knowledge to justify using an image to warrant true beliefs. Does that imply that the epistemic merit of a photographic image is not intrinsic to the nature of the photographic process? So far, my discussion has shown that there is no standard photographic process. It is the photographic practice that ultimately decides what the process will look like (Perini, 2012, 159). Objectivity plays a more dominant factor when we choose to minimize the mind-dependent parts of the process, e.g., by using an algorithm to produce a visual image from the light recording. We do this every day when we use the basic camera settings on our smartphone; we take a snapshot, and an algorithm produces a digital image that we can instantly share with others. Nowadays, however, most of these algorithms already instantaneously edit the light image by using HDR software. Moreover, they are edited by hand—e.g., with a soft portrait filter—before they are shared, giving a more mind-dependent representation of the scene. In other practices, e.g., astronomy, visual information is added to the recording in order to increase its epistemic merit. This approach can be explained by the epistemic virtue of trained judgement (Daston 2007, 314). Most sciences have concluded that absolute objectivity is neither obtainable nor necessary to generate knowledge. What is important is to decide the needed grade of objectivity and how we can procure this by using the media at our disposal.

Visual works of art can be made by using automated mechanisms to

deepen our understanding of everyday objects. Likewise, scientific images can be constructed by adding visual features to recorded information to generate knowledge. The question is when and how, not what.

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