

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

Transcriber's note: Numbers are from transcription program; no time code on audio files.

00:00:54:00 DOMINIC WILLSDON: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome back. [music] That's not me singing. [laughter] Welcome back. This is the second public [inaudible; volume quite low] the symposium Is Photography Over? Let me ask, first of all, put your hand up if you were not here last night.[inaudible] So let me say a little bit about where we're at here. So we had, as obviously, many of you know, we had our first session here last night. And we tried to air some of the issues and the ways in which one might break down this rather kind of blunt question, is photography over, into some of its component parts.

00:01:44:00 And we need to find out what aspects of this might have meaning or feel urgent to any of the representatives of the various communities[?] of photography that we have here [inaudible; volume increases]...

00:01:56:00 ... out here, very importantly. We had a session this morning, just with the participants and, you know, did some more work around some of these questions. And we'll say a little bit, to start with this afternoon, about the state of those discussions. But for the most part this afternoon, we want to really open it up to everybody here and make this session, you know, very much not just two-way, but all ways, like just a large plenary session. And we have two microphones for those of you in the house. One is right there, and one is down front here, for you to comment and ask question.

00:02:40:00 My name's Dominic Willson, by the way. I'm the curator of education and public programs here. And I'm chairing this again with my colleague Erin O'Toole, who's assistant curator for photography here and the curator of the exhibition The View From Here, which is up on the third floor. And I'm going to ask Erin to introduce our speakers, largely for the benefit of those of you who weren't here last night.

00:03:03:00 ERIN O'TOOLE: Thank you. Let's see. Where to start. I can barely see them. [laughs] Okay. We'll start at the far end. Over here to my left is Philip-Lorca diCorcia, also known as P.L., who is a photographer whose work has been collected and exhibited by museums

O'TOOLE (Cont.): around the world. Most recently, he had monographic exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He also holds the position of chief critic at the graduate school of art at Yale, from which he received his MFA in 1979.

00:03:37:00 Next to him is Peter Galassi. [inaudible voices] No, sorry. You're hiding back there, Blake. [inaudible voice] Okay. [laughter] Sorry.

00:03:44:00 Next to him is Blake Stimson, not to be confused with Peter Galassi, who teaches art history and critical theory at UC Davis. His book *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* was published by MIT in 2006. And in 2008, he co edited the anthology *The Meaning of Photography* for the Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press.

00:04:08:00 So next to him *is* Peter Galassi, who has been the chief curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York since 1991. He's organized numerous exhibitions, the most recent of which is Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century, which is now on view at MoMA and will travel here to SFMOMA in November of this year.

00:04:29:00 Next to him is Vince Aletti, who is on this page. He was the former art editor and photography critic for the *Village Voice*, and now reviews photography exhibitions for the *New Yorker*, and books for *Photograph* magazine. He also has experience in the curatorial realm. In 2009, he was co-curator of the International Center of Photography's Year in Fashion.

00:04:56:00 Next to him is George Baker, who is a professor of art history at UCLA and an editor of the journal *October*. He's written many books and essays, including a forthcoming book to be entitled *Lateness and Longing: On the Afterlife of Photography*.

00:05:12:00 Next to him is Doug Nickel, who is currently the Andrea V. Rosenthal Professor of Modern Art at Brown, where he teaches the history of photography. He was a curator here at

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

O'TOOLE (Cont.): SFMOMA for ten years, starting in 1993; and following that, was the director of the Center for Creative Photography, in Tucson.

00:05:32:00 Next to him is Corey Keller, an associate curator of photography here at SFMOMA. She's organized exhibitions on both nineteenth century and contemporary subjects for the museum, and is currently organizing retrospective surveys of the work of Francesca Woodman and J.B. Greene.

00:05:51:00 Next to me is Charlotte Cotton, who is creative director for the proposed London space of the United Kingdom's National Media Museum. Previously she was director[?] of photographs at the Victoria and Albert, head of programming at The Photographers Gallery, and head of the department of photographs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

00:06:10:00 Next to her is Walead Beshty, who is an artist and writer. His most recent solo exhibitions were at the Thomas Dane Gallery in London and at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. He's also an associate professor of art fine at the Art Center College of Design, in Los Angeles.

00:06:28:00 Next to him is Geoff Dyer, who's somewhere on here. [laughs] He writes both fiction and nonfiction. His fourth novel, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, was published in 2009; and his nonfiction book on photography entitled *The Ongoing Moment* won the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award for writing on photography, in 2006.

00:06:54:00 Next to him is Trevor Paglen, who's an artist and geographer. He's written four books, exhibits his work internationally, and is a researcher at the department of geography at UC Berkeley.

00:07:05:00 Next to him is Jennifer Blessing, who is a curator of photography at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 2009, she organized the exhibition Catherine Opie,

O'TOOLE (Cont.): American Photographer; and she was co-curator of the exhibition *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video and Performance*, which is now on view at the Guggenheim.

00:07:26:00 And last but not least is Joel Snyder, who is a professor and chair of the department of art history at the University of Chicago. He is co-editor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, and writes on photography, the history and theory of representation, and the history and theory of perspective and optics. Thank you.

00:07:51:00 WILLSDON: So a couple of words about the type of event we've tried to put together here. We wanted to do an event that had a process, that had a conversation, a move through different stages. And that began by us commissioning short texts, 500-word texts from each of these participants, they'll be[?] published online in the last couple of months. We also commissioned a couple of additional texts from Tom Mitchell at the University of Chicago and Okwui Enwezor, two individuals that were not able to attend, but we had invited originally. And then, based on all those— And Sandy Phillips, of course, senior curator here, yeah, also wrote a text that appeared on the blog *Open Space* with those other two, just at the beginning of this week.

00:08:46:00 And we've also invited three people to report on these sessions and make those posts—again, to the museum's blog *Open Space*. Sarah Miller, Brendan Fay and Joshua Chuang. So you can find those texts on that blog. So what we thought we do with this afternoon, to start with, is just us up here take thirty or forty minutes or so to tell you about where we've got to in the state of these discussions, and then really open it up for the rest of the afternoon, and see what it is that you want to talk about and pursue. One other thing to say is that one thing I've learned so far is we need to find more of those chairs so that these three of us don't have to be [laughter] elevated in this slightly strange manner. So let me begin with— We have about three or four topics that a lot of our discussions so far have circled around.

00:09:56:00 And one of those is, unsurprisingly perhaps, to do with the advent of digitization. And we have a number of different perspectives on the panel here about how the digital in

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

WILLSDON (Cont.): photography matters, and also how it doesn't matter. So let me just ask anybody to start on that one. [inaudible voices]

O'TOOLE: Who wants to start? [inaudible voices]

WILLSDON: Where's Peter Galassi?

MAN: He's back here.

WILLSDON: Okay. One way in which we sort of nuanced our question yesterday was to say not is photography dead, but if— Hm?

O'TOOLE: Over.

00:10:44:00 WILLSDON: Over. Over. Wow. [laughter] There's actually a story in that, which we'll get to, that people think we say dead. I just said it. But you know, that's a question. But not is not photography over, but in photography, if there's something over, what is it and how does it matter? And this morning, Peter Galassi said that chemical photography is dead. And yet—

MAN: And now you have to deal with that.

00:11:11:00 PETER GALASSI: The technology of photography's been changing since the invention of photography. The digital revolution is a major thing that's transforming every aspect of our life. And it is— Chemical photography is effectively dead. It'll be some kind of little niche activity that'll go on on the sides of things, but bas photography henceforth will be digital. And to an enormous degree, already is digital.

00:11:46:00 Photography is also— it's a way of capturing a picture, the image that's made by a camera. It's also a lot of other things, including methods of transmission of these images. And of course, the digital world is transforming those more radically than any other aspect, I think[?].

GALASSI (Cont.): But in terms of capturing— fixing the image that is made inside a camera, the advent of digital technology really didn't change photography very much. You can still capture the image that the camera makes. And in that sense, photography's very much alive. And digital technology is ensuring its future life.

00:12:38:00 O'TOOLE: So does anyone want to speak to sort of the other side of the coin, which is that there are ways where it has changed photography, this digital idea?

00:12:49:00 PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA: I think it's changed it. I mean, for most of my life, I've subscribed to the better living through chemistry approach. And now that, you know, that is challenged by too many darkrooms—I can barely see—I think that one of the great things about digital photography is that I don't know how to do it and I ask everybody else to do it. So it's doubled. I mean, the fact that digital technology does a lot of things that you used to have to do yourself. And you're not actually doing it, you're correcting what it does.

00:13:37:00 And the fact that when most of the graduate students that are entering the photography marketplace get out, that's just about the only skill they have to sell. So I think it has a place, economic and otherwise.

00:14:03:00 WILLSDON: P.L., could I just ask you a little bit more about that? Because this morning you said that— you talked about a quasi-crisis, and that that was something to do with the fact that the digital had opened up a world of endless possibilities, in which we were almost paralyzed, or we couldn't make a decision.

00:14:21:00 DICORCIA: Well, you know, that's the—whatever—the aphorism. You know, if one thing matters, everything matters. Or if one thing doesn't matter, nothing matters. Or is it both? It seems to me that the proliferation of imagery is beyond anybody's imagination. And does that level everything? Or does it create hierarchies within that are even more extreme than they used to be, within the system of selection, for like what is valid, what is good? And you know, I think that, in the art realm, is a serious thing because there is—

00:15:17:00 DICORCIA (Cont.): And I think this is another thing we talked about. There is a hierarchical system within the curatorial world, which selects out things. And with so much more to select from, is there in the old school chemical world, the expertise, the willingness to deal with it?

00:15:44:00 I mean, I don't want to just bore the panel by restating or rephrasing something I said earlier but you know, I think from an educational perspective is when this sort of question of the digital sort of points out a kind of problem within the way photography has been taught, in that the technical is often treated as a separate or autonomous realm. The idea of photography being about picture making. And what you end up having with the move to digital is, aside from that kind of touch-based sort of craft-based understanding and intelligence that develops from directly interfacing with the materials and the media itself, what develops is a kind of transparent or direct— an idea that digital is just a direct output. And that understanding what's at stake and what the resistance is and what the presence of that material really is, is inaccessible through the analogy to analog or photographic processes that are chemical-based.

00:16:53:00 And we got into this discussion about, you know, Photoshop being based on an analogy to chemical processes and curves and things like that; but in actuality, this is a kind of mask. And that at this point, there's not the same level of being able to interface with, well, what are the points of resistance, because they've shifted. You know, there aren't the same kind of parameters that sort of development with working with photographic prints and chemicals, darkroom exposure. They're not the same. And the problem that comes up is developing a logic for how to deal with the digital material. Which is quite difficult when photographic practice is often taught as picture making, which leaves out that part of the question, I think.

WILLSDON: Jenny, can I ask— there was something that kind of follows off on what you[?] said this morning about a sort of similarity between— we don't have to say crisis, but you know, the moment of the digital and the moment of the shift of color, that was to do with a perception of reality.

00:18:04:00 JENNIFER BLESSING: Yeah. I was just saying that I thought that there was a— it seemed like there's an anxiety expressed about the advent of digital and the question of truth to reality. And oftentimes people seem to worry that digital is somehow less truthful or more susceptible to manipulation than chemical photography was, which is not the case. In fact, throughout the history of photography, there has always been manipulation, whether it was in the darkroom or set up, staged photography. So I think that that is a false concern.

00:18:50:00 But what I was saying this morning was that it reminded me of the kind of anxiety about color versus black and white photography at roughly mid-twentieth century, where there was a sense that black and white photography was more truthful to reality than color photography was, because color photography was associated with advertising, with spectacle. And also the color itself was not— seemed not to represent reality. And now we've kind of gone in the other direction. I gave the example of my kids looking at *The Wizard of Oz*. They see Oz as being more realistic than Kansas is, because Kansas is in black and white and that looks fantastical to them. So that was just the— I think it's a misplaced anxiety of [inaudible].

00:19:52:00 WILLSDON: And that actually linked to sort of the second of the three kind of core topics that concerned us so far, which was to do with a shift in belief systems or a shift in perception. And actually, Doug, you were speaking about that.

00:20:10:00 NICKEL: Yeah. I mean, I think they're interrelated, in a way. It seems that one of the stakes of the question being considered here—and in a way, this follows from what Peter was saying— If our attention is focused exclusively on technology—does this new technology do something or not do something; does it change something fundamentally?—we're only paying attention to half of the equation of potential change. The way that photography works is that you have a system for making the image; you have the image; and then there's the way that we perceive the image, as the third part of the chain. And I think we need to give greater consideration to that second half of the equation.



00:20:58:00 NICKEL (Cont.): Just to give a couple of examples, to show how problematic this could be, philosophers call thought experiments— Say Corey goes into the collection and pulls out a very detailed black and white gelatin silver print and we hire a very skilled artist, let's say, a hypothetically extremely skilled artist, to make an exact rendering on glossy paper, of this photograph, so well executed that from a distance, it looks just like a photograph. We put these two objects under glass, in frames, hang them on the wall and invite anybody to walk in the doorway and look at these two objects and identify what they are.

00:21:39:00 Most people would say two photographs. That's how we tend to react. Because as observers, we take that handmade work to bring a photograph, we bring to that transaction a set of expectations about how it was made and what its relationship is to something in the real world. It's part of our cultural upbringing to regard a photograph as special in this way, having—it's what was called ontological relationship to its subject, that it's directly connected by way of chemicals, light waves or light waves on digital surfaces, light-registering surfaces, whatever it might be. But if you then get closer or you give away the game, you tell your observer that this thing actually is a painting and not a photograph, then you have a different set of expectations that you're now bringing to exactly the same work.

00:22:38:00 The work doesn't change; but the way we think about the work is going to change radically, knowing it has a different nature, a different way of coming into being. So I think that one of the difficulties that hangs over the larger question here is, in an attempt to try to define what photography is, to decide whether/that photography is over, we still haven't really come to a very rigorous definition of what a photograph is. It's not just cameras making pictures; it's also a set of expectations that we bring to looking at kinds of pictures that you could call photographic. And there's a very real possibility that that set of expectations is being radically mutated right now at this moment of history, because of an understanding of— or what we believe happens digitally, as something distinct from what happens analogically.

00:23:32:00 O'TOOLE: And Walead, you had a interesting observation about that, about sort of this idea of the photograph kind of disappearing because of us growing accustomed to seeing things from that perspective.

00:23:46:00 BESHTY: Oh. Well, it seems that one form of disappearance would be for a kind of lens-based image to become ubiquitous. Thus, the lack of the ability— where we would lose the ability to compare it or contrast it with another kind of image. I mean, that would be a form of disappearance, in the sense that it would become so naturalized and so ever present that there wouldn't be another form[?]. Yeah. So I mean, that's the other side of this question of the presence or being able to identify it as a specific discipline or practice or whatever it might be.

00:24:29:00 WILLSDON: So there are a number of questions there around, I guess, the social conditions for the reception of photography and how that might've changed, and in what way different forms of photography can find their place today. The third topic of the three that we wanted to just, you know, present to set things up this afternoon was to do with what's sometimes spoken about as the two camps in art photography—that's to say photographers and artists who use photography. And we had a discussion about what's the state of things with that distinction. And George, do you want to say a couple things about that?

00:25:16:00 BAKER: Can I first slow us down just a moment and polemicize maybe a little bit. And I'm actually just maybe wanting to ask a question, more than polemicizing. But I'm just wondering, to the panelists and ultimately to the audience, if people do find that we're rushing by this chemical history.

WILLSDON: I was thinking we would just set out these three things, and then people can ask about any of these three, or anything else, just in a few minutes.

00:25:45:00 BAKER: Okay. So I just wanted to ask that. I mean, I guess my question really is, is there more of a loss here than we seem to be stating on the panel at the moment? Will people miss things? Are there experiences that won't be possible anymore if chemistry

BAKER (Cont.): photography is a vestigial niche little craft can devote themselves to like a hobbyist, but has no purchase in the culture anymore? And this is a nostalgic question, maybe. And nostalgia is what it's about. But I am kind of wondering about what does pass away. Because I don't agree with Peter, I think, that photography is just about an image captured by the camera.

00:26:33:00 I mean, we can't define photography, I think, on this panel, but obviously, there are cameraless photographs; we all know about that. That's not what I'm talking about, exactly. It's just about this stress on the optical, that the analog image somehow holds us back from just embracing that kind of image as photography itself and only. I think about Jeff Wall's essay, the short little essay, "Photography and a Liquid Intelligence." That if we stress the optical, what we're forgetting is the liquids that we're involved— and flow. And I think about Roni Horn's work in the present. I think about certain photographers who really are trying to articulate some other aspect of what was once possible in the medium. So I just wanted to ask about what— and if other people besides myself—I guess I'm a pathological nostalgic—feel that there is something that is being lost here that one wants to describe and stress the specificity of; BAKER (Cont.): or if there's a continuity of change in photography and we're just witnessing the latest transformation and should deal with it.

00:27:36:00 SNYDER: Well, what do you think would be lost?

BAKER: Something about— Walead used the word resistance. The resistance of the medium and the ways in which it was practiced in the past. Resistance, materiality, physicality, but also connection. Yes, you could manipulate chemical photography; not as wildly, I think, as digital photography. You could do that. But there was that— I mean, you could stress other things, but always I come back to that physical connection to an object in the world that the image somehow carries on with it.

MAN: But the digital— I mean—

00:28:13:00 DICORCIA: How can you say that? I mean, physical— I mean, if the average art photograph in a museum now fell on you, you probably wouldn't survive. [laughter]

MAN: So true. So true.

DICORCIA: You know? Thirty years ago, you could take it home in your pocket and maybe get it out of the museum. I mean, I don't know what you mean by physical.

BAKER: Yes you do, P.L. [laughter] It's what you said last night about affect that I was referring to. It's about an attachment to an object in the world—often a loving one, a desiring one. It's not about how big or heavy the photograph has become, it's about its attachment to something.

00:28:54:00 DICORCIA: Well, that was another thing that we weren't going to bring up, but we discussed. You know, where people apprehend a photograph has changed and varies enormously. And that has increasingly been in huge, white spaces. And we didn't even go into books. So you know, it's changed quite a lot. Photography's absorption has, to some degree, been a very good thing for the practitioners. But you know, just like all absorption, you know, you get a little bit tainted by what you're absorbed by.

00:29:42:00 BESHTY: I just don't— I mean, I think that it's hard to identify what those resistances might be at this point—I think largely because it took quite a long time to figure out what on earth that was, with regard to light-sensitive material or light-sensitive silver, and how to use that and how to figure out what that meant; and that this wasn't going to— I mean, I brought up Oliver Wendell Holmes, in saying no one's going to travel anymore because we're just going to look at stereographic views of far-off places and then we'll actually have been there; it's just the same. You know, and I think as time goes on, the configuration and the sort of resistances implicit within digital media will become more and more readily available.

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

00:30:24:00 BESHTY (Cont.): But at this point, you know, there hasn't been that much time to play with it. And it's still a sort of— it still operates as a kind of simulation of an older technology. But I also think that photography is far more legible, simply because at these moments of technological shift, the anachronism of certain aspects of it make it pronounce itself. In the same sense that if the ubiquitous lens-based images say we can't tell the difference between one and another. In some sense, this process of something becoming outmoded also makes it more concrete, more understandable, and opens up a set of possibilities, as well.

00:31:03:00 I also wonder what possibly could be— I mean, I don't know, you know. Like, technologies come and go all the time, and certain kinds of— You know, the steam train left, but then people had really nice experiences on electrical-based trains. [laughs] You know? Or whatever it might be. I mean, there's still space for a romantic or a kind of romanticized or sort of an affecting relationship to objects and to things. And digital things have to become objects at some point. I mean, the computer screen is an object, is a material, materially concrete moment. You know, you need to have a thing to look at this on.

00:31:47:00 It's never going to just be beaming images into people's heads. I mean, no matter how much we might wish or pretend that that might be or make sci-fi drawings of it, it's not going to happen. And I think that there's always going to be a material base, and there's always going to be something to touch and manipulate and push around. It's just our ability to talk about it and our ability to— And for those resistances to be understood, I think, is the— that's what's sort of slow. We're sort of in between [inaudible].

00:32:13:00 GALASSI: Actually, Walead, Peter Norton, who probably knows a little bit more about digital technology than most of us, actually thinks it is going to happen. So I, for sure, don't know; but there are people who think it will.

COTTON: What's going to happen?

GALASSI: That you will have virtual images appearing inside your head because you've got something planted in there that is producing them.

COTTON: Then photography will be dead.

DICORCIA: And he will sell you the antivirus. [laughter]

00:32:44:00 GALASSI: He sold that business.

BESHTY: I don't feel threatened about that moment coming. [laughter]

SNYDER: And we already have— I mean, I think most of us, I confess, can't tell the difference, often, between a digital print on the wall and a gelatin silver print, as long as they're both really well done. I mean, there are really crappy digital prints, but there are beautiful and very finely crafted digital prints right now. But I can't tell the difference. And I don't think in the end, the result makes a lot of difference, as long as they're both artistically or well crafted.

00:33:31:00 BLESSING: I also— I think with the passage of time, you know, face-mounted or back-mounted photographs are going to have a nostalgic feel to them.

MAN: They already do.

BLESSING: They already do. And you know, these technologies— Like eight-tracks. I guess at one point, an eight-track was radical, and it quickly became an object of nostalgia. I think each of us has dedicated a significant part of our lives to something that is called photography, even if we don't really agree on what exactly photography is. And I *think* that we all still think that there's something to continue thinking about. I don't feel that there's a threat or that there's somehow any kind of— that I would have a less passionate engagement, I guess, because we've entered a digital world. And so I guess the question what does a photograph— or what does photography mean, is one that we each have to answer.

00:34:50:53 BLESSING (Cont.): I think maybe I would say something about it being a means to bear witness. Last night Peggy Phelan said to me, “Photographs are a constellation.” You know, they’re a constellation. You could’ve been there, you weren’t there, you can’t be with someone anymore. But that’s a power that they have. And I think even if it was a drawing that looked like a photograph, it still has the power. And that knowing that it’s a drawing and not literally a photograph doesn’t change the power, for me, because it’s about a certain kind of belief structure associated with photographic vision, even if it’s not literally photographic.

00:35:43:00 KELLER: I think I wanted to pick up on what Jenny said about possibilities, because I think— I mean, I feel a little guilty, in the sense that we’ve put this question out there and implied the possible death of photography, which of course, we never meant to do. And I think what’s so exciting, actually, about what is happening is the incredible range of possibilities. And what’s frustrating for me is the sort of limits of our old models of thinking. And so we’re at this moment where we have to sort of think about the models that we’ve been using to think about photography and what needs to change.

00:36:15:00 So perhaps in ways, some of those models are over; and how can we expand our thinking to accommodate what’s shifted in photography? And that’s really what I hoped we might get at a little bit today.

SNYDER: What models do you think are over?

DICORCIA: Xerox photography. [laughter]

00:36:38:00 KELLER: I think— I mean, one of the things that we’ve talked about is, like, the place of, let’s say, vernacular photography, for example, within the, quote/unquote “canon.” You know, I did a show about nineteenth century scientific photography here. And the thing I most had to defend to people was why is this in an art museum? Which to me, is a non-question. I mean, it just— But it still—

SNYDER: It still comes up.

00:37:01:00 KELLER: It still comes up. Or how do we deal with the— I mean, one of the things for me that's changed about digital photography is the way photographs circulate.

BESHTY: Well, why *was* it in an art museum? [laughter] That would be a question that I'd ask.

00:37:15:00 KELLER: Because— well, first of all, where else would it be?

BESHTY: Natural history museum?

COTTON: Science museum?

KELLER: Yeah, it could be. But I mean, why does it— Well, because first of all, the idea that these photographs, that the aesthetics of the photographs were an afterthought is not historically correct. Because certainly, when you make a picture, instead of a document or data that are numbers, you have to think about it like a picture. And therefore, it feeds into all kinds of other visual systems about how you look at other pictures. So the people who are looking at scientific pictures are also looking at all kinds of other pictures, and bringing their habits of viewing to those pictures, as well. So it's worth considering within those networks.

00:38:02:00 COTTON: So why do we have such difficulties applying that to contemporary art photography? I mean, if you're going to say they're all dead, the nineteenth century astronomers and scientists who made those fabulous photographs, so we have this license to think of them in the context of a modern art museum for their formal values or to say, Well, at that point in history, innovation— COTTON (Cont.): one of the places where true photographic innovation happened was within science, why do we have such difficulty embracing the fact that digital isn't really inherently about contemporary art photography? It's about a massive and profound social change. And that it's not just about how artists respond to that; that's how we as viewers or us as curators respond to that, as well.



SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

KELLER: I don't have any problem with that.

00:38:56:00 WILLSDON: So we're policing the boundaries of art more strictly in the present than we are in the past.

00:39:04:00 COTTON: Well, you know, I mean, I've just recently sort of liberated myself from that being my worry. And it does seem like a—

WILLSDON: Because you're in a science museum.

COTTON: Yeah, exactly. I'm really enjoying that lack of anxiety about what it is and what it isn't, and definitely, whether it's art or not. It's an investigation. It's a photographic investigation within that context.

WILLSDON: So I'm going to open it up to questions now. But just, there was one fourth topic, which we said we wouldn't put out there. [laughter] But I'm going to say it just briefly, just in case you want to ask us about it, which is about institutions. I mean, many people up here felt that this would be too much talking shop—too much like a plumber's convention, Blake Stimson said. But there are some questions of power and of the location of different forms of genres of photography in the world today, how they get— Including in the education system, how photography gets taught, how it doesn't get taught.

00:40:06:00 WILLSDON (Cont.): And then where photographers and photographs and find themselves in art museums. But if you want to ask about that, that's great, but we didn't want to make you talk about that. So I'm just going to ask— Pardon? [inaudible voice] Yeah.

BESHTY: He said because we fear you. [laughter]

WILLSDON: Yeah. So let me just invite questions and— Pardon? [inaudible voice] Yes. And there are two microphones that we'd like you to go to. One is there and one is there.

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

00:40:35:00 O'TOOLE: We're simulcasting to another room, and the folks in the other room can't hear unless you go to the microphones. So I'm sorry about that.

WILLSDON: It's also tricky in this room, I think, as we found last night, amplification. So if you want to just make your way to those microphones and, you know, line up, if you like, that's great.

MAN: Okay, and I'll pass the microphones to people.

O'TOOLE: Go ahead.

00:40:59:00 QUESTION: This question of— I wrote it down to try and make it fast, but then I kept adding things to it and now it's illegible. [laughter] So.

MAN: Welcome to the club.

QUESTION: I'll try this. Pardon me? If the wonder of photography was its instant credibility in the past, and not so much now, what is it about the past that demanded we believe? And what is it about the present that demands we have a canvas to project our disbelief and our creative manipulation. And is the miraculous that Doug Nickel spoke about yesterday, reframed in the pre— Who knows. Oh, refer to in the present still— does that still exist, but in a different incarnation?

00:41:53:00 One second. Blah, blah, blah. That was the most interesting part of the question, [laughter] but I've decided to let you figure it out. I promise, there's just— I guess my question is, is what we're missing— is the root reason we're asking is it over now because we're surprised that the miracle still exists?

O'TOOLE: Does anyone want to respond to that? [laughter] Anyone want to try?

00:42:24:00 DICORCIA: I don't know, I've seen things on the internet that look pretty miraculous.

QUESTION: Yeah, I'm not saying that the miracle is over. I'm saying it does still exist, and are we asking because we're surprised that digital photography can deliver that miracle? And is the miracle about something else? And is photography essentially about a miracle, because it is this practice that comes in the instant? Despite all the manipulation, despite all the setup, the viewer's perspective is that here it is. And we still have that. And perhaps that's what's essential to photography. And who knows what will happen as it evolves into something fifty years from now that is no longer called digital?

00:43:12:00 NICKEL: I would suggest again that this isn't a technical issue or an aesthetic issue at all, but a larger cultural and social issue. The first part of your question, I think, is best answered by pointing out that it isn't the advent of Photoshop NICKEL (Cont.): that changes the credibility of news photography, for instance, but rather an erosion of faith in the media that's happened in the past couple of decades, where— I mean, you could question why we *ever* believed that those institutions were using photography in an honest way. But we don't believe it quite as much as we used to. But because we don't believe journalism in general as much as we used to. That's not a specifically photographic or technical issue.

00:44:00:00 BESHTY: It also seems like there's always the naïve character that's invoked to say, Well, people believe the media. I mean, not me, but there are people out there [laughter] who believe this stuff or take photography as being truth. Or before, right? When it was an unproblematic relationship to the real. It's always somewhere else, someone else, someplace else, but never the people in the room.

00:44:26:00 GALASSI: Yeah, but forget about the truth or believing the media or anything. The digital technology has actually made the pictures in the *New York Times*, for example, much more interesting than they were fifteen years ago. I mean, there's *regularly* absolutely fabulous, magical pictures. I'm not talking about are they true or not, what political point of view they

GALASSI (Cont.): represent; I'm just talking about amazing things to look at. You know, two or three times a week, in the *New York Times*. And of course, the reason is that the picture editors have instant access to a vastly greater resource of pictures that's just streaming by them all the time. And they can, rather than— the *New York Times* has one guy in all of Asia or something like that. So the technology making the pictures available delivers to us kind of amazing pictures, much more amazing than they were twenty years ago.

00:45:27:00 ALETTI: Well, I guess I understood the question to be a little more general; not so much about news pictures or the media, but about what photography can do. And for me, that doesn't have anything to do with the technology, but with the vision behind the camera. The person who's looking, the person who's taking the picture. That's not going to change. I mean, it doesn't matter whether he's using a digital camera or any other old technology or something in the future. If he has—or he or she—has a vision, that's what you're going to get. I mean, it's the eye behind the camera. And that remains miraculous if the passion or the excitement is there.

00:46:08:00 STIMSON: Just to add to Doug's point about this being a larger social and cultural issue, which I took the question to be addressing— Certainly, it seems fair to associate photography with the nineteenth century, to associate it with the idea of democratic institutions, with the public sphere, with the exercise of reason—all these great, noble, modern ideas. And in a way, it was the single best cultural expression, perhaps, of those ideals. As a counterpoint to that, we might take as one expression of our contemporary lower level of belief in journalism and in photography and so on, the great statement by the Bush administration spokesperson who told a *New York Times* reporter that we in the Bush administration no longer believe in or work with the quote/unquote “reality-based” community. Right? [laughter; inaudible voice] And of course, photography is really a vehicle or is an expression of that ideal of the reality-based community. And to some degree, we can think of it as being archaic.

00:47:20:00 GALASSI: No, but it's also the creation of the photo op. I mean, which is the non-reality-based community.

DICORCIA: I mean, I got the impression that people were initially amazed by this kind of magic trick that photography was. Which was unreal—it was black and white, by the way. Which— Well, I don't want to get into that. And now it seems that it's flipped, and when it's *real* people are amazed. That's where the *New York Times* comes in. I mean, the impact of those images is most often, whether it's a potent reminder of the rest of the world or not, a reminder of things that all the other images in our lives make us inured to.

00:48:17:00 And I think it is strange, because the trick of photography—and it is a trick and it always a trick; and you can call it a chemical trick or a digital trick or whatever—has ceased to fascinate. So it's become a means of conveying information, emotion, the personality of the maker, a lot of different things. But it seems to me that apropos to what we've been talking about, the thing that seems to be most surprising now is when it does exactly what people thought it did a long time ago, and that is to show you something you didn't know. And that's rare. But I think that is kind of enhanced by the digital world. It's enhanced and cobbled by the digital world.

O'TOOLE: Geoff, did you have something you wanted to say?

00:49:14:00 DYER: Yeah. It strikes me that there's some special appeal in these sort of lost processes or— I mean, now that everything can be done with such facility, with all this technology, the less sophisticated technology's gained something. So of course, the most extreme example of this is this guy who's got a show coming up soon in New York at the ICP, Miroslav Tichy, who I'm sure you know all about, who in the 1970s, I guess, he kind of built his own cameras. And he even built a kind of telephoto lens out of a kind of old baked bean tin. And he referred to himself as a stone age photographer.

00:49:59:00 And of course, because he built his own cameras with all this sort of stuff, I mean, the light is never right, the framing's not right, and a lot of them are not in focus. But once he'd built this kind of crappy old camera of his, he just spent all his time just perusing around the local pool, photographing women in bikinis. [laughter] And the thing is that these photographs have an

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

DYER (Cont.): incredible kind of power and specialness, partly because you feel his kind of loneliness very much. But they have a power that— I mean, these photographs, digitally, they would just be nothing. So it's actually all the defects of them which give them their kind of poignancy and beauty.

00:50:46:00 And really, you do have there— you know, there's something absolutely miraculous about this most mechanical of approaches to photography. And I'm pretty sure that there's a show coming up at the ICP soon.

ALETTI: It's there right now.

DYER: Oh, is it?

ALETTI: Yeah, it's on there now.

O'TOOLE: I think we should take another question. Gary[sp?]?

00:51:07:00 QUESTION: Hi. Hi, guys[?]. [inaudible voice]

O'TOOLE: Oh, sorry. Okay, sorry, I didn't see you.

WOMAN: You can go with him next, but I—

O'TOOLE: Okay. Okay. Gary?

00:51:12:00 QUESTION: It seems to me this panel's really taken to heart the museum's theme for its seventy-fifth anniversary, which is 75 Years [of] Looking Forward. Everyone has been very forward-looking. I was really intrigued by two comments from Joel Snyder last night that seemed to fall flat and didn't get a response, so I maybe would like to reframe them because they were very provoking for me. And I'll say from the perspective— I'm someone in my late

QUESTION (Cont.): forties who came to photography— grew up in New York, came to photography through *The* history, with a capital T, as told by MoMA in New York. And that period reached its pinnacle probably in the late eighties, when they had all the shows of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of photography, where we got to see a cannon or *the* canon, and a story was told. And then what seems to me has happened the last twenty-five years, we've spent our energy destroying that canon, deconstructing that canon.

00:52:06:00 So Joel said last night when he goes and lectures to young artists or photographers, sometimes they know nothing about the history of photography. That doesn't surprise me because anyone under thirty-five has probably never seen a critical survey of photography on the walls of an institution. The second part—

GALASSI: How often are you in New York? [laughter]

QUESTION: There's not been—

GALASSI: You should come look and see what's on our walls, because what you just said is completely false.

00:52:32:00 QUESTION: No, you specifically say in your shows that you don't use that approach; you use a thematic approach to do various topics. That's what you do in your current installations. Now, the second part has to do with his comments on—

GALASSI: No! It's not true! You can interpret anything you want, but it's not true.

QUESTION: The second part has to do with *Cruel and Tender*, which he raised the comment. It seems to me that was fifteen years after those other shows; came back and said, We've got to find some way to tether contemporary practice to what was going on in the past. And what was interesting to me was you gave the perspective it started with August Sander. It didn't; it started with Thomas Ruff. And they had a pathway that was pretty much prescribed how they wanted

QUESTION (Cont.): you to go. If you wanted to get from Sander to Evans, you couldn't follow the path they said; you had to go first through the Bechers and then to Evans.

00:53:26:00 And it was because it was too threatening, I felt, in that show, to say that this stuff from the past— It was accepted, the contemporary practice, but not the past. So what I'm wondering is, is there a possibility now, twenty-five years since we've had these big in-depth survey shows trying to establish a canon, could one be done again to try to say what's happened the last twenty-five years, and maybe introduce a new generation to some, What is the history of photography, a la what MoMA does with the paintings department, have a more messy history of Modernism?

00:54:01:00 DICORCIA: Those shows are over. [laughter; inaudible voice]

GALASSI: I don't know what to say. I mean, the— Since 1964, which is when photography had its own galleries, the principal function of those galleries has been to tell *a* history of photography, not *the* history of photography, from the collection. That expanded when we expanded in 1984; and it expanded again considerably when we expanded in 2004. And basically, together with this great institution and its great photography collection and traditions, we're one of only a handful—I mean, like *three*—institutions in the world that take on this responsibility of laying out a history of photography in our galleries on a more or less permanent basis. The pictures change; the function doesn't. And so that's why I'm— I mean, you can say you don't like it, they're the wrong pictures, all the rest of that; but the function is there.

O'TOOLE: Okay, down here.

00:55:24:00 AUDIENCE: Yeah. Does this one work? Can people hear me?

O'TOOLE: Yeah.



AUDIENCE: Okay. So what I wanted to do was make a few observations about what I perceive as your questions, the anxieties that your questions stem from; and then maybe that will stimulate some further questions from you, or comments.

00:55:41:00 It seems to me that the source of a lot of your three major topics here, plus a few that surfaced last night about the proliferation of images and whether it would still be possible for photography to exist under those circumstances—all of these concerns stem from something that has afflicted photography from its beginning, which is the fear that the man or woman behind the machine was merely a handmaiden or a servant or, you know, utterly subservient to that machine, and that the machine was doing the work. And something Vince said about it's the eye behind the machine; and various other people on this panel have picked up the theme that really, it's the person behind the machine that is making photography either an art or, let's say, a piece of science that will still be of interest in a hundred years.

00:56:27:00 I mean, this distinction between art and non-art is meaningless. We look at ancient pots that were made for other purposes and we look at them as art. So let's forget about that distinction, because in a hundred years it's going to disappear, and only the photographs that are worth looking at for the reasons we now look at photographs are going to be around, anyway. But also the anxiety that all of this is out there all the time and is going to somehow cheapen the process. If you just think about the analogy with words and what writers do and what editors do, words are out there all the time. Everyone's speaking in prose all the time, as Molière said. And that doesn't prevent the individual writer from selecting from that pre-existing pool, the things that he or she wants to say.

00:57:07:00 Editors, even more so. And they are even more comparable to photographers, because they're dealing with a given. They don't necessarily—or shouldn't—change too much what they're dealing with; they just arrange, they put in context, they select, they frame, crop, blah, blah, blah. You can see the analogies. So I think that it's quite possible for photographers dealing with this proliferation and this everyone has it, what am I doing, to rely on the fact that it is the individual behind the machine that's doing the work that makes the stuff valuable.

SFMOMA  
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript  
Day Two, Part One, Friday, April 23, 2010

00:57:39:00 AUDIENCE (Cont.): Now, as far as the issue of loss, of course there are going to be losses. There are losses in the world of words, too. We don't have too many people writing plays in iambic pentameter anymore. But that's not too much of a loss. The loss is that we don't have Shakespeare. See? It's not the iambic pentameter that's the real loss. [applause]

O'TOOLE: Does anyone want to respond to that, or should I take another question? Okay.

MAN: Here, here.

O'TOOLE: Corey.

00:58:08:00 KELLER: You know, I was just thinking that maybe one analogy— We tried to think a little bit before, what would be other comparable things? And one thing, if you want to take an analogy, that we've lost is the art of letter writing. I mean, in putting together our anniversary show, we went through the museum's archives, and were amazed to find all of our director's letters about how she felt about works of art that she bought for the museum, and explaining to people why art was so important. And we included that in the show. And we realized how much of our own correspondence had been either, you know, two-word increments or had been just completely discarded. And I think that actually, in a way— I was talking to someone this morning about photographs. I think the snapshot and the digital, what's happened to digital photographs, the way we look at them, the way we consume them, the way we throw them out—

00:59:03:00 I mean, my husband's iPhone crashed yesterday and we just lost all his pictures. And it was just— like, we had this moment, it was just terrible. And then he said, "I can take some more." [laughter] You know? But you had the snapshot as a photography thing. I think that goes back a little bit to the miraculousness we were talking about before, and how you can still find them, and what that moment of discovery that [inaudible] this amazing moment when you find that picture. And that's been lost, I think, to a certain extent. And it did remind me a little bit of what's happened to the way we speak to one another, which I also think has been lost.