



3/27/12

## PHOTOGRAPH, MATERIAL, AND METAPHOR

Jerry Spagnoli

A photograph is a reflection of the state of mind of the photographer and, in turn, the viewer. Photography is the perfect metaphor for our dynamic relationship to the world. We think we see what is there but what we see is really only what we're ready for.

The first daguerreotype I ever saw was in a photographica flea market in the banquet room of a rundown hotel in midtown Manhattan. It was a cloudy, damp fall day and the prospect of rummaging around tables full of used camera equipment and old photographs struck me as an interesting way to spend the afternoon. I made my way through the room, scanning tables loaded with every kind of obsolete camera accessory you could imagine and I came to a cardboard box full of little leather cases. I started going through these unassuming artifacts, worn out, with broken hinges and peeling covers. Inside I found alternately dark or faded brown images or dour couples, men in hats and ladies in dresses with not a smile among them. I picked up one case (Fig. 1) that, in retrospect I realize, changed my life. It contained an image which was startlingly different. It appeared to be a mirror and after a little adjustment revealed the image of two little girls, one about nine or ten looking fiercely at the camera. She had her arm protectively around the shoulder of a younger girl in a state of fear, trembling so much that she was reduced to a blur by the long exposure. But it wasn't the subject, which startled me. It was the perfection of the photographic representation. There was a transparency and three dimensional quality which made me feel a window to a moment which occurred 150 years ago opened



Figure. 1: Daguerreotype, circa 1850

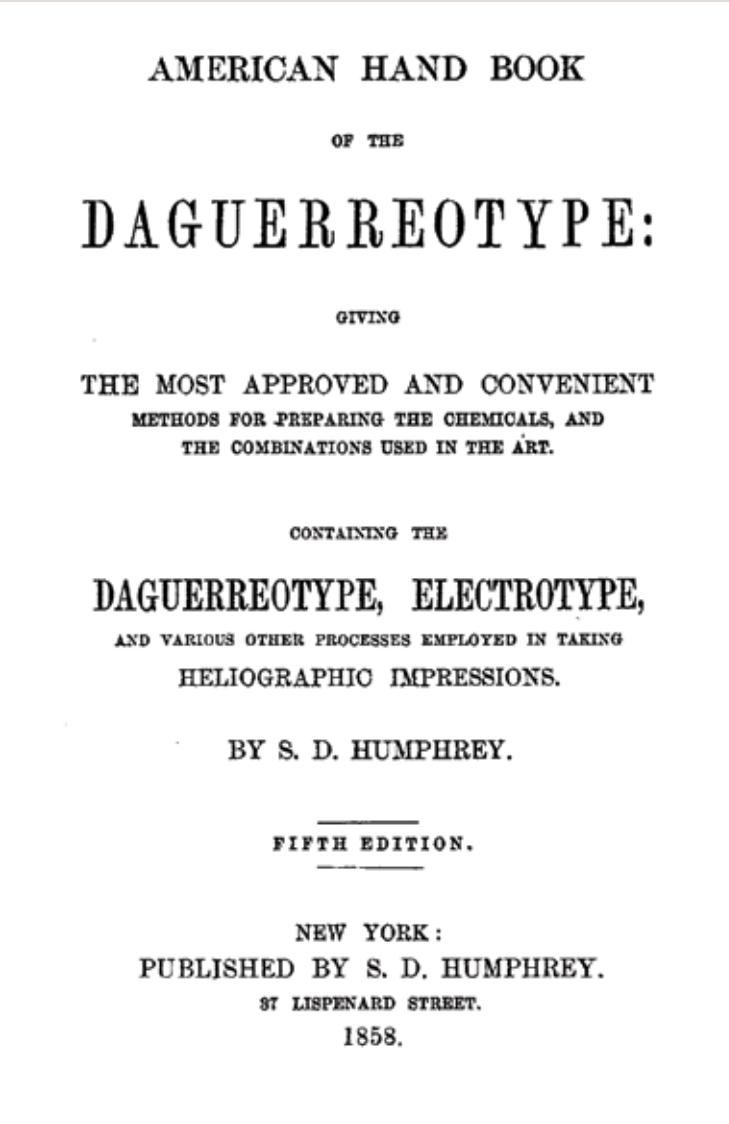


Figure 2: *The American Handbook of the Daguerreotype* title page, 1858.

in the palm of my hand. It was so different from any other photograph that I had ever seen that I was momentarily stunned. It seemed more like a prodigy of nature than something man made. After a couple of seconds it occurred to me that someone had made this image, and it had been made with what must have been primitive technology, back in the 19th century. "I've got to find out how to make these," I thought to myself. I paid \$35.00 for it (a fortune for me at that time), found out it was a "daguerreotype" and took it home.

Later that week I went to a bookstore that carried old photography books and looked at a reprint of a manual called *The American Handbook of the Daguerreotype*.<sup>1</sup> (Figure 2) Written in 1858 It was like reading something in Olde English not quite Chaucer, WW but close. The chemical names were ancient and unknown to me (except for mercury which put me off considerably) and the descriptions of the apparatus and procedures were so obscure that I could not get any concrete sense of the process. I left disappointed. This was going to be harder than I'd hoped, but I remained determined.

Time passed, maybe a year or so, and I went to see a show of 19th century images at the Metropolitan Museum. It was a perfectly nice show. I hadn't really developed an understanding of what it was that I was looking at so I was just taking it all in and then I got to the last image. It was a daguerreotype, of an odalisque, reclining on a couch and when I looked at the date, I was startled to see it was from the 1970's. So now I knew that it was possible to make these things. I did some more research and decided that it was too dangerous and expensive to get involved with given my situation at the time, but I had renewed hope. From that moment on I made a habit of visiting photo flea markets. and I would always talk to the daguerreotype dealers and mention that I was interested in making daguerreotypes. Eventually at an event in San Jose, CA, I was told that there was a recently published article which explained a simpler and safer version of the process called the Becquerel process. I got hold of the article and began working. About a year later, I saw a demonstration of the full process in Rochester, NY and it seemed manageable, so I set up a lab in my San Francisco studio. The rest of the story comprised years of frustrations and occasional successes as I gradually worked out the essential techniques necessary to produce fairly reliable results.

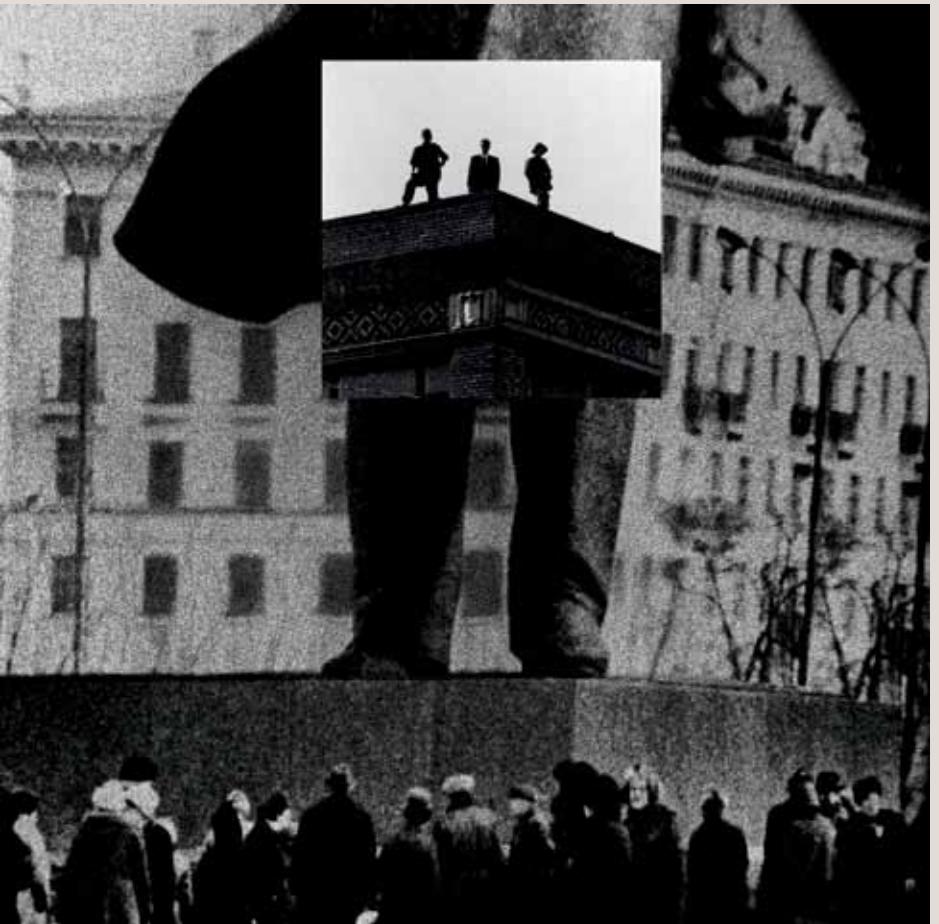
What was important to me about the daguerreotype was that it highlighted the material aspect of the medium without diminishing the importance of the subject. It was the integration of these two elements of the image which had become the primary focus of my work. It might be useful at this point to briefly discuss a project I was working on before my foray into daguerreotypy.

### AMERICAN DREAMING

I started this project towards the end of 1990. It was provoked by the build up to Gulf War One. I'd been working out some of my ideas about documentary photography for a while that all coincided with this substantial shift in US foreign policy. Not being a professional photojournalist, I didn't have access to places and personalities at the center of events so I simply lived the day to day life of a civilian and photographed the things I saw around me. The process was largely intuitive,. I'd go to events or to particular parts of the city where I'd be likely to find something that would make an interesting photograph, but beyond that the process was one of reflex and discovery..

What fascinates me about photography is its ability to provide the photographer the means to extract and organize a meaning out of the chaos of the world around us. This ability is particularly striking for street photographers. It's an intense environment. Your mind and body are bombarded by , much more stimulation than you could possibly absorb and process. The brain automatically decides what to pay attention to and what to ignore. This is a biological adaptation from the earliest days of our species and is essential to our survival. Without this ability we'd be distracted to death. It's a system for tailoring the world to the limits of your comprehension. Its primary function, in this case, is to assist you in navigating physically down the street, but what is also going on is more complicated.

Because of the way our minds work, situations and things have meanings for us and we tend to notice what we are predisposed to see. Some days you'll notice people with bandages on some part of their body, other days you'll keep noticing people carrying guitars. There's no more than the usual number of such things on any given day but somewhere in your mind you are thinking about it and so you notice. When you photograph on the street this mechanism becomes the basis for building a collection of images. You go out without any specific intentions, you photograph whatever crosses your path, you exercise no control over the subject except where you choose to stand and when to trip the shutter, and after months of shooting you end up with a coherent body of work. In fact the camera provides a way of externalizing one's thoughts. Your brain's highly selective attention provokes your impulse to press the shutter. I had been using this approach for a number of years and had become fairly good at it, but in the end the images lacked the emphatic communication with the viewer that I was after. The images were too diffuse and there were too many irrelevant distractions in the frame. In other words they looked too much like the world. I felt that I needed to break them free from that constraint so I decided to work on a series of images from which I would present only small portions of the scenes I photographed. I had gotten this idea from some books I had been looking at which featured details from important paintings. The



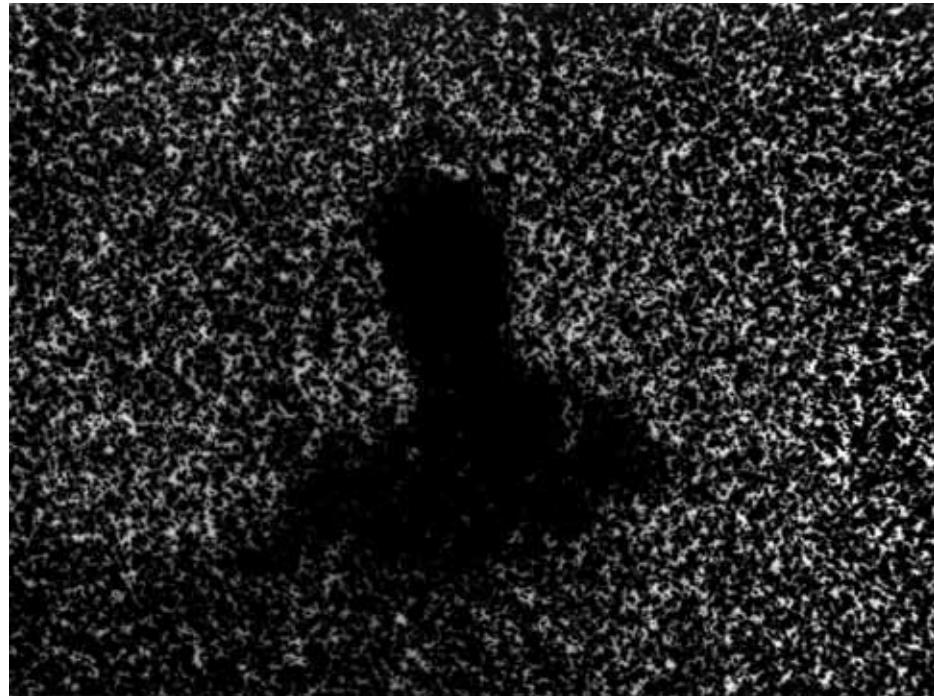
*untitled*, from the series *American Dreaming*, 1991 - 95 / 2013.

authors would focus in on a small section – a gesture, something hanging on the wall, or in the distant landscape – and explain what it meant. This way of reading images was very compelling to me. It suggested that a rhetorical system could be developed to create a form of open-ended story telling. When I began working on the street, I focused on the specific, small details that I felt had the most potential for meaning when separated from their context. I hoped that this would allow them to operate freely in the mind of the viewer as a provocation to their own internal storyteller. These images could then be arranged and sequenced in such a way that a new context could be created by their interrelationship. This would allow me a certain amount of narrative control while still allowing the audience the experience of deciphering the meaning.

These photographs are all, technically, documentary photographs. I didn't pose or arrange anything. I went out, I looked around and I photographed what I thought were interesting subjects without any intervention. When it came time to make prints I selected all the images that I thought worked well as compositions. It was all very straight forward and fairly neutral, but in the end the results were very idiosyncratic. Originally, I considered displaying the images in random sequences, or allowing the viewers to rearrange them on a gallery wall, but I decided that they needed to be presented in a book. I had faith that no matter how vigorously I sequenced them, there was still plenty of space available for the audience to work out their own ideas.

The subversion of the objective report of the photograph is an important aspect of my work. This series was basically a project of fragmentation and reconstitution. The formal aspects of the images re-enforce this. I shot it all on 35mm film with an ASA of 3200 and then I used only a 1/8 - 1/4 inch portion of the negative for the final image. The resulting graininess emphasizes the surface of the film and breaks down the transparency of the representation. The image is not a direct seamless report of the subject; it is overtly mediated.

This grainy look is also intended to suggest a state in which the world of appearances is reduced to an articulated surface, animated from behind by a field of energy. It's as if what we see is really just a scrim onto which natural forces are projected from behind and that scrim keeps you from getting too close to the origins of those forces. The world (as depicted at the film plane) is (metaphorically) the interface between your mind and the energies beneath that grainy surface.

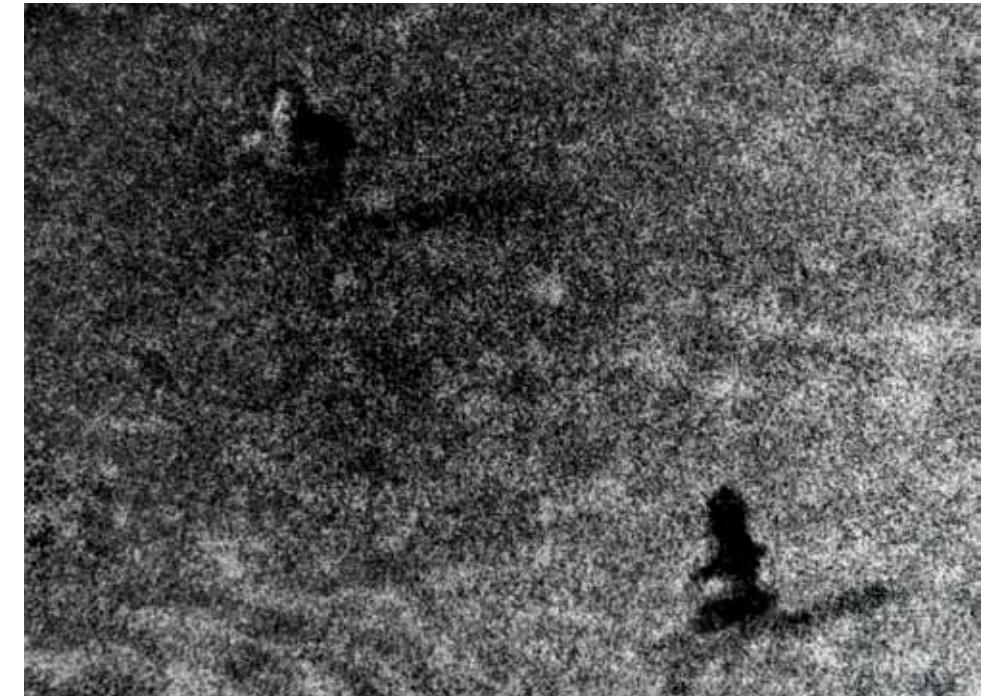


*untitled*, from the series, *Situations Seen From a Considerable Distance*, 1998.

#### PHOTOMICROGRAPHS

#### (SITUATIONS SEEN FROM A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE)

In the American Dreaming series, I made enlargements of small details from the negatives I shot. In order to do so, I had to turn my whole studio into a darkroom and mount the enlarger at a height of twelve feet to make the 20 inch prints. There was one image, however, that alerted me to the fact that I would need to move to the next level of enlargement. The image was of the facade of the Federal Building in San Francisco and on top of it can be seen a row of policemen who were observing an anti-war rally taking place in the streets below. In the print I made, the building occupied most of the picture and even in that extremely enlarged print the police were still quite small, but when I looked closely at the figures I could make out their individual postures quite distinctly. Despite the fact that they were made of perhaps 100 grains of silver there was enough information to make a pretty good guess at what their general attitude was about the event they were observing. I found this incredible; such a small amount of



*untitled*, from the series, *Situations Seen From a Considerable Distance*, 1998.

very rough information could communicate so effectively, so I decided to begin shooting with an extreme degree of magnification in mind for the finished image.

The prints I had been making had pushed the limits of even the best enlarger lenses available so I purchased a microscope with a camera mount. The technique I developed was to shoot with a 35mm camera equipped with a normal lens and shoot subjects that were at least a block or two away. For the first series that I worked on, I went to Candlestick Park in San Francisco a number of times during the baseball season and shot the spectators across the field from my seat. Every time the ball was hit I would fire away, getting thousands of people in the frame each time. I would then put the processed negatives through my microscope and look for the most well defined faces I could find. I would then make a photograph of this enlarged piece of film onto another sheet of film. I could then make a print from this enlarged negative. I was searching for the threshold of intelligibility. Where was the line where the connection between information and knowledge breaks down? I felt that the rhetoric of this investigation was well set by my apparatus. I was

using a Leica camera, a renowned tool of photojournalists and documentary photographers. I used the finest lenses available to ensure no distorting effects and I then put the image through the best microscope lenses available. The entire system ensured no distortion, simply the direct transmission of the raw data. There was, however, one less-than-perfect component in the system, the film. The film was the recorder of the event, the perceiving mind of the system, if you will permit the metaphor. It was at the film plane that knowledge could be tested.

The portraits that resulted from this series were very interesting. If you were unaware of the subject matter you could easily miss the fact that you were looking at a human face, but once you were attuned, your natural talent for pattern recognition would kick in and you could make out the features and expression of each. Oddly, many viewers commented that they found the portraits disturbing. One collector who purchased a print had to bring it back because it was giving his wife nightmares. This particular image was of a face that was excited and smiling because a home-run had just been hit.

During the period that I was working with this method, I had the good fortune to be invited to travel to Hawaii. While there I came across a cliff face overlooking a cove. In the center of the cove was a large rock and the rock was covered with people, many of whom were having a grand old time throwing themselves off the rock and into the surf and then climbing back out of the water and up onto the rock again. I spent the two days I had available sitting on that cliff overlooking the cove shooting the action.

I was too far away and there was too much going on to really see everything, so my approach was to keep the camera pointed at the rock and every time I saw someone jump I'd hit the shutter. It became a reflex. By doing this, I could get the jumper, if I was lucky, and everything else that was going on in the larger scene. After I returned from Hawaii, I processed the film and put the negatives under the microscope to see what I had. Now, this particular feature of the project strikes me as the most interesting aspect. The on-site photography is a sort of reflexive data gathering. The actual photography, the discovery and extraction of interesting scenes, takes place during the inspection process under the microscope. There is a displacement from the actual events recorded and by implication a level of abstraction ensues. What is most striking about this series is how strongly the images suggest an other-worldly location, an ahistorical moment where people strike the poses that are found in art works spanning centuries. Of course this is as much caused by my selections from the available potential subjects contained in the original negatives, but the displacement of the subjects caused by the technology they've passed through have produced images which are

mysterious yet familiar. An element of the uncanny emerges from these scenes, shot on a bright sunny day, simply by being processed through a set of rigorously analytical tools

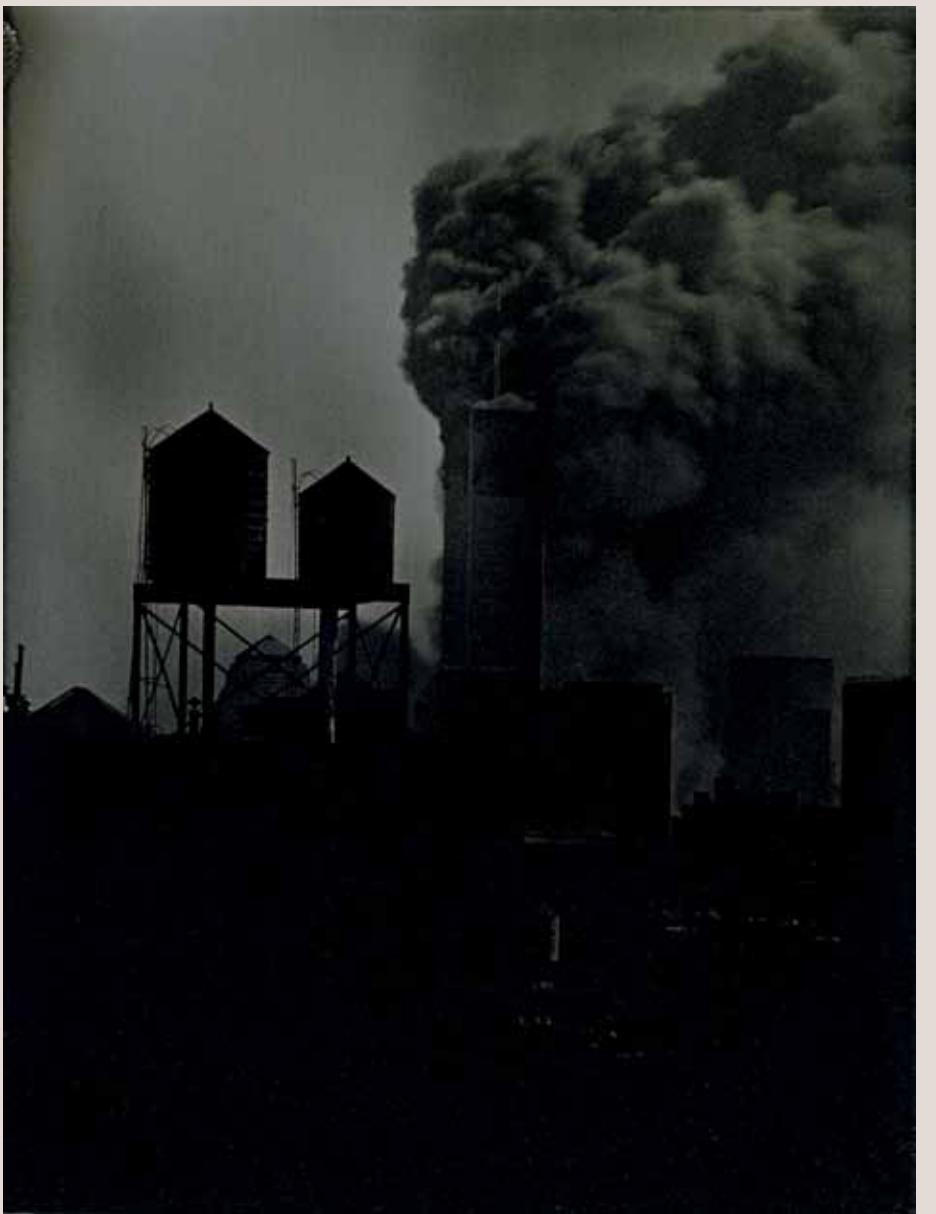
#### THE LAST GREAT DAGUERREIAN SURVEY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I began working with daguerreotypes as the American Dreaming project was winding down. I was still interested in using the methods of documentary photography to subvert the medium's hold on the claim of objectivity, and by extension cast doubt on the dangerous presumption of objectivity we maintain in our dealings with the world in general. It seemed that the daguerreotype could be a perfect collaborator in that effort.

The image on a daguerreotype plate presents its subject with an uncanny illusion of volume and space. Photographs on paper always depict the world in translation. In a photographic print the three dimensions of the subject are converted to a two-dimensional graphic representation, which is actually the source of much of modern photography's beauty.



*untitled*, from the series, *The Last Great Daguerreian Survey of the 20th Century*, 1999.



*untitled*, from the series, *The Last Great Daguerreian Survey of the Twentieth Century*, 2001.

The daguerreotype is completely different. The subject in a daguerreotype is rendered in a seamless three-dimensional space. The 19th century description of it as a “mirror with a memory” still rings true. The reason for this uncanny representation of space is found in the plate’s unique optical properties. When you look at a daguerreotype you are actually looking at two images. One is the image created by the camera and rendered as a deposit of silver crystals on the surface of the plate. The other is the virtual image reflected in the polished plate itself. This second image is not really consciously perceived, but it provides important cues that are read subliminally.

When you look at a daguerreotype, it’s necessary to position yourself and the plate in such a way that allows light to strike the surface of the plate while a dark surface is reflected in the polished silver surface. This reflection provides the dark tones underlying the image while light scattered by the image particles provides all of the actual image information. As mentioned previously, the image particles are deposited on the surface of the plate while the virtual image (the reflection in the mirror surface) appears to be behind the surface of the plate. This phenomenon is common to all mirrors. When you look at something in a mirror, the object doesn’t appear to be on the surface of the mirror, instead it appears as far behind the surface as the reflected object itself is in front. This is the reason that a mirror in a room makes it look bigger. It doubles the space. In a daguerreotype, the mirror substrate has this same property. When you reflect a dark surface in the plate in order to view the image your mind is registering this spacial information even though your conscious mind is concentrating on the subject. This is the technical reason for the uncanny realism of the daguerreotype image, sometimes referred to as its immediacy, or its holographic look.

To be able to tap into this illusory medium and represent the things of the world with the precision of a camera lens was tantalizing to me. It also provided a wonderful system of visual rhetoric to explore the issue of “what do we really know about the world?” I could now present the resulting images in an optical medium that could push the illusion of reality even further.

Along with these formal qualities viewing a daguerreotype carries with it a feeling of intimacy. Each plate is hand made. Prepared, shot and finished all in one day. They encapsulate and preserve a very personal relationship between the photographer and the world. I think this quality is obvious in the image. Flaws in the plate serve as markers for the ephemeral nature of experience. The small size allows for communication with only one viewer at a time. Sometimes the image on a daguerreotype plate can feel more like a thought than a photograph. All of these qualities can allow for the production of a series

of images that don't require overwrought effects to share our private and idiosyncratic experience of the world.. The image on a daguerreotype plate is the best and most persuasive argument.

With this new tool available to me I began to document the public spaces of cities. First were San Francisco and New York, two cities in which I'd lived and then later other cities. What attracts me to cities, and in particular busy streets and situations, is the vitality of the crowds. There is something fundamental to human nature that is best experienced where large groups have gathered and go about the business of being alive. It's this expression of something eternal in human nature, combined with the inevitable markers of contemporary culture that make urban images so poignant. For me there is really no difference between the spirit on the streets of New York today, Athens 2,500 years ago or Ur 10,000 years before. But of course, they all look a lot different. What I am trying to allude to in the images from The Last Great Daguerreian Survey of the Twentieth Century is the notion of time passing. Each moment, second, month, year, century, millennium passes and doesn't return,. The daguerreotype has a particularly interesting relationship to light and through that, to time.

When you shoot with a daguerreotype plate, light passes through the lens of the camera and lands on the plate where it forms an image particle. Light passes directly from the subject to the plate and becomes the image, which is a direct artifact of the subject created through the agency of light. When you view an image on a daguerreotype plate, light has to be directed at the plate under controlled conditions (if you wish to be able to see the image properly) and the situation which was present before the camera is re-animated by light striking the image particles that have been previously deposited in the camera. There is a sort of symmetry to this system. Light creates a record and through the agency of light the scene is replayed. It might be reasonably asserted that all photographs do this, but what is different is that a daguerreotype is not a print or a graphic depiction. It is an optical device with physical properties that permit the re-constitution of the subject in a virtual space. It is a matrix of crystals in which light is shaped and suspended. The image exists in real time and is recreated each time it is viewed. It is this reanimation of the image on the plate, and in the viewers eye and mind, that makes the daguerreotype such an elegiac depiction of times past. It is through the sensation that the image is an event that you have the feeling of time and "now" when you view a daguerreotype. The contemporary scene depicted, with all of its markers, the latest technologies, troubles, and promises, is already the past; the river never stops flowing, and the daguerreotype in some uncanny way can help to make that realization.



*untitled*, from the *Pantheon Series*, 2004

#### THE PANTHEON SERIES

The daguerreotype process, while perfect in many ways, has some very distinct limitations.. There are many subjects that are difficult to shoot because of the technical limitations of the medium. Exposures are long, making action very difficult to capture. Preparing and developing the plate requires an easily accessible darkroom. Another characteristic that could be a limitation in some situations is the small scale of the images. There are times when you want more impact on the wall for certain projects. I had begun to think about the possibility of a more "extroverted" project, one which could utilize the architectural space of a gallery and effect the viewer through the interplay of all the images at a distance as well as being effective individually. I had been using backlighting very often in my work with daguerreotypes and sometimes I would even

include the sun in the scenes so I decided that I would shoot a series of images with the sun in the center of each one. That would be the unifying motif. Of course, as everybody who has read the rules about how to take a picture knows, you should never do that. There are a number of technical problems created by that kind of lighting, the principle ones being lens flare (a hazy, foggy look caused by the sun hitting the glass elements of the lens) and excessive contrast (the sun and sky will be very bright and all of the things standing in the picture will be very dark). I decided to use a pinhole lens to avoid the problem of glass elements. I had done a little work with them in the past and knew that you could shoot into the sun effectively, and the artifacts from this sort of lens were interesting to me. I built an 8x10 pinhole camera (I decided on 8x10 film because I wanted to make big prints and I wanted the images to remain fairly sharp at a large scale) and shot with color negative film (for increased dynamic range). The film was capable of capturing all of the information in the scene, but then I found that it was impossible to print because of the contrast of color print paper. I tried using contrast masks but it was still unsatisfactory. So instead I scanned the negatives and digitally processed the image to slowly bring out and equalize all of the information captured by the negative. It was very effective. So by necessity, in order to undertake this project, I had to incorporate a technology that predates the invention of photography (the pinhole aperture) and another technology developed only recently (digital processing).

It may seem that at this point that I am delving too heavily into the technical minutiae of this project, but as time went on I realized how the means of producing these images contributed more to their content than the actual subject.

I had decided to use a pinhole aperture because of the problems associated with using the curved glass of a conventional lens when shooting directly into the sun. As time went on I began to think about the camera itself as a metaphor. In ancient Greece there was a cosmological model that suggested that the sun was not an object in the sky, but was actually an aperture in the dome of the sky.<sup>2</sup> If it wasn't for this dome we'd be incinerated by the radiance beyond (This idea is probably behind the design of the Pantheon in Rome. Interestingly the aperture in a dome is called "the oculus"). It occurred to me that the pinhole camera was a model of that conception of the universe. If you accept that, then by extension, the world itself is a kind of camera, the sun projecting the image of the world from some place beyond. The camera was then a fully functional microcosm of the world, which I found entirely agreeable.

### LOCAL STORIES

In 2007, I was shooting in Paris for an extended period and spent time in the Louvre when the weather wasn't agreeable. I enjoyed looking at the history paintings and it dawned on me that I needed to move my Pantheon project in that direction. I found the group scenes in the history paintings particularly interesting. These scenes were full of many little portraits. In particular *The Coronation of Napoleon* by David was impressive. The scene is depicted as a group of individual portraits despite the self-defined singularity of Napoleon as its justification. I began to think it might be possible for me to produce large-scale images that depicted casual everyday scenes, that would have portraits of people going about their business embedded in them. I felt these could be considered historical scenes, sans the Napoleonic pretense. I had to alter the camera I was using at the time to accomplish this. The exposure I was using with the pinhole lens was 9 seconds, which was fast when compared with daguerreotypes, but too slow for capturing a portrait (except by accident, on very rare occasions). I managed to track down a super-wide lens, designed specifically to reduce lens flare. I mounted it to my camera and began to shoot.

The thinking behind this project is in line with the reassessment of historical narrative that occurred back in the twentieth century. At that time the idea of history as "the story of great men" was roundly rejected. Historians found narratives of everyday life in journals, court records, wills, deeds and ephemera that had survived in obscurity and through these documents a new sense of the part in history played by the perceptions of everyday people. It normalized our sense of the past and democratized the sense of what was important.

From my point of view, the real experience of history is a personal one. Everything else is a construction promoted or accepted for all sorts of good or bad reasons. Ultimately, the only thing you can know is what you have proximity to, and even that is a construct of your own personal fictions (but at least they are yours). Every person on earth is the container of a personal history, their own experiences and memories. All of these individual histories jostle with one another, resist and accommodate each other in an endless flow, never reaching a consensus, but constantly moving on. In order to illustrate this state I utilize a wide lens, seek to gather as much of what is in front of me into the frame. The effect I'm after is the visual impression that the whole world is included and within that view everybody is preoccupied with their own life, even in the midst of others. The surface of the earth is a sort of grand bazaar of life, every individual in open exchange with others, and with their own sense of themselves. It's an ephemeral state. Images are a metaphor for the democratization of the history of the world. They are general in viewpoint and diffuse in subject. The only constant is the thing surely there from before the beginning and certain to be there after the end, the sun in the center of the sky.



untitled, from the series, *Local Stories*, 2008.



untitled, from the series, *Local Stories*, 2008.

### CONCLUSION

When photography was first introduced in 1839, it was hailed as a great tool for science. It was thought that at last there was a reliable, neutral reporter on everything under the sun. The possibility that it was a medium for art came later. Photography's first talent was thought to be its objectivity, its ability to present the facts. The photographic image, was considered free from the intervention of the artist. It was thought to be empirical and reliable. Created automatically, by a machine, it was free of the inevitable distortions found in the work of the human hand (and mind).

What I've found since I saw my first daguerreotype is that the content of the work I've produced can increasingly be found within the materials and methods I utilize and the medium's relationship to the world. It's at that point where the functional metaphors of the work are operating. The subjects of my images are straight-forward documents, but are nuanced to a greater or lesser extent by the medium's own ways of perceiving the world.

Photography, for me, is a mechanical demonstration of consciousness, with all its limitations and richness. It is this historical reputation for objective reporting that I use as a starting point when considering how to approach a project, and which photographic technology to employ. I think that it is perfectly obvious that objectivity is a condition which is impossible to achieve. We are the products of innumerable impressions. Our schooling shapes us. Our talents and deficits turn us in particular directions. Even our senses have been demonstrated by science to be limited severely when it comes to conveying all of the various stimuli that bombard us throughout the day. Even with all of those points well understood, we all persist in believing that we have a grasp on the objective truth of our situation. Our relationship with the world can best be described as fluid. Our knowledge and understanding of the situations that we encounter is constantly shifting and changing as new information is received and as our appreciation of the complexities of particular circumstances develops. At some point you may reach the conclusion that the only thing you can know for sure is that you can't know anything for sure. In this world of flux and uncertainty stands photography, freezing moments, and allowing us to examine the information contained in a fragment of time from a particular point of view.

### NOTES

1. Edward Anthony, *American Handbook of the Daguerreotype* (New York: S.D. Humphrey, 1858)
2. Carlo Rovelli, *The First Scientist: Anaximander and His Legacy* (Yardley, PA, Westholme Publishing, 2011)