

MULTIPLE ORIGINALS

Originality, uniqueness and reproducibility in photography

Consider a photographic print: not a photograph in a newspaper or magazine, but an actual print made from a negative. What exactly is it? Is it a copy, a reproduction, or an object somehow original in its own right? If a copy, then a copy of what? Clearly not of the negative, which is usually of a different size and in any case looks nothing like it. Clearly, too, not of its subject, since a three-inch high, two-dimensional depiction of Mount Fujiyama in varying tones of grey cannot be described as a copy. If a reproduction, then what is being reproduced? Perhaps this is disingenuous, and the correct answer is that a print is a copy or reproduction of another print from the same negative. Consider, in that case, a selection of prints derived from a single negative: a contact print; a 10x20 foot mural; a full-frame print showing sprocket marks along the top and bottom edges; a partial cropping; an overexposed print; an underexposed print; a solarised print. It is not immediately obvious in what sense all these can be called reproductions from a common source.

Originals, then? It is surprisingly difficult for most people to accept the photographic print as an original object, except when produced by an atypical minority of photographic processes which include daguerreotypes, photograms and colour Polaroids - processes, in other words, which bypass the negative to produce a unique image. That last term suggests a clue to the problem; we tend to think of original as a synonym for unique, whereas a photographic print is always original, but might not be unique.

Jean-Claude Lemagny put it succinctly when he wrote that "engraving and photography share the special quality of being not reproducible, but multipliable... With rare exceptions, the engraver or photographer do not consider their matrix (plate or negative) to be an original; it is among the prints made from it that originals will be chosen. The possibility of multiplying prints under the same conditions means that here, originality has nothing to do with uniqueness" (*Photographies* no.2, 1983). Negatives, then, can be printed in a virtually infinite number of ways, some of them repeatable. A reasonable proposition would therefore seem to be that photographic prints are individual interpretations of a negative which are also potentially multipliable. In other words, multiple originals.

Like engraver's plates, negatives are matrices which can, and usually do, survive the death of their creator. Should they be used to produce posthumous prints, and if so, what is the status of these prints? Two points need to be made: first, providing copyright is not being infringed, posthumous prints are perfectly legal; and second, they should be clearly identified as such, otherwise they become forgeries. Even under the most favourable circumstances, posthumous prints will never achieve the value and authority of 'signed' prints produced during a photographer's lifetime - and in this context, 'signed' refers not only to a neat pencil signature at the bottom right edge of the print, but to any recognised

method of authentication including rubber stamps, blindstamps and studio codes. In principle, it is generally accepted that prints endorsed in some such way are representative of the artist's intentions at the time of signing.

An obvious exception to the rule occurs where none of a photographer's prints have survived, but the negatives remain available; such an eventuality is less improbable than may at first appear, since negatives are usually better looked after than prints. In these cases, the choice is between posthumous prints and no prints at all. Probably the best-known example is that of E.J. Bellocq, the New Orleans photographer whose work survives exclusively in the form of 89 glass-plate negatives discovered after his death. Taken around 1913 for purposes unknown, these portraits of prostitutes from the red-light district of Storyville bear little or no resemblance to the pornographic images of the time. If they are now valued at their true worth, it is thanks to Lee Friedlander's original appreciation and to his careful printing, which reproduces the original tonal range through the use of gold-chloride toned printing-out paper. Bellocq's own prints may have looked slightly different, but Friedlander's versions have their own authority.

Museums, archives and institutions frequently resort to contemporary prints of 19th century photographs, whether for study purposes or to fill a gap where, once again, only the negative has survived. Obviously, the value of the new print will depend on the care with which it was produced. Claudine Sudre and Gilles Rochon, two distinguished French technicians who specialise in such work, take radically different positions on the status of their prints. For Rochon, contemporary prints have the sole purpose of "...completing collections which have at their disposal only the original negative. In no case can these reprints, even though executed by authentic techniques, be qualified as 'original prints'. Because an original photograph is a photograph entirely created by its author, or by another person during the author's lifetime...". For Sudre, on the other hand, "an original print can be defined as a print made from the original negative of a photograph" - neither more nor less.

Such a view would probably be considered dangerously unsound by most art historians, but she raises a further point which is of peculiar relevance to 19th century photography: that of the physical decay of the original print. "If last century's prints", she writes in *Photographies*, "have a historical and emotional value, the majority have nevertheless lost their original qualities by the ineluctable chemical degradation of the image, and are thereby removed from those qualities which their authors struggled so hard to convey". In this particular context, I have yet to come across a convincing rebuttal of Sudre's argument, which hinges on the fact that in the negative, photography has the means to replace a degraded 'vintage' image - something impossible in the case of, say, an oil painting. In a contemporary context, of course, a similar question must be posed as far as C-type colour prints are concerned; one New York dealer, Robert Freidus of Freidus/Ordovery Gallery, has already taken the radical step of guaranteeing to replace C-type prints which suffer fading or discoloration.

Sometimes a photographer's posthumous reputation can depend on a colleague's advocacy even if a substantial quantity of original prints survive; Eugene Atget's stature now appears unassailable, but it is interesting to speculate whether this would have been the case without Berenice Abbott's dedicated championship. Before meeting Abbott in 1926, Atget had sold large quantities of prints to a variety of museums and libraries (5,655 to the City of Paris Library; 4,000 to the Bibliothèque nationale; 672 to the V&A), but in every case they were purchased not as works of art in their own right but as reference documents, which was how Atget himself regarded them.

On Atget's death in 1927, Abbott was able to acquire a large stock of negatives and prints with which she tirelessly promoted his work; her portfolio *Twenty Photographs by Eugene Atget* was published in 1956. The purchase of the entire collection by the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1968 became the catalyst for a spectacular rise in Atget's reputation, culminating in four major exhibitions with accompanying monographs. Indeed, there has been evidence of a tendency to go slightly over the top in current critical evaluations of Atget's work, particularly when attempts are made to force him into a precociously modernist stance; but for that, neither Abbot nor the amazing old gentleman himself can be blamed.

Whereas the professional archives of many 19th-century photographers were often broken up or haphazardly disposed of, in this century photographers (and their families) have usually been concerned to preserve their negatives, whether in order to ensure a continued income for the heirs or a more secure bid at immortality for the defunct artist. The Center for Creative Photography at Tucson, Arizona, has been a major beneficiary of the latter priority, having in its possession the complete archives of several distinguished 20th-century photographers including Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Edward Weston and Eugene Smith - the Smith archive, in particular, weighing in at 44,000 lbs.

Negatives in the CCP archive are for study purposes only, but the estates of many photographers continue to market carefully controlled numbers of contemporary prints. These are often produced by the photographers' children: Edward Weston's negatives have been used by both Cole and Brett Weston, August Sander's by Gunther Sander, Eugene Meatyard's by Christopher Meatyard and Erich Salomon's by his son Peter Hunter. Other estate prints are made by photographers' assistants, or by photographer/technicians familiar with their printing styles; Anna Farova, for example, has produced contact prints from Josef Sudek's negatives using his own methods and paper, while Neil Selkirk's posthumous Arbus prints completed the greater part of a portfolio left unfinished at her death.

A major source of posthumous prints is the US Library of Congress, the repository for some 75,000 negatives commissioned by the Farm Security Administration between 1935 and 1943. Including work by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange,

Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein, all are in the public domain, and prints of various sizes and qualities can be ordered by anybody familiar with the catalogue numbers; with a few exceptions, these are still made from original negatives.

The Library of Congress archives are unique in providing access to a important segment of pre-war American photography; the value of this resource is increased by the fact that the photographs in question were habitually processed and printed by FSA labs, so that there are often no artist-approved 'vintage' prints in existence to set against the modern versions. In fact, a modern exhibition-quality print from the LOC is usually better than a hurriedly produced FSA press print. Photographers were however permitted to borrow negatives from the Library for their own purposes, with the result that signed prints of a number of images from the archive are also available. It is interesting to note that careful comparison of Walker Evans's signed vintage prints with later LOC prints show minor variations: for example, the vintage version of Floyd Burroughs' portrait taken in 1936 includes, among other differences, a fly on Burroughs' left shirt sleeve which is absent in contemporary prints. There is sufficient evidence of this to suggest that Evans may have made a habit of keeping back favourite negative variants for his own purposes. This does not appear to have been the case with *Photographer's Window Display, Birmingham 1936*, though of course two identical negatives might have been exposed within seconds of each other. What, if anything, does this possibility do to the notion of authenticity?

The problem of two identical negatives or matrices is one which could only arise in photography. Nevertheless, the element of reproducibility is to a certain extent shared with other media, particularly fine-art printmaking, and it is useful to consider how far it extends in those areas. While there are virtually no limits on the number of reproductions which can be made from certain contemporary media such as offset lithography, steelfaced intaglio plates and screen prints, traditional media including copper plate engraving and aquatint are severely limited by decay of the matrix during the printing process. Despite variations depending on the delicacy of the plate, a liberal estimate of the number of 'pulls' which can produced might be around 200 for copperplate engraving, 100 for aquatint, 80 for mezzotint, and anything between two and fifteen for drypoint with its vulnerable burr. Even traditionally robust lithographic stones may show decay after about 25 pulls if they have only received a thin wash of colour.

Until the mid-19th century, the problem of disintegrating plates was virtually ignored and any still considered commercially viable would be passed from hand to hand, yielding prints of increasingly low quality each time a new edition was published. It took the combined action of artists and dealers, followed by appropriate legislation, before proper control could be established in the form of limited editions. The obvious side-effect of increasing perceived value was also clearly in the forefront of everybody's mind, and despite certain grotesque aberrations such as the milking of editions through a proliferation of artist's proofs, editions on different papers, *remarque* pulls and the like, the fine print

market soon settled down to its present reasonably contented form.

Does the editioning of prints have any intrinsic relevance to photography? The medium itself clearly does not call for artificial limitation, since - given reasonable storage and handling - a negative will not wear out in use the way a copper plate does. In this context, therefore, the editioning of photographic prints might be regarded as a subtle variety of mimetic pictorialism - a lusting after the forms and trappings of other, more established media. If, goes the (often unconscious) argument, an un-editioned engraving is rejected as a mere reproduction, then perhaps photography could acquire respectability by falling in line with prevailing custom.

In final analysis, the decision to edition prints appears to be a purely commercial one, usually imposed by a gallery and predicated on the premise that collectors will balk at paying a reasonable price for anything that isn't limited in quantity. Thus, the very high prices reached by Irving Penn's large platinum prints seem largely due to sophisticated marketing by Malborough Gallery, his New York dealers, who have maintained strict control over editions. Not all dealers take the easy way out; the late Lee Witkin would make strenuous efforts to educate his customers, pointing out among other things that in most cases, far from assuring rarity, editioning simply increased the number of prints in circulation to a purely artificial high. The limited-edition portfolio, on the other hand, seems an altogether more useful exercise in that very often the limitation extends only to the portfolio, no restrictions being applied to continued use of the images included in it. The advantage of a portfolio is that it is a good way of presenting a unified body of work, while as far as the purchaser is concerned, the overall price is normally less than the cost of the individual prints. Manuel Alvarez Bravo, for instance, has published two such portfolios without feeling the need to retire the negatives.

It could be argued, and indeed often is, that though there may be no very cogent reasons for artificially limiting the number of prints obtained from a negative other than those of commercial expediency, at least there is no great harm in the process. A number of artists might feel justified in querying the priorities implicit in this argument, but over and above matters of principle lies a consideration which stems from the very nature of the medium. Lee Witkin put it with commendable brevity in his *Photograph Collector's Guide*: "Because the negative is durable, in years to come a photographer can interpret its image differently; the freedom to do so is one of the special qualities of photography".

In other words, if one accepts the premise put forward above, that every print is an interpretation of a negative rather than a reproduction, it becomes impossible to justify any restriction on the artist's freedom to propose a different interpretation at a later date. This reinterpretation is of course not the same as initial experiments in the darkroom, which result in a variety of ephemeral trials to be discarded before a satisfactory image is produced; rather it is a question of rethinking the possibilities of a negative and producing a different image from it.

The reinterpretation may consist of a different cropping, a variation in the tonal range, or even a completely different method of printing. One medium obsolete for many years but now enjoying a renewed popularity is the platinum print. A platinum print differs quite dramatically from a silver print, partly because of its greatly expanded tonal range (and a consequent reduction of tonal contrast), and partly because the platinum actually lies on the paper surface, rather than in a gelatine emulsion coating the paper.

Commercially prepared platinum paper became unavailable in the mid-thirties, but a number of photographers including Irving Penn have taken to producing their own hand-sensitised paper. Alvarez Bravo, a photographer with a high degree of technical skill, has been doing so since the early seventies, and has even made prints using an idiosyncratic mixture of platinum and palladium salts. In 1984, the Victoria & Albert Museum commissioned a set of platinum prints from Bravo; some of the images already existed in silver-gelatine versions, making it possible to compare subtle differences between the two variants of such a classic as *In the Temple of the Red Tiger*.

Perhaps the most accomplished exponent of platinum printing in Britain today is Pradip Malde, whose recent still life images have been printed in both silver-gelatine and platinum versions; in a short statement reprinted here, Malde makes some subtle analogies between the ritual assemblage of his mysterious still lifes and the 'ritual' of making a print, in which the very discipline of the repetitive actions allows a considerable freedom of interpretation. "An event", he says, "can vary in resonance according to the nature and juxtaposition of its components", and the resonance of his *Forked Songue, Tong* does indeed change from one medium to another: insistent, almost baroque complexity in the richly-toned silver print, and enigmatic stillness in the swirling greys of the platinum version.

In some cases, the major part of a lifetime's work might be printed over again to suit a different interpretation, to the extent that even when carried out quite late in a photographer's career, the later versions can become canonical, completely eclipsing their predecessors. One such case is that of Bill Brandt, some of whose best-known work including *The English at Home*, *Literary Britain* and the series on London in the blitz was shot during the forties and fifties. By the early sixties Brandt had radically changed his ideas about printing, using harder and harder grades of paper and increasing contrast to the point where certain of his very late prints have virtually no greys left at all; in Mark Haworth-Booth's phrase, the photographer was "intensifying the encounters which gave rise to the original negatives".

Since his change in printing style coincided with a growing international reputation and an increase in sales, Brandt's later 'hard' prints became firmly established in the public eye at the expense of vintage interpretations which could only be found in rare first editions of his early books and the back issues of

Lilliput and *Picture Post*. In a foreword to the catalogue of the V&A's *Literary Britain* exhibition which opened in 1984 a few months after Brandt's death, Sir Roy Strong wrote that whereas twenty years earlier the photographer had been disparaging about "the milder, fuller toned prints typical of his production in the 'Thirties and 'Forties", by the time the exhibition was being put together "[he] came to regard with more tolerance the qualities of the early prints and agreed to our request to show them".

A more recent (and diametrically opposed) example of a wholesale change in printing philosophy came to light when Fay Godwin's monograph *Land* in was published in 1985. To the astonishment of viewers familiar with Godwin's work, photographs which in earlier collections and prints had been dark and brooding now appeared with radically altered tonalities. To take just one example, a 1978 print of *Moonlight, Avebury* showed minimal separation between grass and sky, with the sheep's white masks representing the only highlights; the 1985 print showed a much broader range of tones, with detail emerging very clearly in the farm buildings, the sheep's fleeces and the grassy foreground.

In an interview last year, Godwin ascribed the change to two factors, one of them highly personal: "My eye has become more educated to real tonalities; when I was printing very dark, that was a false tonality. I don't like those old prints now myself, and I've thrown away two whole dustbins full, to the absolute horror of lots of people who said, 'Oh, but those are vintage prints!' - but I don't like them, I've thrown them away. Something else I should add is that many of those very dark prints were made at a time when I was very ill, so I think that in a sense the horizon did come down for me, and things were very shut in... What I look for now is a very full, rich range of tones, whereas back then - I suppose I was dramatising things, but it was unconsciously, in the sense that there were a lot of psychological factors at work".

So far, the original photographic print has been examined in its most familiar context, that of a more or less straightforward interpretation of a negative. However, an increasing number of photographers dissatisfied with the limitations of traditional photographic representation have turned to strategies which involve one or more interventions in the classic progression from negative to print. Such interventions further weaken the seemingly transparent causal relationship between negative and final work, and therefore, by implication, the work's supposedly automatic quality of reproducibility.

The assault can take place in a number of ways; by direct alteration of the print surface, as in Susan Hiller's self-portraits, in which case reproducibility is no longer an issue at all; by a reading into and fragmentation of the negative into component elements, as in Enzo Ragazzini's *Stadium Portraits*; and perhaps most subtly, by the incorporation of totally unmanipulated photographic images into a conceptual framework outside of which they lose all but the most superficial meaning. A powerful recent example of this approach has been *Precious Metals*, Roger Palmer's sequence of ten triptychs combining imagery and text; to break

up one of Palmer's triptychs into its component parts would be as pointless as sawing up a piece of sculpture.

The re-photographing of an altered print is another fruitful strategy. Since 1982, Mari Mahr has used a technique whereby a large photograph becomes the background for a simple assemblage of objects; once this 'set' is re-photographed, the elements in the final image appear to combine on one single, virtually flat optical plane. Paradoxically, the result is a seemingly infinite depth of field in which there is no hierarchical ranking of fore- and background. Mahr's photographs and sequences have a strong sense of both mystery and simplicity; they seem like folk tales, or tantalising fragments from a private chronicle. One of photography's more dangerous qualities is that of investing the banal with spuriously enigmatic qualities (Ian Jeffrey has accurately identified it as "significant rhetoric applied to mysterious or banal material"), but the great virtue of Mahr's work lies in a rigorous internal consistency whose object is discovery rather than the proposing of empty rhetorical enigmas.

This essay has examined, however briefly, some of the ways in which photographic prints can lay a convincing claim to originality. There is, however, a more basic sense in which a photograph is generally assumed to be 'original', and that of course is the assumption that every photograph is an original invention, specific to the photographer responsible for producing it. And yet the (still purely conceptual) dilemma inherent in our not knowing whether Walker Evans made one or more identical versions of *Photographer's Window Display* has already been referred to. Suppose that we were, in fact, dealing with two separate negatives, and suppose that the second one had been exposed not by Evans, but by a completely different person - is the second exposure, like a twin born minutes too late to claim primogeniture, to be deprived of all rights to originality?

For the strict postmodernist critic, the question is irrelevant; from such a stance there can be no originality, only parody, allegory and subversion through appropriation. Hence such postmodernist paradigms as Sherrie Levine's direct copies of photographs by Edward Weston and Eliot Porter, or Richard Prince's 1983 *Cowboys*, wholly derived from Marlboro cigarette advertisements. The trouble, as Linda Andre pointed out in "The Politics of Postmodern Photography" (*Afterimage*, October 1985) is that the subversive intention of these images depends entirely on a prior knowingness on the viewer's part. If that knowingness is absent the subversive intent simply misfires; if it is present, the deconstruction becomes little more than a self-congratulatory exchange between proposer and viewer.

For most of us, the question of the twin photographs and their authorship remains a nagging one. David Hurn tried to answer it when he re-photographed Atget's views of Paris parks in *Up to Date*, as did the University of New Mexico's Rephotographic Survey Project which investigated the sites of classic 19th-century American landscape photographs. Hurn's project simply confirmed that despite as close an approximation as possible to the original conditions, Atget's

images stubbornly refused to be copied, while the results of the Rephotographic Survey were interesting mostly through a comparison of 'then' and 'now'.

Perhaps of greater relevance than Levine's wholesale appropriation or Hurn's meticulous re-creation is Ian Walker's sequence *Searching For Bacon*, in which Bill Brandt's famous portrait of Bacon on Primrose Hill is echoed by nine small C-type prints taken in the same spot. Bacon of course is absent, yet despite the sunniness of the colour prints, the 'gothic gloom' of Brandt's image seems to pervade the location. In the end, with this light-hearted homage Walker achieves both objects at one and the same time: the work is simultaneously an original conceit, and its own deconstruction.

© John Stathatos 1987, 2012

First published in 1987 by the Photographers' Gallery, London;
revised 2012.