

Introduction

Do not open until you understand what is going on.

A couple of years ago, I came across a sealed envelope, marked with this handwritten instruction, in the artist Robert Heinecken's archive (see figure 1). I sat there and stared at it for a minute or two, mulling over how I might interpret this directive from the past. Archival research is always compelling for the sense of immediacy and intimacy one so often feels with the thoughts and working process of a research subject, but even so, I was struck by a nearly visceral sense of being addressed directly by Heinecken himself.

This was, in fact, precisely the envelope I'd come looking for when I made my appointment at the archive. I knew what was inside of it. But it gave me pause: *Did I understand? Should I open it?*

I knew that in 1973, Heinecken had made a series titled *Vanishing Photographs*. The images were fairly elaborate tableaux scenes, featuring the work of his friends Les Krims and Jerry Uelsmann, rephotographed and represented as multiple exposures.¹ Heinecken reproduced his friends' work but intentionally did not fully process the new gelatin silver prints, now

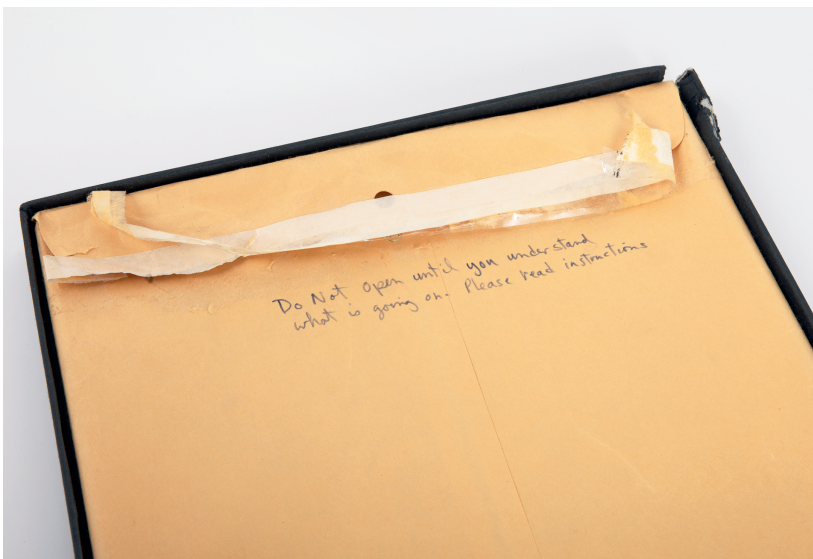


Figure 1. Robert Heinecken, archive material, c. 1973. Courtesy of the Estate of Robert Heinecken. A similar envelope is held in the artist's archive at the Center for Creative Photography.

authored by him. Consequently, as the new *Vanishing Photographs* prints continued to be exposed to light, he knew that they would darken, gradually becoming illegible.

The series was conceived, then, as ephemeral photographs: discrete material images that would exist only for a limited duration. Heinecken knew that the images were going to change even over the short course of an exhibition. Their lifespan was understood to be—in fact, *designed* to be—both temporary and in continuous flux. Such a set of conditions, arrived at intentionally, was nearly unprecedented in the history of photography. But it is not unusual today, in the twenty-first-century ecosystem of images. And, though the intent of photography was always toward permanence, a state of ephemerality was not unusual in the first several decades of the medium's

existence. As such, Heinecken's radical gesture operates as a pivot point, connecting the highly mobile and fleeting experiences of a vast sweep of photographic experience today with the very origins of the photographic medium.

Heinecken made his *Vanishing Photographs*, furthermore, during a period of the medium's intense consolidation into the art world, as it was being absorbed into institutional systems of value that both perpetuate and prize equivalences between such attributes as permanence and stability with the very possibility of creating enduring meaning. Given photography's fledgling state as a medium of artistic value at the transitional date of 1973, it was all the more imperative that its images endure. Rhetoric and theory had both developed in alignment with this unspoken yet clearly understood set of requirements.² The new crop of institutions, both cultural and academic, that would establish a serious foundation for photography, concurred.

As I considered how to proceed with this envelope, my thoughts were both more practical and more existential. First of all, though I had known that the prints I was looking for were unfixed, and thus presumably still sensitive to light, I experienced a more urgent sense of my own complicity in the very act of looking than I had anticipated. Accompanying that was a sense of profound responsibility: I clearly considered these photographs notable enough to be worth making a special effort to see (having looked them up in the finding aid, made a request with the archivist, and arrived for my appointment), and yet that desire was squarely met with my own culpability in their eventual disappearance. At what stage, I wondered, were the prints in the process of their own vanishing? How much time did they have left? Was that even something possible to determine? Did it matter? It must have: I didn't want to be the last person to look at them. And I especially didn't want to unintentionally be the last person to look at them. It also seemed possible that my questions were all for naught: perhaps the photographs had

already vanished, and the sealed envelope contained a monochrome of darkened photo paper. I was compelled by considering the more complicated arc of visibility in a photograph's life: starting from an unseen latent image, moving to its visible phase, and finally returning to a different kind of invisibility, something I might think of as the opposite, in a way, of latent images.

At some point in this flood of questions, I began to appreciate the scenario that had been set up, the predetermined conditions I had gotten swept up in. What was happening, of course, was precisely what was supposed to happen—these were precisely the questions Heinecken had intended to provoke, even if I was in an archive rather than an exhibition space. And were the questions I had about the *Vanishing Photographs* really all that different from the questions I might have about all the rest of photography? The photographic relationship between value and permanence is currently undergoing a profound shift in contemporary culture and technology. We are now in a position to see what was, in fact, a foundational condition of photography.³ Heinecken's work offers a route into viewing, and understanding, photographs from a slightly shifted, yet fundamentally altered, perspective in which sight and its processes are not taken for granted but rather activated to demonstrate the value of experiencing sight and visibility as an event. Photographic visibility, in the pages that follow, is assumed to be conditional: a durational process to be performed, to be experienced. Artists who offer temporary, fleeting, hidden, and future modes of visibility—whether strictly “photographic” or more expansively media-driven—collectively produce this new, conditional framework.

Early on in considering this mode of thinking about photography as a fleeting experience rather than an object of material permanence, a series of “what if” questions emerged. I had come to better appreciate the substantial period of time that elapsed between the ability to create a photographic image and the ability to fix that image.⁴ During this decades-long period, it seemed, the dogged aspirations of the inventors to fix the image became

materialized—the goal became the definition. Photographs *would be* permanent, stable objects, no matter how difficult it was to pin them down in that way and to still the sensitivities of silvers. But what if one of the inventors of photography had wanted something different? What if one of them had decided that fleetingness was the very definition of the thing they were after and, instead of seeking permanence, set about seeking a range of temporal parameters for photographs? Perhaps some photographs would last a week, others would last for a few months, or a year. But even those calibrated to a shortened timeframe—say, a few hours or days—would be understood to have a different sort of value than those calibrated for duration. A shift in the history of photographic expectation might well have altered the development of photography as a medium and the development of cultural and practical understandings of what photography “is.” In fact, what I am proposing in this book is that the “what if” that I have just outlined is, in fact, the medium that was invented. It is a simple truth that photographs do exist in a durational range. It is just our understanding that is limited.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the many ways that photographs, today, disappear by design. The most obvious are represented in the rapid proliferation of social media practices, currently exemplified, when it comes to images in particular, by the app Snapchat and, to some degree, by its more mainstream popular knockoff, Instagram Stories. As recently as 2017, Snapchat hosted the creation and social exchange of 3.5 billion photographs per day.⁵ Yet, as a default condition of this service, the photographs disappear within moments of being viewed.⁶ Between the app’s early reputation as a sexting platform and its general lack of permanent visual archive (though, naturally, many exceptions exist), academic discussions of Snapchat initially appeared most prevalently within sociological and communication discourses.⁷ A platform founded on the principles of fleetingness and disappearance presents not just a unique challenge for but also an active argument against the conventional cultural value of archival objects. This durational

value presents a distinct challenge not only to any visual culture study but also for the conventional tools of art history, which privilege tangible, reviewable objects. With over two hundred million daily active users, the application facilitates a staggering number of photographs, by any measure. This level of popular engagement with making and sharing photos is something that no one interested in contemporary cultural photographic practice should easily dismiss.

Just as interesting, though, as the sheer quantity of images is the evident appeal of disappearing photographs, particularly to a generation that did not grow up experiencing printed, material photographs as a typical photographic encounter. Shoeboxes of photos under the bed belong to a different generation. The allure of fleetingness is not just experiential but driven as well by privacy advocates. Tools such as Xpire and Dust incorporate the ephemeral aspects of both text- and image-based communication into online exchange. Indeed, technology journalist Farhad Manjoo declared apps that were at odds with the model of saving everything online (or, in tangible archival storage, forever) “the most important technology of 2013,”⁸ embodying the potential for establishing a newly private and “erasable” internet. Though a default mode of saving everything characterizes much of the online world, there is nothing inherent about internet technology that requires material to be permanently saved. These are settings created by the people who design the programs. Similarly, within photography, a default mode to save imagery characterizes the vast majority of approaches to the medium. And yet, again, there is nothing inherent to either analog or digital photographic technology to require this: there is no chemical or digital predetermination that photographic imagery need be fixed.

In her extensive work on West African photographs, photographic practices, and archives, the photo historian Jennifer Bajorek has foregrounded the critical importance of taking seriously the insistent present variability in photographic life expectancy. What is typically held as a default expecta-

tion for fixed photographic duration is, for Bajorek, primarily evidence of a deeply Eurocentric notion of the medium that takes not just cultural and aesthetic expectation but even the impact of climate and storage as shaping an operating understanding of the medium's parameters. Speaking to this Eurocentric audience, Bajorek writes:

If we listen to these images, many of which may appear, to us, to be neglected, fading, or fragmented—or which document, in themselves, material traces of lost photographic histories and processes of ongoing archival loss, we find ourselves faced with different forms of photographic temporality, with non-linear histories, and with experiences of loss and futurity that are largely missing from contemporary discourse.⁹

Crucially, Bajorek points to the inadequate language around photographs and photographic theory, and the clear inability to account meaningfully, or even accurately, for the experiences of photographs in West Africa with what becomes, by extension, “colonial notions of history and memory, presence and absence, abundance and loss.” Far from situating her subject matter as an isolated geographic or regional outlier or anomaly, Bajorek points to the possibility of “an avant garde with regard to the future of all photographs.” I have to agree with her assessment that “the notion that a photograph is a fixed image, or even *an* image, becomes impossible to sustain.”¹⁰ How long we understand something to last profoundly impacts how we experience it, as well as how we care for, describe, and remember it. These varied photographic conditions, I suggest, are pervasive, and even foundational, within canonical Eurocentric histories and practices as well.

The French inventor Louis Daguerre was certainly not the first to experiment with light-sensitive silvers, but his public announcement of success, in January of 1839, generated intense public engagement and marked the beginning of a public discourse on photography.¹¹ The press immediately honed in on permanence as a central and key aspect of the new invention. In

hindsight, all claims to permanence were clearly a collective leap of faith, as no one could really know how long the plates, all newly made, might ultimately last. In his collection of reactions to this moment, Steffen Siegel has suggested that the crucial element of what 1839 marks is precisely this newly public discourse, namely, that its “countless participants . . . fashioned a way of talking about photography that has formed the basis for all the different discourses that have developed since.”¹² Collectively, this discourse formed a conceptual framework for the very notion of what photography “is.” And, certainly, the concept of permanence was utterly central to the public’s fascination with the new invention.¹³

And yet, in his recent study of Daguerre, the photo historian and curator Stephen Pinson suggests a more nuanced set of concerns that occupied Daguerre as he worked through the invention process.¹⁴ Namely, through his deep devotion to and concern with the development of the diorama, Daguerre was chiefly fascinated with the representation of *effects*. The subtle effects of shifting light that Daguerre had achieved in his Paris diorama, to great popular acclaim and widespread wonder, were necessarily fleeting. Daguerre wondered: How might these effects of shifting light be translated into a graphic medium? He wanted to move the effects from their performative mode—an ephemeral experience for a specific audience—to a medium in which they could be shared in a different way. But the root of it, for Daguerre, was a fleeting experience of the subtleties of light and the creation of such perceptual effects.

DAGUERRE’S NIGHT ALBUM AND THE NIGHT ALBUMS

Already in 1835, Daguerre had begun spreading news of the success of his new invention. However, one dubious reaction to Daguerre’s early claim reveals an accurate skepticism but also, perhaps inadvertently, proposes a performative scenario that feels downright contemporary. Doubting