

Photography and its Histories
Every Thursday
21st February to 21st March 2019
18.30-19.00 Drinks Reception, 19.00-20.30 Lecture and Discussion

'Odd,' wrote Roland Barthes in his renowned 1980 study of photography, 'that no one has thought of the disturbance (to civilisation) which this new action causes.'

Recent years have duly witnessed an explosion of scholarship considering the social and psychological impact of taking photographs. This course draws on recent approaches to explore the wide-ranging changes in perception brought about by the technology since its invention in 1839. How has photography shaped the aesthetic sensibilities and ethical sensitivities of the modern world? Through a series of discrete but related talks by experts in the field, this programme considers how the camera has informed our understanding of art, politics, nature and the self.

No prior art historical knowledge is necessary.

21 February

'Introduction to Series: What Is Photography?'

Dr Sean Willcock, Birkbeck, University of London

This talk covers the origins and early uses of photography, considering what set the technology apart from other forms of visual media. What is photography? What truth value does it have? How has it shaped our relationship to art and science, self and other, life and death? Such are the guiding questions of the lecture series. This inaugural talk begins to answer them by looking at the images of William Henry Fox Talbot and other early photographers, introducing some key concepts and outlining popular scholarly perspectives on photographic technologies.

Suggested reading:

- Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46). <http://www.thepencilofnature.com>
- Susan Sontag, 'In Plato's Cave', *On Photography* (1977), pp. 3-24.
- Geoffrey Batchen, 'Desiring Production', *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (MIT Press, 2002), pp. 2-25.

28 February

'Portraiture, the Album and the Self'

Dr Patrizia Di Bello, Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck University of London.

Taking and sharing self-portraits on social media has recently been found to cause body dysmorphia and bad mental health amongst teenagers and children. The obsessive sharing of portraits of oneself, however, has a long history going back to the first photographic craze for carte-de-visite portraits in the 1860s. This talk explores the birth of social media in the nineteenth-century, around the exchange of photographic portraits collected into albums. It goes on to look at the changes to the family album brought about by the development of

cameras that allowed everyone to take snapshots of oneself, family and friends, to then introduce the work of British photographer Jo Spence in the 1980s, urging us to go 'Beyond the Family Album'. Her work showed how to become conscious of the role of photographs in perpetuating impossible role models and pernicious stereotypes, and how to use self-portraiture to neutralise and reverse their effects on the self. Could some of her insights also serve to critique and resist the negative effects of contemporary 'selfie' culture?

Suggested reading:

- Jo Spence, 'Visual Autobiography: Beyond the Family Album', in *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography* (London: Camden Press, 1986), pp. 82-97.
- For an introduction to the work of Jo Spence, mainly in her own words: <https://henitalks.com/talks/jo-spence-cultural-sniper/>
- On nineteenth-century albums and other vernacular photographic objects: Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Princeton and Amsterdam: Princeton Architectural Press and Van Gogh Museum, 2004), especially the section 'The Murmur of Laughing Voices', pp. 48-60.
- For a take on albums emphasising how they constructed as much as recorded identity, and how they functioned as social media: Patrizia Di Bello, 'Photocollage, Fun and Flirtations', in *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, with essays by Elizabeth Siegel, Marta Weiss and Patrizia Di Bello (The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 49-62.

7 March

'Making an Art of Photography'

Dr Juliet Hacking, Program Director, Sotheby's Institute of Art.

It is often assumed that photography began life in the 19th century as a document and it was only in late twentieth century that its potential as an art form was recognised. But the question of photography's relationship to art has been a staple of discussions on photography since the new technology was made known to the public in 1839. Moreover, the suggestion that photography could be artistic also had political ramifications: some commentators saw it as a threat to the natural order (Lady Eastlake) and to the primacy of imaginative labour (Charles Baudelaire). What was at stake in making an art of photography?

Suggested reading:

- Charles Baudelaire, 'The Modern Public and Photography' (1859). <https://bcourses.berkeley.edu/courses/1457197/files/70783567/download?verifier=xXa4ZHt5tNp3O1jPoADYxmVrI0GBM7tkfRwLB6x4>
- Elizabeth Eastlake, 'Photography', part 2, *Quarterly Review* (1857). Read text from paragraph 7 of part 2 onward. <http://www.nearbycafe.com/photocriticism/members/archivetexts/photohistory/eastlake/eastlakephotography2.html>

- Julia Margaret Cameron, 'Annals of My Glass House' (1874).
<https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/iklichfall13/files/2013/08/Cameron-Annals-of-My-Glass-House.pdf>

14 March

'Reframing Fields of Vision: From "Pencil of Nature" to Environmental Futures'

Prof Liz Wells, Plymouth University.

Since its inception, photography has been used to explore the geographic and the botanical. This talk centres on British photography and ways in which photographers have used the camera to explore place and environment, particularly in relation to rural lands and landscapes. Early photographs were generally accepted as 'straight' empirical evidence. More recently, photography has become associated with interrogative questioning of ecosystems and environmental change. We shall note historical developments, including changing notions of beauty in landscape. Then, through critical evaluation of selected recent examples, we shall consider conceptual framing, ways of seeing and modes of photographic representation.

Suggested reading:

- Robert Adams, 'Truth and Landscape' in *Beauty in Photography* (Aperture, 1996), pp. 11-20.
- David Bate, 'Notes on Beauty and Landscape' in Liz Wells, Kate Newton & Catherine Fehily (eds), *Shifting Horizons*. (I B Tauris, 2000). pp. 34-38.
- Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains' *Journal of Material Culture*, 11(1-2) 2006, pp. 33-48.
- Jem Southam, 'Landscape Stories' in Liz Wells & Simon Standing, *Change* (University of Plymouth Press, 2007), pp. 8-23.
- Liz Wells, 'Case Study: Landscape as Genre' in *Photography, A Critical Introduction*, ed. 5 (Routledge, 2015), pp. 331-344.

Before the talk you might like to look at a couple of examples of land-oriented work by photographers such as: Anna Atkins, Mandy Barker, John Darwell, John Davies, Susan Derges, *P.H.Emerson*, Garry Fabian Miller, David Farrell, Sophie Gerrard, Fay Godwin, Paul Hill, John Kippin, Chrystel Lebas, Walter Lewis, Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, Ingrid Pollard, Jem Southam.

21 March

'War Photography: The Pleasure of Ruins'

Simon Norfolk, award-winning freelance photographer whose work has featured in many leading publications and galleries around the world.

This talk considers the history of war photography from the perspective of a practitioner, placing it within a broader context of military optics and aesthetic traditions of viewing architectural ruins. Simon will discuss his influences in early war photography and the history

of classical landscape art, considering themes of memory and beauty with regard to the fraught topics of conflict and atrocity.

Suggested reading:

- Jay Winter, 'Homecomings', in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Canto, 1995), pp. 15-28.
- Paul Fussel 'Arcadian Recourses', in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 231-269.
- Christopher Woodward, 'Who Killed Daisy Miller?', in *In Ruins* (Vintage, 2002), pp. 1-31.
- Susan Sontag, 'Looking at War', *The New Yorker* 9 December 2002.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war>