

WHAT IS A PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE?



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What is a Photographic Image?

Evidence, Document, Witness, Memory, Truth, Fiction...

What is the nature of a photographic image? What relationship to reality does it have? The status of the image will change according to its use and context. Imagine your portrait on the front of a newspaper, in a family album or on a form in a police file. In each and every case there are different ways in which the image functions and makes its meaning.

"A photograph is an image that bears the mark of the real."

David Company (writer)

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power."

Susan Sontag (writer)

"The acts of seeing and photographing have often been made to seem fused into one."

David Company (writer)

Photographic 'truth'

Is it possible to capture a particular moment in time, through video or photography, which represents an event as it actually was?

Robert Frank – a year spent driving through the USA in 1955 resulted in 28,000 images, of which 83 were made into a book called 'The Americans' - a ground-breaking portrait of American society. (see Robert Frank exhibition pages of the Tate website www.tate.org.uk)

Lee Friedlander – documentary street scenes seeming 'grabbed' from the flow of time – 'social landscapes' of the USA.

http://www.fraenkelgallery.com/artists/a_friedlander.html

Sophie Calle – projects that offer documentary 'proof' and also question the viewer's role as collaborator or spectator.

<http://www.dareonline.org/themes/space/calle.html>

Uta Barth – close up evidence of reality, made to look unfamiliar or unrecognisable.

<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa239.htm>

Philip-Lorca diCorcia – the artist set up a system of flash lights in the street and a radio signal to operate the camera thereby spot lighting passers by. <http://www.robertklein-gallery.com/gallery/dicorcia>

Fazal Sheikh – documentary portraits that are made with agreement from the sitter with any funds resulting being donated to human rights organisations.

<http://www.fazalsheikh.org/>

Private and public

Many artists work with archival or historical imagery, whether from the family album or from social history. Often this work will trigger ideas about memory and time. For example:

Jo Spence – ground-breaking exhibition 'Beyond the Family Album' unpicks the hidden histories of gender and class within the family. No web reference but see book 'Putting Yourself in the Picture', Jo Spence, Camden Press: 1986.

Roshini Kempadoo – her work presents ideas from history and contemporary events in relation to identity and representation.
<http://www.autograph-abp.co.uk/gallery/kem.html>

Christian Boltanski – work in all media that explores real and fictional evidence sometimes including documents from the Second World War. The Reserve of Dead Swiss, 1990, is on display at Tate Modern from December 2004.

Self Portraits – Photography

Many artists use their own image to investigate the idea of truth to reality or as an exploration of how identity is formed.

Donald Rodney – imagery related to illness, identity, family and home. <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/rodney/introduction.htm>

Maxine Walker – her work aims to 'blow apart the idea of stereotype' and sits between Cindy Sherman and documentary styles.
<http://www.autograph-abp.co.uk/gallery/wal.html>

John Coplans – images of his ageing body made over time, however, he never reveals his face! (see Collections pages of Tate website www.tate.org.uk)

Self Portraits – Video

Marina Abramovic – in *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975, the artist repeats the phrase as she brushes her hair with increasing vigour.
Search for Abramovic on <http://www.newmedia-art.org/>

Bruce Nauman – this artist has made a series of works using his own body as a 'living sculpture', performing actions sometimes choreographed, sometimes 'natural'.
<http://www.tate.org.uk>

Portraits – Photography

Thomas Struth – his intense visual objectivity scrutinises contemporary urban existence. www.tate.org.uk

Nan Goldin – a lifelong series of intimate photographs documenting friends and lovers. www.tate.org.uk

Rineke Dijkstra – in making formal portraits she is interested in typologies of people, such as teenagers and new mothers. www.tate.org.uk

Thomas Ruff – a series of colour portraits of family and friends was made between 1981 and 1991. www.tate.org.uk

Portraits – Video

Gillian Wearing – *Confess All On Video, Don't Worry You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian, Version II* 1994 was inspired by 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries and confessional TV chat shows. <http://www.tate.org.uk>

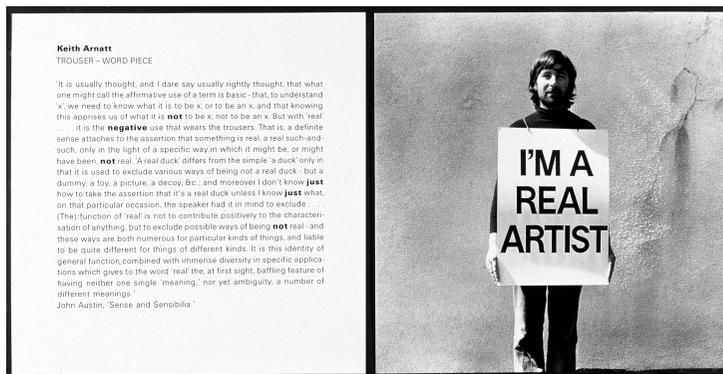
Janane Al-Ani – aspects of her work address the symbolic significance of the veil in contemporary art and culture.
<http://www.arabnews.com?page=21§ion=0&article=51943&d=26&m=9&y=2004>

This section pairs two works which explore ideas and discussion about 'What is a Photographic Image?'. In addition, there is a poster-sized image of the Gillian Wearing work in this kit.

Keith Arnatt

This image of Keith Arnatt wearing a placard is accompanied by a text from J L Austin's 'Sense and Sensibilia'. The text argues that to prove what something is, it is necessary to prove what it is not. The photograph seems to present a straight fact and yet it sows within us an element of doubt about everything that it purports to be.

Keith Arnatt *Trouser Word Piece* 1972–1989
Black and white photographs on paper 1005 x 1005mm each
© the artist



Gillian Wearing

A group of police officers pose – as though for a photograph – for 60 minutes. Photography carries an authority and it also fixes identity, so it is very appropriate that this is an image of the Law. As time passes the group starts to fidget, the image starts to unravel and the order breaks down.

Gillian Wearing *Sixty Minute Silence* 1996
Rear projection video, 60 min. Colour, sound. Dimensions variable
© the artist



Discussion points

Keith Arnatt

- What are we reading here? The words or the photograph?
- What is a real artist anyway?
- Does he want us to take him seriously?
- Do we have to read all that text in order to understand the image?

Gillian Wearing

- Are these people really the police?
- If this is from a video film, why does it look like a photograph?
- Are they looking at me?
- Where are they?

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