

“All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.”

—Richard Avedon

Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

By **Joel Simpson**

In today's age of ubiquitous digital photography a terminological distinction has arisen between “digital process” photographs, meaning images heavily manipulated in Photoshop or other computer-based digital programs, and “digital photography,” referring simply to the digital capture (as opposed to film capture) of images. With our short memories, the assumption is frequently that manipulated or composited photographs are largely a boon of the digital age, with a possible, though somewhat obscure precursor, in the work of surrealist photographers like Man Ray, Raoul Ubac and Maurice Tabard, among others, during the 1930s and 40s. This exhibition provides a powerful corrective to this misconception, overwhelmingly demonstrating that photographic manipulation has been intrinsic to the medium since its beginning.

The idea that photographs “don't lie” is, of course, a popular myth. But neither this notion, its refutation, nor Avedon's mild paradox touches the essential power of the photographic image. Think of an image rendered in paint. Through the relative chaos of the brushstroke we perceive images, along with nuances of light, expression and feeling. Our pattern recognition, call it Gestalt if you like, gives pleasure: order emerges from the chaos.

The photograph affects us very differently. The collective mass of rendered detail convinces our brains that we are beholding the thing itself, and we have the immediate emotional response that we would have to the thing in reality. This irresistible evocative power inherent in the photographic image is the real creative medium of the photographic image maker, as brush and

paint are to the painter. *Faking It* shows how photographers have worked this medium, using, altering, combining, suppressing pieces of reality, in order to create a virtual reality as or more compelling than the real thing, or, as in the case of propaganda and fantasy, photographic “cartoons” whose elements quoted from reality confer a power far beyond the hand-drawn image.

The light that this exhibition and its excellent catalogue shed on the well-worn subject of photographic history is that, rather than a history of styles or schools, this is a history of photographic intentions. And this shift in emphasis, underscored by many revealing before-and-after combinations, brings the photographers themselves into clearer focus.



SONG DONG *Shadow*, 2009. Rosewood, 89 x 103.5 x 103.5 cm.
 Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The show begins with an exquisite 1850 example of a hand-colored daguerreotype (an early example of mixed media), and continues through the mounting of clouds into seascapes by Gustave Le Gray (1820–1884)—early photographic emulsions tended to overexpose them. In this early period such manipulation was a trade secret, since the public still believed that the photographic process accurately and completely transcribed reality. Other examples of alterations during those first 30 years of photography included an 1851 complex composite of the cloister of Saint-Trophime in Arles by Edouard Baldus (1813–1889). Since the long perspective was impossible to capture in complete focus in a single exposure of a large plate, Baldus made about a dozen, each one with a different point of sharpness, then combined them all to render what the eye sees. Even Matthew Brady (1823–1896) had to resort to photographic interpolation in 1865 when one of Sherman's generals was late to a group portrait session and had to be inserted later.

A significant turning point in the public's faith in photographic accuracy came in 1869 when William H. Mumler (1832–1884), who claimed to have discovered "spirit" photography—the leaving of ghostly images on undeveloped photographic plates by revenants—was exposed as a fake. He was convicted of fraud and larceny—selling images of "ghosts" under false pretenses. What Mumler had discovered was double exposure, exposing the same plate two or more times, which became a legitimate technique soon thereafter, though without the spectral claims. His trial ushered in a new era of public skepticism about photography's veracity, at the same time as it freed more creative photographers to engage in all manner of manipulation.

In the portrait business in the 1860s and 70s, this manipulation took the form of highly skilled retouching, involving using a camel's hair brush and fine powders to smooth away wrinkles, and later to work negatives with graphite pencils. Today these photographs have an air of artificiality about them, as we sense the graphic component.

Some photographic artists at the time went to great compositing lengths to create scenes drenched with sentiment, often inspired by the allegorical and genre painters of the day. Swedish-born English photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875) worked laboriously in 1857 to produce his elaborate composite allegory *The Two Ways of Life*. The exhibit features it in a 16 x 30 inch print from the 1920s. The panorama presents the moral choices facing a young man recently arrived in

London: a life of debauchery vs. one of sober dedication to family and work. He photographed each of the 26 models plus background segments on separate glass plates and then combined them by selectively exposing sections of photo-sensitive paper as contact prints in the sun, taking "three good summer days" to make each print. The debauchery side so scandalized the Victorian public that Rejlander had to reveal his artifice in order to offer assurances that it never actually took place. Henry Peach Robinson (1830–1901), on the other hand, pursued much safer material. He used multiple negatives to produce scenes of the death of middle-class children, the anxiety of a working father, or a woodland picnic, and they were immensely popular. Prince Albert even issued an outstanding order to purchase every one of his pieces as he produced them.

In the late 1880s blur came to be used as an aesthetic element in photography, pioneered in England by Peter Henry Emerson (1856–1936). Emerson published a highly influential textbook in 1889, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, and was quite active in photographic societies and juried exhibitions. As a result, he was a formative influence on the school of Pictorialism, flourishing at that time, and which relied a great deal on soft focus. But Emerson



Joyce J. Scott *Yaller Girl*, 2006. Beadwork, wood, mixed media, 25 x 10 x 9 inches. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

was an avowed purist of the negative and vehemently opposed the kind of manipulation that Robinson engaged in. Nonetheless, as Fineman points out, this was "more of a rhetorical stance than a practical reality." In his popular photograph of a farmer with a plough, *A Stiff Pull* (1888), he adds clouds and removes a superfluous patch of trees, to make the ploughman's task more dramatic. Even the purists, the "straight" photographers who assembled around Alfred Stieglitz in the following generation, practiced alterations when it strengthened their compositions or atmosphere. For example, a close examination of a photograph by Stieglitz protégé Paul Strand (1890–1976) reveals a figure retouched out of a group of walkers in his 1915 *City Hall Park*, presumably to improve the composition. And it might be mildly shocking to find out that Ansel Adams (1902–1984) darkened and dramatized his famous *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941) from a much brighter and more banal version.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw an outpouring of photographic novelties of great range and variety. Severed heads were a fashion unto themselves—corresponding to the popularity of performed magic—often sold as post cards that made no pretense to realism. The show included images of a decapitated body holding its head on a tray, a man holding his own head by the hair, a man juggling seven versions of his own head, 13 military officers posing with their severed heads cupped in their hands, and a man with two heads, all by unidentified American artists. Other novelties included an anonymous stereoscopic image of a stork carrying a baby in a sheet about to be dropped into a chimney, a man sitting inside a bottle (by J. C. Higgins, ca. 1888), a woman turned into a portrait bust (by Barthélemy, ca. 1870), as well as a number of artists posing for themselves, including Toulouse-Lautrec in a composition by French photographer Maurice Guibert (1856–1913) in 1890.

During the first fifteen years of the new century, photographic tricksters put faces in moons, flowers and bubbles, making essentially photographic versions of children's illustrations, but a particular sub-genre more intrinsic to the photographic medium at that time was the gigantesque exaggeration. Images of huge chickens, watermelons, corn, rabbits, cows, light bulbs, fish, etc. coming mostly from the U.S. Midwest between 1908 and 1915, made their way onto popular post cards in humorous boasts, mostly of agricultural productivity. Ironically, the famous sensationalist news photographer Weegee (Arthur Fellig 1899–1968), nominally an exponent of photographic literality, gave

himself to extensive playing with distorting lenses and counterfactual scenes, for example, Times Square as a lake, a scene in a bottle of the discovery of a drunk, or the Mona Lisa with a frown. He managed to sell them, both to low-brow humor magazines like *Mad*, *Sick*, and *Hobo News*, as well as to upscale glossies like *Vogue*, *Life*, and *Playboy*. By mid century, however, the interest in photographic fantasies and distortions had abated, only to be revived after the digital revolution.

The first half of the Twentieth Century also saw the use of photographic manipulation for political ends. The show presented rare documents showing the originals of a number of official photographs used by Stalin and Hitler, and then the modified versions. There's a 1926 photo of Stalin with four co-revolutionists that was published in three successive versions, each one with one person fewer, until the 1949 version, where he remains with only Sergei Kirov by his side. Also on display were two versions of a garden party with Hitler, the second version of which eliminates the presence of Joseph Goebbels.

In contrast to these images that presented themselves as factual, there was considerable use by anti-fascist photo artists of what amounted to photographic political cartoons: obviously montaged manipulations to make a political point. The most famous practitioner was John Heartfield (1891–1968), whose April 19, 1934, cover composition for the leftist publication *AIZ* shows Goebbels putting Marx's beard on Hitler. The following year he put Goebbels, Goering, and Hitler on a tightrope attached to a swastika-bearing standard, while a rat gnaws at the rope. Heartfield's influence was extensive, and reached the Soviet propaganda ministry, where Alexandr Zhitomirsky (1907–1993) produced, among other things, a 1941 composition in which an accusing Bismarck extends his hand out from his portrait and points to Hitler in uniform, with the caption, "The Corporal Is Leading Germany into a Catastrophe." In the US around the same time, Barbara Morgan (1900–1992) depicted an octopus with the face of William Randolph Hearst spreading its tentacles over a crowd, *Hearst Over the People* (1939).

Also political, but in a different direction, was the use of photographic image-combining in the service of eugenics, the now-discredited movement to improve "racial stock" by official controls placed on reproduction (selective birth control, forced sterilization, anti-miscegenation laws forced abortions and forced pregnancies, and ultimately, genocide). English polymath, Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin, inventor of the weather map,

and avowed social Darwinist and eugenicist, believed that the English character was being weakened by social policies that protected the poor. He created composite portraits of "criminal types" by superimposing head shots of convicted felons and contrasting them with healthy and law-abiding faces. His theory of types was somewhat shaken, though, when he noticed that the composites seemed less villainous than the individual specimens they were composed of. This very principle was used in the other direction American photographer John L. Lovell (1825–1903) who made composites in pursuit of an ideal. The catalogue includes his composite of the Harvard class of 1887, a handsome young man in a misty atmosphere, and a female version, Composite of Harvard "Annex" 1887, a beautiful young woman. Meanwhile, French amateur photographer Authur Batut (1846–1918) combined photographs of provincial women from various regions, in search of their "types." Even American social documentary photographer Lewis Hine (1874–1940) experimented with superimposing faces and upper bodies of working children, but he was apparently never pleased with his results, and the images were not published during his lifetime.

One might think that photojournalists would be especially loyal to the pure documentary image, but the lure of the visual scoop has been much too strong to guarantee it. In fact, when photographs replaced engravings as illustrations in popular magazines, it was often seen as a limitation, since the engraving could combine elements that were not always present simultaneously to the photographer. The show offered a visual deconstruction of a 1906 photograph by English photographer Horace W. Nicholls (1867–1941) depicting a sea of umbrellas, entitled *Rainy Day Derby*, and alongside it the much less dramatic elements he used to create it. With the establishment of "tabloid" newspapers in the 1920s (the word derives from their supposedly condensed version of the news, like a compressed tablet), faked news photographs became common practice. The show and catalogue include the Hearst papers' 1936 "composograph" of Bruno Richard Hauptman, murderer of the Lindberg child, being strapped into the electric chair, though photography was strictly prohibited in the prison. The scene was staged and Hauptman's face was pasted into it, and though it conflicted with eye-witness accounts and was labeled by the paper as a posed reconstruction, it served the public's appetite for grisly justice and sold papers. A 1960 composite by an anonymous photographer showing convicted murderer Caryl Chessman contemplating the gas chamber is considerably more touching. Chessman

maintained his innocence till the end and received much public support, but he eventually exhausted his appeals and was executed in May of that year. Four years earlier, the UPI distributed an altered photograph of Elvis Presley in the barber chair after his hair had been cut down to military length. The show provided the original of the 21-year-old Elvis with his trademark frontal wave and sideburns. Fashion photography, a cousin of photojournalism, also contributed its share of altered photographs. The show included Erwin Blumenthal's (1897–1969) rather surreal 1950 *Vogue* cover of the eye, eyebrow, lips, and beauty mark of a model on a white background; as well as Richard Avedon's (1923–2004) 1967 hydra-headed composite portrait of Audrey Hepburn, where each of five different portraits of the actress is encased in a black scarf that extends down a long neck.

I was surprised that the exhibition at the Met left out the Surrealists' contribution to altered photography, but the catalogue devotes a chapter to it ("Mind's Eye"), opening with Man Ray's statement of intention, "I would rather photograph an idea rather than an object, and a dream rather than an idea." Fineman makes the important point that Surrealist photographers' representations of ideas and dreams subordinated reality to imagination just as the Pictorialists had done before them, but with an entirely different thematic content. In place of the soothing escapes of idealized landscapes and moonlit nights, the Surrealists favored irrationality and unchained desire. They had absorbed both Freud and the horrors of the Great War. Fineman also notes the stylistic diversity of photographic surrealism, extending from the ironic juxtapositions caught in literality by André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Eli Lotar; to invented or rediscovered darkroom techniques such as solarization (partial reversal of the image by brief exposure to white light during development), brûlage (the burning of a negative), and multiple printing, used by Man Ray (1890–1976) and Raoul Ubac (1910–1985); as well as the more conventional techniques of photographic illusionists of multiple exposure, sandwiched negatives, montage and collage, as practiced by Maurice Tabard (1897–1984), Dora Maar (1907–1997), Claude Cahun (1894–1954), Wanda Wulz (1903–1984), and though he was not mentioned in the catalogue or the show, Hans Bellmer (1902–1975). Cahun's transfixing superimposed portrait of her and her cat, *Io + gatta*, 1932, is the cover of the catalogue. I would also like to have seen one of Ubac's *Battle of the Amazons* included in the show, with its striking use of solarization and the compositing of partial bodies in virtual relief, evoking a violent female

eroticism. In fairness to Fineman, however, it must be noted that surrealist photography is one of the best known categories of altered photography and is considered the main forerunner of photographic manipulation in the digital age. And to her credit, Fineman makes the often mentioned but rarely illustrated connection between the coterie of self-identified surrealist artists and those they influenced in the commercial worlds of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, as well as those whom they inspired in fine art photography outside of their circles

For example, George Platt Lynes (1907–1955), the American fashion photographer famous for his dramatically lit male nudes, applied his refined studio lighting techniques to surreal subjects, as in *The Sleepwalker* (1935), showing a crouched naked man sleeping on a narrow platform mounted on a human trunk, with buttocks and legs. Herbert Bayer (1900–1985), Bauhaus trained, immigrated from Austria to New York in 1938, produced some of the most striking surrealist images of the time, though he was never formally associated with



Joyce J. Scott *Yaller Girl*, 2006. Beadwork, wood, mixed media, 25 x 10 x 9 inches. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

the movement and spent his professional life as an innovative advertising photographer and book publisher. His *Lonely Metropolitan* (1932), included in the show, depicts a floating pair of hands with eyes in them against the background of an apartment building. American William Mortensen (1897–1965) began his career in the 1920s as a Hollywood set and costume designer, shooting glamour portraits of Clara Bow and Jean Harlow, as well as stills for Cecil B. DeMille productions. He left Hollywood for a the much more relaxed artists' community of Laguna Beach in the early 1930s, where he established his Mortensen School of Photography, and where he promoted his particular aesthetic, according to Fineman, "an eccentric blend of late Pictorialism, Surrealism, Gothic horror, and Hollywood kitsch." A fierce advocate of photographic manipulation, he dismissed the purists of the time, saying that their program "inclines to overlook the basic truth that the final concern of art is not with facts, but with ideas and emotions." In return, Ansel Adams jokingly called him the "Anti-Christ." The exhibition catalogue gives two of his most famous images each a full page: *Obsession* (1930), a woman cowering in fear about to be enveloped by a dark cloak; and *Human Relations*, 1932, a disheveled man's head with two fingers of an intruding hand poking deep into his eyes.

Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) was both the best known surrealist artist and one who cultivated his public image scrupulously. He also collaborated extensively with advertisers and Hollywood film studios. Though he didn't do much photography himself, he participated enthusiastically in Philippe Halsman's (1906–1979) famous stagings, including (in the catalogue) *Atomicus*, in which Halsman manages to capture Dalí, his easel, three cats, a chair and a flume of water all in the air at the same time. Less known, however, is Welsh photographer Angus McBean, (1904–1990), born on the same day as Dalí, whose main career was as official photographer to London's Old Vic theater, and who was best known for his expressive portraits of actors. But when he played with the medium, he created masterful composite photographs that make joking direct reference to Dalí's signature style, which he sent as Christmas cards. The catalogue includes his card from 1949, where a huge nude woman, planted down to her buttocks in the ground, gazes across a desert landscape at two clothed male figures (McBean standing and his partner, David Ball, crouching), flanking a large-format camera on a tripod, and accompanied by a background holder and studio lamp.

A little farther out of the mainstream was New Orleans photographer Clarence John Laughlin (1905–1985), best known for his romanticized "portraits" of plantation house ruins in *Ghosts Along the Mississippi*, first published in 1948. Heavily influenced by the French Symbolist poets, Laughlin often took a moralizing stance in the social commentary accompanying his highly subjective photographic compositions. In the one included here, *The Masks Grow to Us* (1947) a woman's face morphs into a dead-eyed painted mask. Laughlin explained that his goal was to create his own mythology of "the personifications of our fears and frustrations, our desires and dilemmas."

Both the exhibition and the catalogue conclude with the efforts to fabricate photographic images in the 30 years before the advent of Photoshop. The chapter is entitled "Photoshop." It opens with the staged "documentary" photograph by artist Yves Klein (1928–1962) of him leaping from a second story window onto an empty Paris street, which he published in his own single-edition newspaper for Sunday, November 27, 1960. The exhibit shows the two images that made up the final seamless one: Klein dives from the window with eight men holding a canvas tarpaulin to catch him, and the empty street. Fineman perceptively comments, "Convincing to the eye if not to the mind, Klein's Leap symbolically enacts the leap of faith we make in accepting the truth of any photograph, acknowledging both the pleasures and the perils involved in the willing suspension of disbelief."



Joyce J. Scott *Yaller Girl*, 2006. Beadwork, wood, mixed media, 25 x 10 x 9 inches. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The 1960s saw a flourishing of confected photographic creativity, as a new generation of artists chafed at the dominance of "straight" photography that had prevailed since the 1930s. Arbiters of taste, such as Robert Heinecken, who established the photography program at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1962; A. D. Coleman, photography critic writing in the *New York Times* and *The Village Voice*; and Peter Bunnell, a young curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art; were all advocating for expanding the photographic vocabulary beyond the literal. It is as if they were preparing the ground for the advent of the digital age. Conceptual artists, like William Wegman (b. 1943) and John Baldessari (b. 1931), who taught at CalArts, and who didn't consider themselves photographers, began to use photographic images in their work. Duane Michals (b. 1932) created a body of work using narrative sequences that aimed at representing products of the imagination rather than objects in the real world. In one famous sequence that he made following the death of a friend, *The Spirit Leaves the Body* (1968), he uses a series of seven double exposures (much as in 19th century spirit photography), to show a ghostly figure arise from a nude recumbent man, and walk towards the viewer out of the frame. The acknowledged master of the spiritually transcendent photomontage, however, is Jerry Uelsmann (b. 1934). Working in a darkroom with seven enlargers at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Uelsmann combines simple but powerful images from nature—trees, mountains, lakes, surf, roots, skies—in counterfactual compositions, for example, a tree and its roots suspended in the air over a promontory jutting out into a lake, with a ghostly negative of a seed pod stretched out in the water below (*Untitled*, 1969); or with the addition of human elements—figures, hands, furniture, architecture, boats; for example, a tiny silhouette of a man walking on an old-fashioned writing desk surrounded by the walls of a wood-paneled study that opens up to a dark cloudy sky and the sun behind a cloud (*Untitled*, 1976), the two examples in the show. Uelsmann's meaning is never explicit, but his compositions inevitably communicate a sense of the profound.

Martha Rosler (b. 1943) is a non-photographer who combines found images to make her points. In *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72) she pasted figures from combat photos of the Vietnam war in *Life* magazine into photographic interiors that she lifted from *House Beautiful*. The catalogue includes *Red Stripe Kitchen*, where she has carefully matched the soldiers to the scale of the kitchen, offering the illusion that they are there in the doorway

and behind the counter. The idea is that the first "television war" had finally brought war into our homes, offering us the choice to inure ourselves to its horrors or to experience them and protest the war.

The show offered considerable space at the end to the work of Kathy Grove (b. 1948), who removes female figures from famous photographs to underscore their role as passive objects of desire. The fact that the resulting image seems pointless is just the point. As with much conceptual work, the viewer is expected to reflect on his/her disappointed expectations and thereby examine his assumptions. The three well-known examples shown are Brassai's *Lovers in a Small Café* in the Italian Quarter (1932), Kertész even more iconic *Satiric Dancer*, and Man Ray's *Violon d'Ingres*. In the first, Grove leaves us with a man of obvious amorous intent staring at himself in the café mirror; in the second, she merely presents us with an empty sofa flanked by a white marble torso; and in the third the nude woman's body has vanished, leaving only her turban, the drapery at the bottom of the frame, and the two stylized 'cello S's in pitch black against the less dark but still black background. The most objectified woman of the three leaves the greatest emptiness when she is removed.

The exhibition and catalogue focus on photography in the U.S., France and Great Britain, with excursions into the Soviet Union and China in the propaganda section, but there have been very significant altered works produced elsewhere, most notably in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, where there is a long tradition of photographic experimentation going back to the 1930s. It had its own school of surrealist photographers active at that time including Jindrich Styrsky, Frantisek Vobecky and Karel Teige, and today photographers such as Pavel Jasansky and Michal Macku continue in the tradition.

In her concluding remarks, Fineman summarizes the importance of the show as offering "a truer picture of photography's past." But we can be even more specific: the show conclusively demonstrates that image alteration and combining have been an intrinsic part of the photographic process since the beginning; that it is entirely germane to the medium, and not merely an fanciful aberration that undermined the reign of the "straight" photography of a generation or two ago, much less the invention of "digital process" photography. In addition, it demonstrates again and again that under much more challenging conditions than the Photoshop environment, artists did it with grace, precision, and immense imagination. **M**