

Matthew Brandt

Photography concentrates one's eye on the superficial. For that reason it obscures the hidden life which glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade. One can't catch that even with the sharpest lens. One has to grope for it by feeling...This automatic camera doesn't multiply men's eyes but only gives a fantastically simplified fly's eye view.

-Franz Kafka, 1921¹

The image on this card, Matthew Brandt's *American Lake WA D* (2011), is not an ordinary photograph. In fact, it might be misleading to simply label the work a photograph. This is because of the unique process of the artist, wherein the subject of the work (in this case water from the lake being photographed) is used as an active element in the creation of the final image.

Brandt began by taking a photograph of American Lake in the State of Washington. After developing the photograph, Brandt soaked it in water he took from American Lake, allowing the colors to run and degrade. The resulting image is one in which the balance of the three primary colors in the photographic print is upset, with the cyan blues concentrating toward the left side of the image creating dark pools, while the magenta reds and yellows saturate the work with varying degrees of intensity across the rest of the surface. This parallels Brandt's wider process of incorporating the subject into his photographs. For example, he has printed photographs of buildings using dust taken from the buildings that were photographed, or dust taken from the spot where the buildings used to stand, and he has used the dead bodies of honey bees from a collapsed colony as the pigment for a photograph of a swarm of bees. In this way, the final art work has a presence beyond a mere photograph, and it broadens the possibilities for photography as an artistic medium.

From the time of its invention, photography initiated a crisis in art. With photography's ability to faithfully reproduce the world around it, the need for skilled artists was eliminated, and especially for portrait and landscape artists with the technical ability to paint things naturalistically. This sparked a lively debate as to the true nature and purpose of art and greatly accelerated the development of modern art. Some fighting back against photography, such as Franz Kafka in the quote above, have sought to degrade it, saying photography leads merely to an objective rendering of the subject without any artistic input. Even the word "photograph" (*photo* meaning "light," *graph* "write"—i.e., "that which is written by light") reflects the view that photography removes the mediation of the artist. Influential theorist Susan Sontag had this objective quality in mind when she described photography as, "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."²

There is a bit of a false premise underlying these discussions about photography, however, because photography is not as objective as it may seem. To think of photography as merely objective is to ignore issues of framing, focal depth, angle of view, choice of subject, lighting, and of course manipulation after the fact. The light that comes in through the lens is mediated by either chemical or digital processes that are controlled by the artist. The subsequent stage of developing a print leaves the work open to even more intervention. While the artist's hand may be less obvious in a photograph than in a painting, the fact that this artifice hides behind the veil of objectivity makes photography all the more deceptive and seductive.

Brandt's work does not present itself as an objective reflection of reality. On the contrary, the manipulation in the development process (I use this term in the broad sense of the entire process from negative to final print) is celebrated as a central feature of the work. With each individual print, Brandt allows the work to degrade by letting it soak for an extended period of time. Thus, water is used to both construct and deconstruct the print. In its final form, the print appears as if we are still looking at it through a layer of water, with an unstable surface and light distortion. Despite laying bare the manipulation in the development process, Brandt makes an attempt to remove his hand from the work to some degree by introducing an element of chance in the way the water is allowed to warp and distort the color in the print. Rather than exerting the kind of precise control over the image traditionally valued in photography (a careful hand that gives an air of objectivity to the works of people like Ansel Adams or Dorothea Lange), he lets go. He allows the water to help shape and sculpt the image for him.

In his seminal 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin discussed the ways he thought mechanically derived images lack the "aura" of authenticity associated with traditional artistic objects. In regard to photographs, he said that "from a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."³ To Benjamin, because photographs can be reproduced endlessly and distributed in any number of ways, the artwork becomes little more than a general idea that lacks a presence in time and space. He argued that one cannot go see THE photograph, but only one particular iteration of it. However, Brandt's process resists Benjamin's critique since each Brandt work is necessarily unique—it is impossible to get the lake water to degrade any two prints the same way—so each print has its own final form, unlike any other.

That the water used to degrade the print is from the lake being photographed is also important. In this way, the work becomes a collaboration between the artist and the subject of the photograph. The lake shapes the photograph both at the initial stage (when light from the lake passes through the lens and imprints its image on the negative) and in the development stage (when water from the lake determines how the chemical process will present that image to the viewer).

The process by which Brandt returns the photograph to its subject matter challenges the notion that it is indeed merely an image of the lake. Washed and eroded by the lake's water, Brandt's print gains a kinship with the rocks and sediment of the shoreline. Like the rocks, trees, sand, and dock in the image, the artwork enters the lake's extended ecosystem. What the work presents to the viewer is not merely an *image* of the shaping power of water, but an *example* of it. The work becomes both image and object.

--Clinton J. Buhler

Matthew Brandt lives and works in Los Angeles. His work is the permanent collections of a number of museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Columbus Museum of Art, the Cincinnati Museum of Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum. His work has been included in numerous museum group exhibitions. His first solo museum exhibition ("Matthew Brandt: sticky/dusty/wet") recently opened at the Columbus Museum of Art, where it will remain until March 9, 2014, before traveling to the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art. www.matthewbrandt.com

¹ Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, quoted from Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2005), 207.

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2005), 154.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."