

S. Billie Mandle,
*Our Lady of Perpetual
Help*, 2008. From the
series *Reconciliation*
© S. Billie Mandle



What new debates and ideas are occupying scholars of the medium? Photography historian Robin Kelsey outlines the key ideas animating research today.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help: Thoughts on Recent Scholarship on Photography Robin Kelsey

Scholarship on photography is so abundant and varied today that discerning trends is no easy task. But perhaps photography itself can assist us. In particular, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* (2008), one of a series of photographs by S. Billie Mandle of compartments for penitents in confessionals, may serve as a helpful touchstone. It has in common with much recent scholarship a set of paired concerns: structural division and exchange, materiality and trace, community and ritual, revelation and absence, sin and history. Reflection on these concerns in the light of *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* may stimulate new thoughts about the current state of photography scholarship.

Structural Division and Exchange

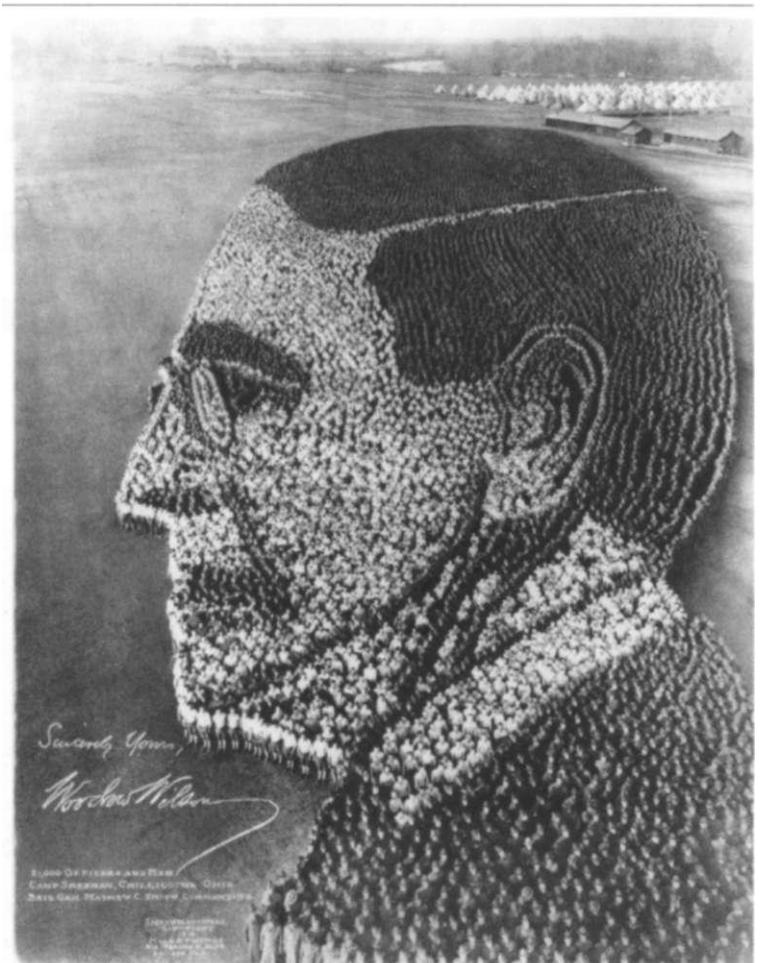
Part of the power of Mandle's photograph is that the space it shows us is inseparable from another we cannot see; the compartment of the penitent is bound to the unseen compartment of the priest. The concourse between these spaces is restricted by tradition: individuals enter each space bodily but interact as disembodied voices passing through a screen. The two spaces are asymmetrical. We see the space of the sinner who seeks forgiveness, while the space of authority, the space from which absolution can issue, remains hidden.

Perhaps the primary challenge to scholarship on photography today is the division of the subject into two distinct but connected spaces. One is the space of things, where photographs are made of paper, glass, silver, dyes, and other materials, and where we handle them, hang them on walls, move them about, and put them in boxes. The other is the virtual space of our digital network of server farms and hard drives, where photographs have no substance or size and arrive suddenly when we beckon them to our glowing screens. Photographs pass from one space to the other through the prescribed channels of digitization or printing, or meet in hybrid contraptions, such as the digital picture frame.

Curiosity about the division between these spaces has displaced concern for older divisions, such as that between photography and painting. Questions about medium have mostly given way to questions about *pictures* or *images*. The rise of *picture* as a category is revealing. In 1977 curator and art historian Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition used the word's nonspecific quality to set a postmodern interest in photography, video, and film against a modernist exaltation of painting. By 1994 scholar and theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, in his book *Picture Theory*, was using the category to open up a new discussion of visual culture. Following precedent, he distinguished between picture ("a constructed concrete object or ensemble") and image ("the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides a beholder"). Although he introduced his book with a discussion of television, Mitchell wrote on the cusp of a digital revolution that would make television seem feeble as a purveyor of visual representations and threaten to wash away the significance of older pictorial forms.

In recent years, reference to visual representations on computer screens and to the phenomenal experiences they engender has collapsed into the term *images*, obscuring the distinction between electronic representations and mental experiences. We tend to reserve the term *picture* for representations of an older and more concrete kind. As Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen noted in the summer 2012 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, for Crimp, the turn to *picture* was a way of opposing the modernism of critic and art historian Michael Fried, but by 2008 Fried himself had taken up the notion of the picture to shore up the aesthetic promise of pictorial art in his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. For modernist aesthetes such as Fried, Jeff Wall, and others, the category of *picture* became the route by which photography could come to be taken seriously as art and thus brought into alliance with painting. The new culture industry of the Internet has made the old high-low rivalry between painting and photography beside the point; they have a shared fate now. Meanwhile, the surge of photography into contemporary art has raised a host of issues, from philosophical questions about the role of agency in art production to historical questions about how this surge came to pass.

The recent negotiation of the divide between modernism and postmodernism can be traced within a narrower body of scholarship on photography proper. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, writing on photography was dominated by a modernist emphasis on formal experiment and medium autonomy. The Museum of Modern Art in New York was the principal American organ for this scholarly strain, with works such as Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography* and John Szarkowki's *The Photographer's Eye* becoming canonical in the field. Between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, writers such as Rosalind Krauss and Allan Sekula led a rebellion against such modernist narratives and the historical amnesia that the assimilation of photography into the modernist art museum had entailed. They focused instead on the production of photographic meaning by *discourse*—a term that cultural critic Michel Foucault had momentarily used to refer to systems of communicated knowledge. In the wake of this rebellion, writers on photography tended either to attend to the specific formal qualities of pictures in a modernist mode or to draw away from pictures and unmask the mystification of photographic discourse through postmodern critique. In recent years, scholars have begun working across this modernist/postmodernist divide by attending to photographic form as a historically positioned and politically saturated intervention in its own right. Art historian Jae Emerling's 2012 book *Photography: History and Theory* offers a splendid account of this new scholarly turn.



Arthur Mole and John Thomas, *Sincerely Yours, Woodrow Wilson, 21,000 officers and men, Camp Sherman, Ohio, ca. 1918*
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Scholars have taken a keen interest in how photographs and their circulation establish social ties, negotiate commonalities and differences of identity, confirm cultural assumptions, and generate moral obligations.

Materiality and Bodily Trace

Another strength of Mandle's photograph is its concern for bodily traces. The cumulative kneeling of penitents has left a worn and darkened patch on the rectangle of green felt, and their shoes have scraped the surface of the acoustic tiles. These traces remind us of the anatomical effort of kneeling in this cramped space, and of the repetition of this action over time. These corporeal imaginings mingle evocatively with thoughts of the disembodied interlocution for which the penitents kneel and the forgiveness it purports to deliver.

One effect of the emergence of the virtual space of the Internet is a new fascination with the material tactility and obduracy of photographs as things. Prior to the Internet, scholars tended to regard photography as a dematerializing medium. Now interest has surged in the material substrate of photography, from the accidents of its liquid chemistry to the creases and stains of its paper supports. The turn toward the tactile is exemplified by the title of Margaret Olin's book *Touching Photographs*, published last year. The motivation behind this turn is less nostalgia than a desire to understand the history of photography anew in light of our digital moment. Indeed, even as scholars investigate the materiality of old photographs, their specific inquiries pursue contemporary concerns. For example, in these days of digital cutting and pasting, scholarship on composite printing and



Sir Edward Charles Blount, from the *Blount Album*, 1860s/1880s, a sixty-page collection of collages made from watercolors and albumen prints. Featured in Elizabeth Siegel's *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* (Art Institute of Chicago/Yale University Press, 2009) Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin

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photocollage has been burgeoning. From Jordan Bear's work on the composite photographs of Oscar Rejlander to Elizabeth Siegel's exhibition and catalog on Victorian photocollage, *Playing with Pictures* (2009), to Andres Zervigon and Sabine Kriebel's recent studies on John Heartfield and photomontage in Weimar Berlin, we know far more about the history of these practices today than we did several years ago. This incisive scholarship has attuned us to signs of process and labor, and to the issues of economy, identity, and culture in which they are enmeshed.

Community and Ritual

The interior of the penitent's compartment in Mandle's photograph has a specificity that raises questions about the church that houses it and the community to which it belongs. Confession is an intimate exchange between penitent and priest, but that exchange is sanctioned by an institution that binds a community in ritual. The ritual in question is predicated on a sense of obligation, an act of conscience, and the disclosure of truth. The community it affirms has left the cumulative marks of its membership in the worn patches of felt and wall, making the space we see at once both intensely private and profoundly shared.

There has been much interesting recent scholarship on photography and community. Scholars have taken a keen interest in how photographs and their circulation establish social ties, negotiate commonalities and differences of identity, confirm cultural assumptions, and generate moral obligations. Ariella Azoulay's 2008 *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Blake Stimson's 2006 *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation*, and Louis Kaplan's 2005 *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* are three notable examples of recent literature in this area. The growing interest in photography and community follows the postmodernist preference for the study of photographic practices rather than individual photographs. But relative to the path-breaking postmodernism of Sekula and Krauss this new scholarship is less in the sway of Foucault and his notion of discourse, more interested in practices outside the control of large institutions, and less certain of its disillusionment. By pursuing the nexus of photography and community, this recent scholarship takes a fresh look at photography's promise as a democratic instrument and its claims to universality. Azoulay writes of "the citizenry of photography," while Stimson considers "photography and its nation." Both of these scholars take seriously the possibility of photography having a politics that counters the volatile and often oppressive divisions of social identity. The role of ritual in the affirmation of photography's social value as a token of the moral claims that reality makes on us has led Stimson and this author to redefine the photographic index as "a secular ritual form, as a post-postmodern Salah or Shabbat or wafer and wine." *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* can remind us of photography's own operations of truthful disclosure and moral obligation, and of the community that its rituals reinforce.

Some scholars who are drawing attention to social practices of photography have taken heed of the field's poor record of prognostication in the early digital era. Many predictions of the end of photography, or at least of its reliability in the wake of the digital turn, exaggerated the import of mechanical process and ontology and slighted the determining effects of social practice. As several scholars have observed, personal and family photography and the assumptions undergirding them have changed remarkably little in recent years. The means of production, storage, and dissemination have changed, but many of the rituals endure.

Revelation and Absence

For a contemporary picture, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* traffics in many of photography's hoarier qualities. It portrays a camera of sorts: a box infused with light. By bringing illumination to a social space ordinarily darkened and unseen, Mandle follows in the footsteps of many celebrated practitioners, such as the Progressive Era reformer Jacob Riis, who aimed his flash into tenement airshafts and bunk-filled flophouses. Mandle's long exposure allows the dim light in the confessional compartment to accrete, supplying a degree of visibility unavailable to the ordinary eye at the site itself. Photography is here living up to its Enlightenment promise to penetrate the veils of our ignorance and offer us a clearer vision of reality. But this clarity has its conditions: the long exposure precludes any direct registration of the fidgety bodies that regularly occupy this space. We are left instead with evidence of past action—the stains, the wear, the soiling—that calls to mind the absent life. In this respect, the photograph takes us back to the early history of the medium, when sensitized plates reacted too slowly to capture action, and photographers of the Civil War (to take a prime example) had to content themselves with posed camp scenes and battlefield remains. An article in the *London Times* from 1862 asserted: "The photographer who follows in the wake of modern armies must be content with conditions of repose, and with the still life which remains when the fighting is over."

Coming in the wake of a long succession of confessional encounters, Mandle offers us conditions of repose. But what is most affecting about these conditions is less their stillness than their degraded banality. The floor and the acoustic tiles are of a very common kind, and the disrepair of the compartment adds to the disparity between the base conditions of this space and the lofty aspirations of the sanctified practice that takes place within it. This disparity brings home the fallen state of the penitent, while also invoking the transubstantiations associated with photography as art. Since the days of the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who welcomed conspicuously clumsy props and weary sitters into her allegorical scenes, photographers have sought to alchemically transmute unpromising everyday matter into something divine.

In recent years, scholars have continued to bring forgotten and neglected practices and histories to light. These efforts have often revealed photography's grubby underside, which in the heyday of Newhall and Szarkowski lay largely hidden beneath canonical exemplars, whitewashed accounts, or honorific tales of technological advance. This critical strain in recent scholarship includes Steve Edwards's 2006 book analyzing photographic discourse in nineteenth-century England (*The Making of English Photography: Allegories*); Andre Gunthert's trenchant critical reappraisals of key photographic myths in the journal *Etudes photographiques*; Clément Chéroux's 2003 book on photographic errors (*Fautographie*); and Tanya Sheehan's recent work on race in early American photography. From these authors, we now have a clearer and more capacious understanding of many matters, including photographers as a class in Victorian England (Edwards), the emergence of the instantaneous photograph (Gunthert), the history of aesthetic delight in photographic distortion (Chéroux), and the role of race and humor in the shaping of photographic conventions (Sheehan). The desire to understand specific photographic practices across a broad range of social and geographical domains has driven new publishing schemes. Such initiatives as the journal *Photography and Culture*, launched in 2008, and Reaktion Books' *Exposures* series, which now has over a dozen books, with titles such as *Photography and China*, *Photography and Science*, and *Photography and Literature*, exemplify the broad scope of current scholarship.

Sin and History

The scrapes and stains in *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* linger like the material residues of castoff sins. They are traces of the many stories that penitents have told about wayward steps and failed struggles with temptation. They are thus doubly removed from the sinful actions that confession is designed to address, and these actions are themselves only echoes of original sin. The photograph is the polar opposite of the decisive moment of street photography, which once promised to catch modernity instantaneously and on the fly. Mandle's camera comes after the many transgressions, and after their many histories, to slowly produce a picture suffused with scrutiny, meditation, and belatedness. The act of recording this room carries with it a sense of unveiling the past, and even of disinfecting its soiled spaces with light. The picture recalls not only the sins of petitioners but also those of the church and its representatives. This community bound in ritual has been riddled with segregations, intolerance, and sexual scandal.

Contemporary scholarship on photography often seems similarly removed from immediacy and concerned with reflective matters of conscience. Scholars have been writing histories of photography theory, such as Bernd Stiegler's 2006 *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie* (History of the theory of photography) and Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest's 2011 *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective: Case Studies from Contemporary Art*. We also have many histories of histories, accounts of how the archives and canonical stories of photography were formed. These accounts frequently wrap themselves around the moral missteps of prior generations, noting their egregious exclusions, hidden biases, and self-serving assumptions. The tone is often more prosecutorial than confessional. But these critical appraisals of past sins serve a shedding and lightening function of their own. A desire to rectify past wrongs has driven the expanded reach of scholarship and brought oppressed subjects into a more sympathetic visibility. Shawn Michelle Smith's 2004 *Photography on the Color Line: IV.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*, an investigation into archives and photographs of African-Americans, is a case in point.

The tiles lining the confessional compartment depicted in *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* signify a mid-twentieth-century interior. Repositioned in the space of art, they recall that period's modernism and its decline. The shabby, mass-produced echoes they provide of the monochromes and field paintings of high modernism allow the photograph to speak to a larger history, and to the sins for which it must account. Eugene Atget's photographs of Paris have been famously likened to those of a crime scene, and part of the productive friction of *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* is that it bears the same affinity. But here we cannot think of crime without thinking of punishment and forgiveness—and of a paradigmatic modernist aim: grace.

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