

Critical Response

I

Photography and AI: Why It Matters, Though

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Hot Dog Sandwich

Is a hot dog a sandwich? Sandwiches seem familiar and obvious, easy to define. But millions of answers making up this meme prove otherwise.¹ Sandwich experts may tell us rules of substance and form, outline expansive taxonomies, reassure us with citations about an English Earl. As each entry attempts a more comprehensive and conclusive answer, the pedantry compounds. But the more total and definitive the answer seems to be, the less self-evident its criteria appear. The very pomposity of the sandwich expert begins to read as a winking acknowledgement that their expertise can only be performative, their authority self-authorizing. Each iteration of the meme that claims to resolve the question adds to the ongoing gag, so the debate goes absurdly on.

Amanda Wasielewski's essay on AI and photography takes up a hot-dog-sandwich kind of question (see Amanda Wasielewski, "Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photographs," *Critical Inquiry* 51 [Autumn 2024]: 1–29). Wasielewski asserts that, "framed within long-standing debates on the ontology of the photographic image," her essay "seeks to answer the question: Can photorealistic AI-generated images be defined as photographs?" (p. 6). Here photography

1. See, for example, Megan Garber, "It's Not a Sandwich," *Atlantic*, 5 Nov. 2015, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/11/its-not-a-sandwich/414352/; Jillian Kramer, "Ruth Bader Ginsburg Weighs in on Whether a Hot Dog Is a Sandwich," *Food and Wine*, 22 Mar. 2018, www.foodandwine.com/news/ruth-bader-ginsburg-hot-dog-sandwich; and "Is a Hot Dog a Sandwich? Science Finally Has the Answer," *Discover*, 4 Apr. 2022, www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/is-a-hotdog-a-sandwich-science-finally-has-the-answer. Thanks to Scott Richmond for suggesting this meme in relationship to AI.

would be the familiar sandwich and AI-generated images the hot dogs that beg classification. Like the TikTok videos claiming to solve sandwichness once and for all, this essay proposes a comprehensive theory of photographicness.

Photography can certainly seem familiar, given that most people make, see, and circulate what they understand as photographs every day without feeling puzzled about defining them. But, like the sandwich meme, attempts to explain photography unsettle what went unquestioned. What photography might be has been continually reinvented and reimagined over almost two centuries, bound up with broader negotiations of relationships between art and technology, reality and representation, visibility and knowability. I agree with Wasielewski that this history offers important resources for engaging current questions. Reengaging with the difficulty of defining photography could offer critical purchase on AI-generated images. But that's not what the essay does.

Wasielewski effectively seeks to reconcile two things: how photography came to be understood through dominant theorizations of its medium-specificity—primarily by twentieth-century, US and European cultural theorists—and what counts as photographic in the current context of AI-driven imaging. This choice about how to approach the mutual definition of photography and AI-generated images strongly delimits what could count as definitive. As with the hot-dog-sandwich meme, the essay answers its framing question through the way that its inquiry is, itself, framed. That it presumes what it would prove is signaled as soon as the title's reference to "AI-generated photographs"—a speech act equivalent to "hot dog sandwiches." Instead of revisiting an established discourse to find insights on current debates, the essay's rereading of that discourse reduces what could be found there. It allows old ways of thinking about photography to constrain current thinking about AI, but also redefines photography through norms of AI-driven imaging in order to argue that AI-generated images are photographic.

The problem is not that this essay gets the answer wrong. As with the hot-dog-sandwich meme, what matters is how the criteria for an answer are put forward as given. By treating ideas and aesthetic norms that have become familiar and conventional as therefore essential, the essay incorporates and reiterates the logics of machine learning that it would interrogate. This tautological approach threatens not only to carry forward influential oversimplifications, but also to naturalize newly dominant terms of AI as ahistorical or inevitable conditions of how things are and always have been.

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Photographicness

To argue that “photorealistic AI-generated images” should be considered photographs, Wasielewski defines photographs as images that look photorealistic.² This emphasis on how things look is possible only by taking digitization as the default, beginning from the same premise that enables visual material to be processed in machine learning operations. She “exclude[s] the physical and material dimensions of photographic objects” to consider only what could be expressed through surface appearance and associated pixel values of a “two-dimensional,” screenable image (p. 7). This presumes a paradox in which historically and materially specific conditions define photographic aesthetics but no longer matter once those aesthetics can be applied like filters to any digital image.

Wasielewski argues that the “distinctive” visual and formal properties of photography are “specific” to the “physics of the materials and equipment used” to make photographs. But she glosses over any specificity in referring to “different photographic techniques” that produce “qualities” in “a variety of ways,” “with all that entails.” Wasielewski suggests that the distinctive qualities of photography are “often overlooked” not despite but because they convey “photographicness” in a familiar way; indeed she too overlooks them, declining to elaborate what is deemed obvious. It is difficult to know what “specific visual appearance” or “visual effects” she takes as definitive, given the wide range of photographic technologies and aesthetics. Centering photorealism privileges one strand of photographic practice—excluding, for example, abstraction. But, consider the different qualities of a daguerreotype or calotype, a Rayograph or Polaroid. The argument hinges on “photographic form,” but what that is remains purposefully vague (p. 4).

The essay’s third paragraph suggests why Wasielewski’s notion of photographic aesthetics is so generalized: this aligns with how AI-driven systems interpret photographic form (see p. 29). She explains that, in making an AI-generated image, a prompt engineer might type the name of a particular camera, lens, or film to apply its style. This is possible because visual properties associated with these terms have been gleaned through machine learning processes, extracted from sets of training images in which photographs are linked to these terms through metadata, tags, or labels. Rather than considering how such extraction and translation might transform or reduce photographic aesthetics, Wasielewski defines “photographic form” as the very distillation of this process. This sleight of hand correlates with the gesture of making digitization the default: what counts as photographic slips from an

2. For a critique of this elision, see Liv Hausken, “Photorealism Versus Photography: AI-Generated Depiction in the Age of Visual Disinformation,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2024): 1–14.

association between specific formal properties and a specific material process to an association between a label—such as “Sigma 85 mm f/1.4”—and an information pattern gleaned from quantitative analysis of images associated with that label.

Simply eliding photographic and computational aesthetics forecloses what could be most productive to interrogate: what it means for machine learning to extract and extrapolate the computational from the photographic is precisely what leading scholars on this topic explore and critique.³ In contrast, Wasielewski’s effort to determine whether AI-generated images are photographs has preemptively ceded everything to the assumptions of AI-enabled imaging, taking as its premise how AI-systems define and categorize patterns gleaned from image sets as photographic.⁴ Machine learning’s mode of pattern recognition is transposed as common sense to suggest that we all know what photography is because we have seen enough photographs to know what photographiness looks like.

If this essay aimed to address how photographs are “used, circulated, and received”—how photographs “communicate”, “culturally speaking”—it is an odd choice to resuscitate a philosophical debate about ontology (p. 4). Although she does not directly say it—and this, too, reminds me of the hot-dog-sandwich meme—the conclusion she comes to suggests, implicitly or explicitly, that this debate is itself nonsensical. The ontological problem is a false lure if photography is simply what looks photographic and when this describes a reality effect untethered from what really is. Wasielewski claims that in the era of AI, “photography has become a regress of representations” but also that “AI-generated photographs” only “expose the experience of reality in all photographs as fantasy” (pp. 20, 19). Of all the theorists she invokes, then, Jean Baudrillard seems to carry the day: from 1981 to 2024 and digitization to AI, the simulacra still triumph.

Insights of poststructural and postmodern theory offer little new traction at our current impasse in visual culture, as consensus around any shared reality

3. See, for example, Hito Steyerl, “Mean Images,” *New Left Review* 140/141 (Mar./June 2023): 82–97; Antonio Somaini, “Algorithmic Images: Artificial Intelligence and Visual Culture,” *Grey Room* 93 (Fall 2023): 74–115; Nicolas Malevé and Katrina Sluis, “The Photographic Pipeline of Machine Vision; or, Machine Vision’s Latent Photographic Theory,” *Critical AI* 1, nos. 1–2 (2023), read.dukeupress.edu/critical-ai/article/doi/10.1215/2834703X-10734066/382465/The-Photographic-Pipeline-of-Machine-Vision-or; and Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, “Excavating AI: The Politics of Training Sets for Machine Learning,” excavating.ai

4. My thought here is indebted to conversations with Kris Paulsen and Lindsay Kaplan about art and AI. For related arguments, see Lindsay Kaplan, “Method without Methodology: Data and the Digital Humanities,” *e-flux* 72 (Apr. 2016): www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60492/method-without-methodology-data-and-the-digital-humanities/, and Kris Paulsen, “Video’s Past Futures,” in *The New Television: Video After Television* (forthcoming).

appears increasingly fraught. To rediscover that mediation is always mediation only glosses over the problem of how reality and representation relate, missing how this relationship is restaged through changing visual technologies and shifting rhetorics of simulation or fakes. We cannot beg the question of photorealism when there are life and death implications involved in what looks realistic and appears visibly true.⁵ Reality effects may be fantasies, but they are also ideological effects and articulations of power. The history and discourse of photography are valuable for the object lessons they provide about how this has worked: how the terms of visual mediation negotiate ways visibility and reality are themselves conceived and shape what seems to take place as actual and visible, witnessable and representable, deserving or demanding response. In turn, new technical and conceptual frameworks of *generation* associated with AI could offer ways to rethink what we assumed we understood about visual mediation's terms.

Long-Standing Debates

The fact that it does not really matter how we classify a hot dog makes it fun to see how many different ways the criteria for a sandwich could be rethought. There are important stakes, however, in how AI-generated images are understood; and this triggers long-standing anxieties about the contingency and fungibility of any criteria for defining a photograph. Working back through debates about photography offers the chance to reconsider the chestnuts and bromides that have carried forward from that discourse but now fall short as we engage with AI. Trying to understand how photography and AI relate prompts us to address what is particular about contemporary imaging, and, in turn, to recall the particularities that have attended earlier imaging practices and their theorization.

Wasielewski surveys a wide range of influential ideas in the theory of photography, offering summaries and syntheses that I often see as misunderstandings. I disagree, for example, with using *The Pencil of Nature* as synecdoche for all nineteenth-century thought on photography and that a singular "ur-theory of the medium" is apparent among the contradictory ideas still jostling between its texts and images (p. 5). I am confounded by the claim that what Roland Barthes terms the *punctum* is both "the locus of surrealism in photography" and what Walter Benjamin calls "the 'optical unconscious'" (pp. 18, 19). I cringe to see Gerhard Richter's profound investigation of photography paraphrased as an assertion that his paintings are photographs. I

5. Consider, for example, images of murdered Black men from Emmett Till to George Floyd, satellite images of so-called weapons of mass destruction used to authorize invading Iraq, the work of Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture, and plastic surgeons asked to deliver results expected from Instagram filters.

urge anyone interested in Richter's concept of *photography by other means* to read Kaja Silverman's chapter with this title in *Flesh of My Flesh*.⁶ I urge anyone interested in Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious" and the "spark of contingency" he saw in early portraits to consult Miriam Hansen's careful elucidations of his often-cryptic thought.⁷ I would caution anyone thinking alongside Barthes to rethink his blind spots—perhaps starting with the work of Shawn Michelle Smith.⁸

Despite all this, positing my own or others' readings as definitive would undermine my larger interest in refuting this essay's method: its summary rereadings discard the nuance that has made these texts so compelling and deliberately excludes the objects and practices that these theories theorize.⁹ Wasielewski samples many of the most-cited passages from many of the most-anthologized texts by some of the best-known authors on photography in order to distill the *main idea* from what already appear as the main ideas. This finds less rather than more in the well-trodden ground that it re-treads. It is an approach that resonates with the method of large language models like ChatGPT.

Much as AI-driven tools are restructuring visual culture, they are restructuring research and writing, reshaping seeing and thinking toward modes of machine learning that sample and simplify. ChatGPT can offer a useful overview of a vast topic, surveying and synthesizing the most-circulated information into a quick summary; but it falls apart in the details, where it gets important things wrong. Beyond overt mistakes, the frictionless distillation sought and produced through such methods cannot help but miss what makes a complex discourse rich: its tensions and contradictions, its oversights and occlusions, the way particular contexts shape general claims, or the way the connotations of a phrase overrun its paraphrase.

Whatever photography is or might be, one reason its objects and practices remain interesting is because they instantiate what informs and yet exceeds the structures and strategies of AI-driven imaging. To equate photography

6. See Kaja Silverman, "Photography by Other Means," *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, Calif., 2009), pp. 168–222.

7. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, 2011). See also Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 336–75.

8. See Shawn Michelle Smith, "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*," in *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, N.C., 2013), pp. 23–38.

9. Along with the concept of surface reading, which suggests interest in form rather than deeper meaning, I would also suggest the digital humanities concept of distance reading, which describes a computational and statistical approach to textual interpretation that looks for patterns in large amounts of literary data. See Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 1–21, and Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York, 2005).

with the effects of AI prompts is to ignore everything that machine learning's logics of extraction already leave behind. AI-driven methods for finding patterns and identifying norms disregard what appears statistically insignificant or unsynthesizable as irrelevant and unrecognizable. This offers an impoverished approach to finding and making meaning in humanistic and critical inquiry. To explore how AI-driven processes distill, composite, and reinvent whatever they analyze demands forms of analysis that would not simply emulate these processes and adopt their assumptions in the name of understanding and explaining them.

Near the end of her essay, Wasielewski reiterates that "photorealistic AI-generated images" should "be defined as photographs" because they "effectively imitate photography," even if this only simulates the "specificity" photography has been "seen to epitomize" (p. 27). Conceding, then, that this redefines photography as its simulation, she brushes aside the stakes of that distinction, asking: "Does it matter, though?" (p. 28). This seems to end with a shrug, right where a different question and richer debate could begin: If these images count as photographs, what would that mean and how would it matter? To ask this would require thinking both more concretely and more broadly about *photographicness*, to consider how the "physical and material dimensions" of form and technique that Wasielewski has bracketed relate to larger formulations of subjectivity, knowledge, and power.

We might begin again with the example that opens Wasielewski's essay, "photorealistic images of people" who do not exist (p. 3). If these are seen as photographs, what does that imply about seeing their subjects as people? The terms of photographic mediation have always been bound up with the ways personhood is conceived and conferred as visually recognizable. Machine learning scraped photography's history of depicting people to glean conventions for creating convincing AI-generated portraits. But we could find important insights in the particularities that were averaged out. For example, what remains relevant about: early daguerreotypes meant either as portraits or ethnographic studies; the *carte de visite*'s multiples and the snapshot's early automations; the visceral propositions of stereoscopic nudes and composite portraits; ways photographers have subverted portraiture's racialized norms; or how material limits of lenses structured what smartphones simulate in portrait mode? AI-enabled imaging inherits much more from the history of photography than a menu of visual styles.¹⁰

Asking whether AI-generated images are photographs is a hot-dog-sandwich question, poised to stoke debate. But, trying to resolve what photography

10. I pursue this argument further in Brooke Belisle, *Depth Effects: Dimensionality from Camera to Computation* (Oakland, Calif., 2024).

really is or which images are really photographs will not help us address crucial concerns that continue from photography through AI. For example: What ethical demands do images pose to viewers? Whose way of seeing does the idea of *photorealism* ratify? Attempting to define *photographicness* as an ahistorical and universal quality—seeking the kind of rule that AI might extrapolate—misses the ongoing contestation of values at stake in its continual redefinition. Simply subsuming the photographic into the computational, just as AI-driven methods do, essentializes what is dominant and familiar but misses the chance to think critically about both the past and present.