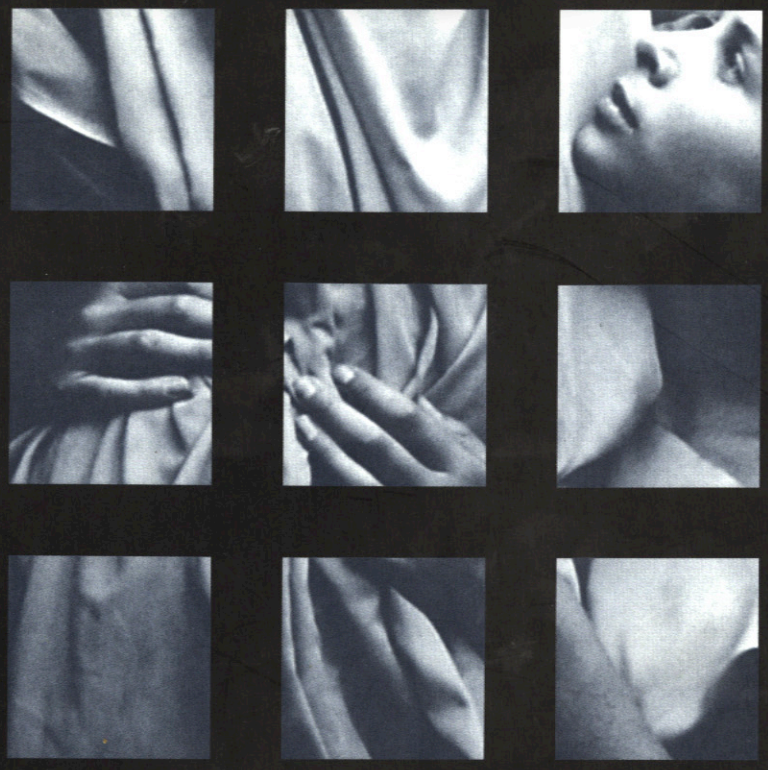


EACH WILD IDEA

WRITING PHOTOGRAPHY HISTORY

GEOFFREY BATCHEN

While this generation of artists extended the photograph out into space, later practitioners pursued the spatiality *within* the photograph. David Hockney's various cameraworks of the early 1980s, large collages constructed from Polaroid and color snapshots, turn looking at photographs into a temporal experience. Each snapshot represents a distinct moment in time; seen collectively, they mark the passage of time lived by the artist during the making of the overall image. We witness duration. But we also move through space, questing through a given scene in concert with Hockney's own eye. Unlike any single photograph, his otherwise banal and decorative images convey a sense of depth and dimension, of multidimension. Abandoning the singular perspective recommended by the camera, Hockney draws with his photographs, once again making the edge of the photograph a prominent feature and the ground of his image, its negative unoccupied space, a vital part of our visual experience.[6]

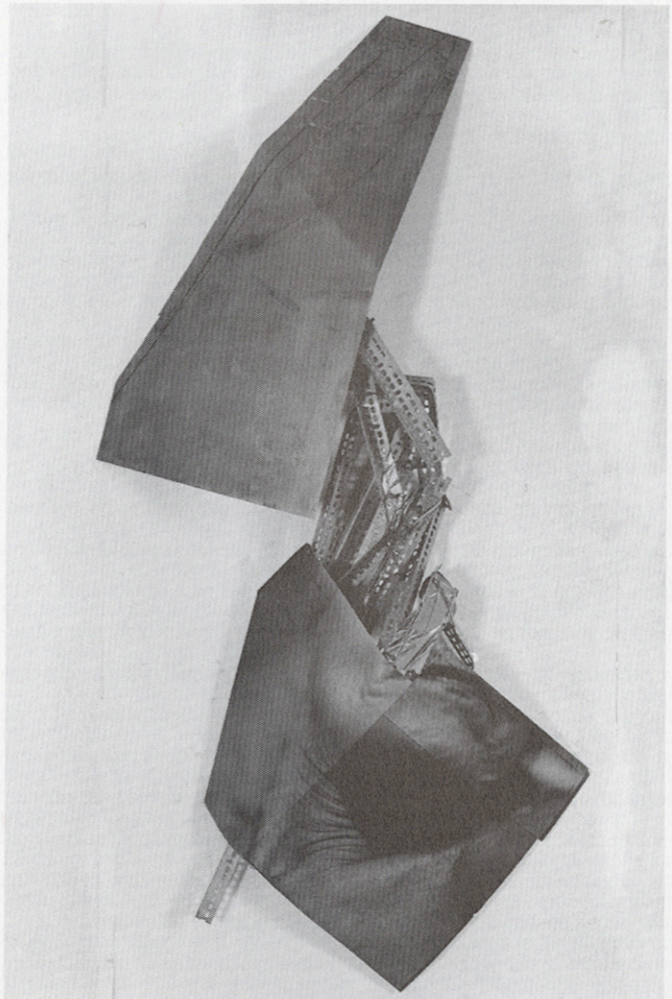
Post-photography takes these various permutations of the photograph as a given. Like photography itself, they have been consigned to the toolbox of history. Now any number of artists practice a form of transmutation in which photographic imagery reappears as solid apparitions of glass, timber, graphite, stone, paint, paper, vinyl, or wax. Turned into an artifact, the photograph has become just one more reference point to an industrial age already rapidly passing us by. Photography has become "photography," eternally framed by the quotation marks of historical distance and a certain awkward self-consciousness (that embarrassment one feels in the presence of the recently deceased). In short, for these artists, photography has taken on a memorial role, not of the subjects it depicts but of its own operation as a system of representation.

Consider the work of Seattle-based artist Ellen Garvens, for example. The first thing you notice is the sheer size of it. *Hidden Fish* (1989) comes in at four feet high and over five and a half feet wide. It is the sort of work where you need to walk back and forth to take everything in. This includes its depth, for *Hidden Fish* has a literal extra dimension provided by the addition of chunks of weathered marble (which throw shadows back into the work) and the layering of images and surfaces over each other. Generated from a single negative, the images in *Hidden Fish* are strikingly noncommittal as pictures, although loaded with significance as signs. These signs include two examples of coelacanth, the living fossil fish, their stolid photographic facades fissured and fractured with tears and abrasions, only to be stuck back together over sheets of roughly painted plywood. The other half of the image, equally

divided and scarred, gazes down onto the checked floor of the natural history depository where these fish have been found and photographed.

A later work, *Hourglass* (1991), almost seven and a half feet tall, features a photograph of the wrinkled neck and chin of an older woman (in fact, she suffers from a skin disease) laid over a skeletal gathering of angle iron (photo 5.1). One piece of this angle iron continues down behind the photograph to poke out the bottom of the picture directly in line with an artery in the woman's neck. The upper portion of the work consists of a sheet of bent steel, dulled by use and inscribed with scratches and seemingly arbitrary patterns of lines. Like the piece of steel, the photograph curves forward into space, declaring itself as volume and making its materiality an overt part of our perceptual experience. In similar fashion, *Egyptian Ibex* (1992) combines two silver gelatin photographs of mummified animals with steel and crumpled graphite-coated paper. Duct tape helps twist the paper together to mimic the leg form of the ibex in one of the photographs, or at least to echo it in some way. Unremittingly industrial in tone, all of Garvens's photographs tend to drift lazily in and out of focus, refusing the spatial and temporal certainty of a consistent gaze.

There is something calligraphic, perhaps even alchemic, about Garvens's choice and use of materials. They are, after all, the primary "content providers" of her work. These materials are almost always found objects, often broken and abused, their surfaces (like her photographs) scarified by use and the passing of time. Starting from a theme suggested by a particular photograph, she builds around and onto it using the found materials as complementary elements, inevitably achieving a near-symmetrical balance not only of her various components, but also of the organic and the inorganic, abstraction and order, image and metaphor. Often her materials are orchestrated into curvilinear clusters suggestive of bodily organs such as skeletons, arteries, or intestines (yet another example is the bundle of rubber tubing tightly bound with wire that is a part of 1998's *Brooklyn Mosquito*). In such cases, the negative space is as significant as the actual objects, with the wall (and the shadows cast on it) becoming an integrated component of the viewer's visual experience. Indeed, Garvens's work always clings to the wall as its ground and support (thus remaining a drawing more than a sculptural practice). At the same time, the strange morphologies of her objects disrupt the rectangular expectations we usually bring to the photograph; having broken these boundaries, photography is here rendered in more ways than one.



5.1
Ellen Garvens, Hourglass, *1991*
Gelatin silver print, steel
Courtesy of the artist

In his 1981 book, *A New Science of Life,* Rupert Sheldrake proposes a provocative hypothesis about morphogenesis, the process whereby things come to embody particular structural morphologies. He suggests the possibility of a "morphic resonance" between forms and across space and time, a kind of interactive, multidimensional pattern of vibrations.[7] Garvens's work suggests something similar. The easy slippage between one substance and the next, in particular from shards of photographic image to equally fragmentary pieces of metal, stone, or glass, makes materiality—specifically, the matter of photography's physical identity—a central issue. A tension is proposed between the photograph's function as a transparent window onto another world and its opacity as an object, sitting before us in the here and now. The photograph is revealed as two kinds of object then—as simultaneously image and thing (a schizophrenia equally enjoyed by Garvens's nonphotographic materials).

With her consistent references to archaeology, preservation, aging, and mortality, Garvens's work presents photography as one transient entity within a history of such entities. Photography, she implies, is today as much a mummified effigy as the falcons and shriveled hands she borrows from Egyptology; it is something properly housed in a museum. Could it be that the photograph is just another of Garvens's living fossils, still endlessly reproducing itself but notable today primarily for the mere fact of its survival, for still obstinately embodying a certain attitude to the act of representation that is already two centuries old? One of Louis Daguerre's earliest photographs featured three ordered rows of fossilized shells, examples of nature exactly replicating itself in and as stone (just as his daguerreotype process allowed it to do the same in metallic form). Garvens's work brings photography's historical self-consciousness full circle, preserving its identity, but only as a fading memory, as but one morphic vibration even now being passed on from our modern epoch to its successor.

One finds a similar resonance in the work of Pennsylvania-based artist Lynn Cazabon. Cazabon starts by videotaping certain image sequences, sometimes of herself (or at least of her body) and sometimes off her television screen, and then refilms them in black and white with a Super 8 movie camera. In most cases, this film is processed by hand as a negative, toned with colored dyes, and then printed (thus reversing the color tones and leaving her with positive images). The processed film is cut into smaller strips and woven together into various patterns before being taped at the edges onto thick pieces of glass or directly into glass negative carriers. Two types of prints are made from this raw material, photograms (direct con-

tact prints of the woven film strips) and photographs (enlargements of particular sections), both produced on RA color photographic paper. The process is labor intensive, laborious even. But it results in certain effects that seem important to the look of the final prints (our look at them, their look at us).

The Large Plaid (1997) is typical in this regard (photo 5.2). When seen from a distance (as demanded by its sixteen-foot width), it appears as a dense textile of these interwoven film clips, a simultaneously regular and yet uneven grid of black, green, yellow, and blue image strips. The grid, that sign of culture (mathematical, regulated, antinatural, antimimetic), that marker of obsessive, almost neurotic repetition, is imposed on the assumed naturalness, the accidental contingency, of the photograph.[8] Each interrupts the neutrality of the other, undermining the autonomy of both. The fissure that results itself implies a certain kind of erotic encounter (Barthes: "Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.")[9] The extravagant repetition of forms (not only in this work but in all the others that accompany it) suggests yet another such encounter: the dangerously intoxicated reiteration of bodily action that does not so much satisfy desire as threaten its recipients with extinction.

Certainly, at this stage, from this distance, the abstraction of *The Large Plaid*'s form overwhelms the "content" of its individual photographs (in the earliest prints in this series, the component photos are so small that they cannot be discerned, having become nothing more than a stream of visual data). Not that this form is ever particularly stable. *The Large Plaid* shivers and shimmers, flashes and winks at us, even as we stare at it. These flashes occur at those points where two strips of film have overlapped and blocked out most of the light in the printing process. Like the pops and crackles in an old record, such spots interrupt the gridded flow of images and make us acutely aware that we are looking at an object—*at* the photograph rather than *through* it. It also makes us aware of us, of our own looking, of the extent to which our look (or, more precisely, the exchange of looks between us and this surface) is what brings the image to life. It seems we are part of this image, whether we like it or not.

Cazabon teases us with another kind of animation as well, with the possibility of stitching these sequences back into motion, at least in our mind's eye. The restitution of linear space and time is actually quite elusive in *The Large Plaid,* given all those flashes and fissures, given