



# *A retrospective*

by abigail ronck

In a world of verbosity and visual saturation, where cleverness defines intellect, and over-enhancement claims beauty; where the glow of television is company and YouTube creates global news; where half-finished books and half-finished thoughts inform our conversations; and what is old is bound to recycle and become new yet again, **HOW DO WE INTERPRET THE STATE OF PHOTOGRAPHY?**

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## Number Of Working Photographers:

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “a photographer is someone who photographs persons, subjects, merchandise or other commercial products.”<sup>1</sup> While this definition surely includes those working in the portrait, wedding, commercial, industrial, photojournalistic and fine art sectors, the projected number of working photographers in the United States—derived from a 2006 census and average growth predictions—is clearly sitting low at 123,220. As more than half of all photographers are self-employed, a much higher proportion than for most occupations, taking accurate census information is difficult. That’s not to mention those professionals doing freelance and part-time work, or those moving into modern digital imagemaking—a rapidly expanding field that largely defies the ideas of definition, rendering the traditional definition of “photo maker” limiting. According to *Rangefinder* editor Bill Hurter, a more accurate figure would be *at least* double the government’s estimate.

Defining the state of any one thing, person or enterprise is nothing if not about the retrospective—about honoring the spirit of Umberto Eco’s novel title *The Island of the Day Before*. What was it that used to define the visual moments of our lives and what does now? And is the vitality of those things isolated and irretrievable or still very much present? Whether or not industry is on the path to pointed, continental progress, or shipwrecked and treading water, there’s always the notion of how yesterday became today, how much of understanding finds itself bedded in a salute to the past.

Like the rest of trade and craftsmanship in our country, the state of professional photography is in flux. That said, the timing of this exploration is precarious when it comes to making definitive conclusions about the aggregate life that colors-in the art/discipline/profession of imaging. Dating back to the 5th century B.C., when the Chinese philosopher Mo-Ti is said to have created and used the first darkroom, or to Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce’s first permanent photograph—a landscape over an eight-hour exposure in 1826—photography has always defined itself as a spectacularly evolving art form.

Photographic capture, on its way to the common man, found advancement when Kodak introduced the first commercially successful box camera for rollfilm in 1888. Then, in a long and nonspecific timeline of progression, Leica introduced the 35mm format to still in 1925; Kodak trademarked Kodachrome in 1935, before originating the first print film in 1942; the Hasselblad

was introduced in 1948; the first digital image was produced on a computer in 1957; and the crew of the Apollo 17 took the first photo showing a fully lit Earth from space in 1972. In 1981, after a few earlier models had been patented by other companies, Sony released the first commercial electronic still camera, jump-starting the digital revolution, which would eventually lead to Photoshop, cameras that shoot video and the advent of Facebook—in effect, the largest photo album and visual directory to date.

That is perhaps the quickest timeline one might associate with photography. After all, this isn’t a history course; it’s a

retrospective, more about nostalgia and memory than dates, more personal than official.

For me, its beginning lies in the 3x5 capture of me holding my newborn baby brother in our Kansas home: my mouth agape at newfound sisterhood, the print now with dog-eared edges and 23 years gone by. It then moves to digging through my dad’s vinyl records at age 9, in search of John Cougar’s picture on *American Fool*—the image tinged with yellow lighting, the crooner’s collar popped and eyes sultry—so I could dance around the living room with bare, summer feet to “Jack and Diane.” Then there’s my introduction to love—



The author with her brother, Jay, 1986.

## Top Paying States For Photographers: <sup>2</sup>



### The Most Expensive Photograph Ever Sold:

On February 7, 2007, Andreas Gursky's "99 cent II, Dip-tych" was auctioned to an unnamed private collector for the unprecedented price of U.S. \$3.34 million at Sotheby's in London. The two-part work, or diptych, is a chromogenic color print showing the many aisles-on-top-of-aisles in a supermarket. The photograph, measuring 207x337cm has been digitally altered so as to skew perspective and maintain viewer interest. According to a 2007 article in *American Photo*, "While it's too early yet to see how the recent stock market slide will affect art sales, chances are the market for Gursky and other contemporary photography will hold up. **This was the third time in nine months that a print of '99 cent II, Dip-tych' has exceeded the two million mark.**"<sup>3</sup>

hanging the December 1980 image of John Lennon on the wall, him naked and curled into Yoko Ono. Annie Leibovitz shot the pair on the day of Lennon's death for *Rolling Stone*.

It was in high school and college that I collided with a collective life bigger than my own in seeing some of the world's

most legendary photographs: Joe Rosenthal's 1945 Pulitzer Prize-winning image of U.S. Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima; Malcom Browne's image of Thich Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who stoically self-immolated on the busy streets of Saigon during the Vietnam War in 1963; the Stuart Franklin picture of the young Chinese student standing in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square just before the bloodshed began in 1989.

It was these images that introduced me to the golden age of photojournalism and the narrative of photographs associated with magazines like *Life* and *Look*. Their discovery is what heralded me into the library archives, on late university nights, to resurrect other photos reproduced on over-size 11x14-inch pages, with high-quality inks on rich paper. These publications are the standard by which photography and journalism are judged, they are the keepers of history from a time I had not seen.

When Henry Luce's *Life* publication went out of print in 1972, we all lost a little something. Gone was a little bit of our tactile understanding of visuality and the pages dedicated to it. And yet what was once old became new again when, just this past March, *Life* and Getty Images joined

## Top Paying Metropolitan Areas For Photographers: <sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-09*, [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos264.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos264.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics, May 2007*, [www.bls.gov/oes/2007/may/oes274021.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2007/may/oes274021.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *American Photo*, March 2007. <http://web.archive.org/web/20070318090710/http://www.popphoto.com/photographynewswire/3911/the-first-3m-photograph.html>

## The Edges Of Digital Photojournalism:

With the introduction of digital photography and the newest in image manipulation, the field of photojournalism is a hotbed for ethical debate. One of the earliest digital photos criticized for breaching the standards of photojournalistic capture was **photographer Gordon Gahen's image of the Pyramids of Giza. Published on the cover of National Geographic in 1982, the original horizontal photograph was altered to fit the specs for the cover's vertical parameters**—the apex of the right pyramid was moved left to fit into the frame—without mention to the magazine's readers. When the situation came to light, editor Wilbur Garrett made no apology for the manipulation, saying it could have been possible to capture the image as it appeared from a different angle.

On April 2, 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* **addressed a similar issue in an editor's note**, regarding complaints that a front-page photo of a soldier and Iraqi citizens—several of whom appear in the photo twice—was a composite of more than one capture. **The LA Times dismissed staff photographer Brian Walski**, who admitted to combining elements from dual photographs in violation of the newspaper's policy.

in venture to launch Life.com, resurrecting their combined collections of imagery on the Web in modern, tributary fashion.

And now today, as I write this at 26, there are my friends and their little-girl wedding dreams, catapulting themselves onto the spreads of magazines like Grace Ormonde's *Wedding Style* (launched nationally in 2003), *In Style Weddings*, and even editorial fashion rags like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Weddings have gone from intimate affairs with traditional photographs to contemporary accoutrement occasions marked and remembered by candid images of the day's events, coupled with sophisticated posing inspired by high-fashion photo shoots. Weddings now have personality like never before—brides and grooms give life and vibrancy to their love, and the photography of the

day often lends them the mirror to see that vision reflected back into reality.

So, here we are, at 26 or 46 or 86, all part of a long and still unfolding medium. What is the state of photography? Sure, there are statistics about the photography industry: average salaries and numbers of photographers working (though not many of these figures are accurate). More pointedly, in an age of digital compositing and computer deftness, there are ethical debates raging about what really even defines a photograph anymore.

Photography is not in stasis—it never has been. The fact that imagery continues to defy verbal definition is perhaps the only consistent and obvious value associated with its evolution. In my mind, photographs do stand in memory as a string of separate islands, holding the significant

days that have come before now, chronicling our lives.

But while pictures may stand alone in time, the industry does no such thing. It continues to move forward and back, carrying with it the collective acumen it takes to recognize beauty even when something's not pretty, the wherewithal to see news happening before it's even called that, the ability to withdraw true presence from those in front of the camera's lens and the visual capture that stuns and silences our memories for a time, only to unspool this and other conversations years into the future.



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### A picture is worth a thousand words:

Though this phrase is particularly timely when it comes to the rise of photojournalism, its varying and inconclusive origins all find themselves allied in similar, age-old sentiment.

In his 1862 book, *Fathers and Sons*, Russian writer Ivan Turgenev wrote, **"A picture shows me at a glance what it takes dozens of pages of a book to expound."**<sup>4</sup>

Its introduction is also attributed to Frederick R. Barnard, who wrote of the efficacy of graphics in advertising under the article title **"One look is worth a thousand words,"** in *Printer's Ink*, December 1921.<sup>5</sup>

Even further back, but much less literal and conclusive, the phrase is at times accredited to either Napoleon Bonaparte, who said, **"A good sketch is better than a long speech,"**<sup>4</sup> or related to Chinese proverbial wisdom.

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)

<sup>5</sup> The Phrase Finder, [www.phrases.org.uk/](http://www.phrases.org.uk/)