

Confronting the Hybridity of Images

An Autobiographical Essay

<https://www.fru.ch/kalender/newwaybodypaint.htm>

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(Beat Frutiger)

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Painting Becomes Photography

The invention of photography emerged during a period in which painting oscillated between Romanticism, Neoclassicism, and the rise of Realism. Academic art in the early nineteenth century was shaped by a naturalistic idealization of the world: perfect mastery of color, form, and proportion, together with the illusion of perspective, light, shadow, and surface texture, served to create a reality that represented the world less as it was than as it ought to be. History painting, mythological scenes, and idealized bodies dominated the visual culture of the period.

Within this environment, Louis Daguerre worked as a stage decorator and painter of dioramas. His collaboration with Joseph Nicéphore Niépce eventually led to the development of the daguerreotype, which was presented at the Academy of Sciences in 1839. Looking back, it seems almost inevitable that photography would emerge out of painting: initially, both media pursued the same goal — the most convincing possible illusion of reality.

Academic painting of that era bears a striking resemblance to contemporary AI-generated imagery: technically virtuosic, naturalistically flawless, and yet often detached from any plausible reality. Works such as *The Birth of Venus* by Alexandre Cabanel depict a world that never existed and nevertheless appears believable. Photography suddenly offered a technically more efficient means of producing such images.

The reaction was correspondingly ambivalent.

On the one hand, photography was perceived as a threat to traditional painting, especially portraiture. On the other hand, it quickly became apparent that photographic images did not represent objective truth either. Charles Baudelaire recognized early on that staging in front of the camera was just as artificial as that of academic painting. Today, his criticism of photography in his analysis of the Salon of 1859 reads like an astonishingly precise anticipation of contemporary debates surrounding digital and AI-generated images.

Photomontage, Retouching, and Staging

By the 1850s, photographic montages directly inspired by history painting had already begun to emerge. Particularly influential was Oscar Gustave Rejlander and his work *The Two Ways of Life* (1857), composed from more than thirty combined negatives. Rather than attempting to depict reality, the work sought to prove that photography could be just as allegorical and morally charged as academic painting.

At the same time, retouching became an accepted part of photographic practice. In early portrait studios, skin was softened, lighting altered, and image details modified. Photography merely continued what painting had practiced for centuries: idealization and staging.

The extent to which photographic truth is constructed becomes particularly evident in Yves Klein's famous *Saut dans le vide* (*Leap into the Void*, 1960). Probably the most iconic perfor-

mance photograph ever created, showing the artist apparently leaping freely into empty space, is in fact a montage assembled from photographs taken by Harry Shunk and János Kender. Klein actually jumped onto a tarpaulin held by a group of his judo friends, later retouched out of the image.

War photography, too, was shaped by staging from the very beginning. Roger Fenton conveyed the Crimean War as an almost peaceful “Picnic War” through carefully arranged compositions. In 1871, Eugène Appert even staged executions of prisoners using actors. The 2004 publication *Bilder vom Krieg — Krieg der Bilder* (“Images of War — War of Images”), published by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, made me realize profoundly that photography had never been pure documentation but had operated between truth and deception from its very inception.

Expressionism Influences Film

While photography searched for its position alongside naturalistic painting, painting itself moved increasingly away from naturalism through Impressionism and Expressionism toward abstraction. Photography responded early through soft focus, atmospheric light, and experimental printing techniques.

In the 1920s, Expressionist cinema developed a visual language that finally liberated photographic imagery from naturalistic representation. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* employed extreme contrasts of light and shadow, painted sets, and distorted perspectives. Film stills from these productions are often barely distinguishable from Expressionist paintings. I continue to love these films because they demonstrate how painting and photography can mutually transform one another.

Photography Becomes Painting

During my teacher training in the late 1970s, we visited Franz Gertsch in his studio. There he showed us how he transferred projected photographs point by point onto monumental canvases. His interest extended beyond naturalism toward a painterly translation of the luminous intensity of a projected slide.

Gertsch explained how he first produced large numbers of photographic portraits — at the time, Patti Smith was a contemporary icon — before selecting one image to reproduce painterly over many months. I always found it paradoxical that

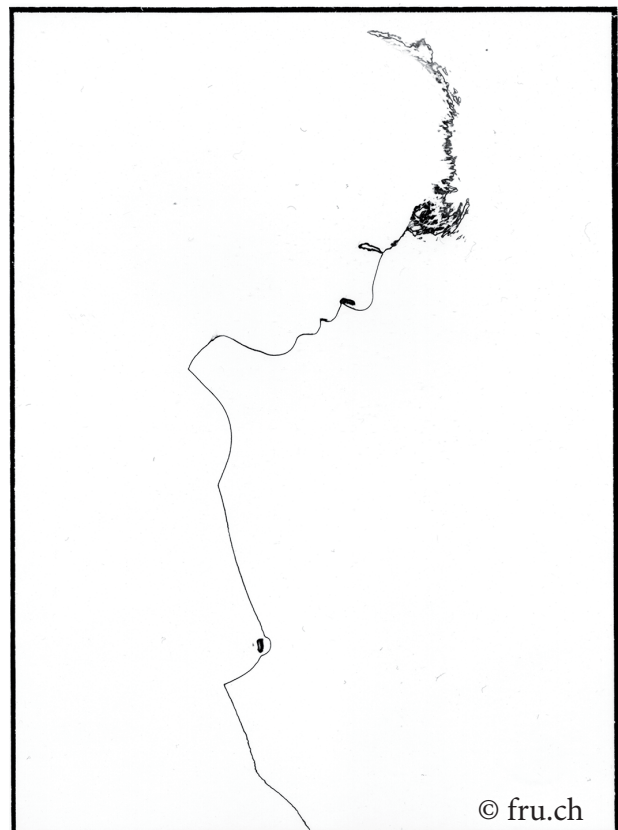
his works were described as “photorealist” or “hyperrealist”: they do not depict reality itself, but photographs. Even then, I began considering the reverse approach — creating photographs that looked like paintings.

Painting Becomes Photography

While still a student in the late 1970s, I experimented with pseudosolarization, a technique Man Ray transformed into a stylistic device after an accidental darkroom incident involving his assistant. Through its characteristic black contour lines, photography acquired qualities associated with drawing. At the same time, the technique offered a means of moving photography away from naturalism toward abstraction.

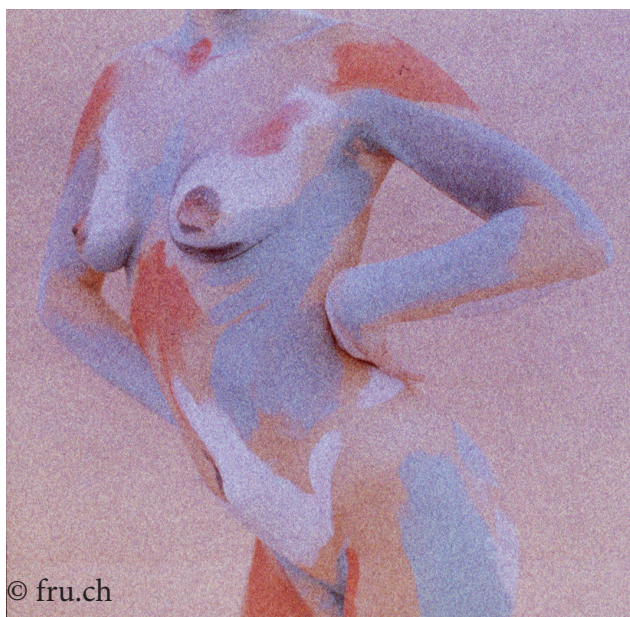
At that time, many photographers believed that a failed photograph could be “rescued” through solarization. In retrospect, this reveals an attitude in which stylistic innovation often seemed more important than conceptual depth.

A decisive turning point occurred accidentally in the late 1980s when I mistakenly exposed a 1000 ASA film instead of a 100 ASA film. The images documented the work of participants in a makeup and prosthetics course. Since the makeup had already been removed, I told the lab technician: “I don’t care what it costs — develop



Portrait of My Wife, Pseudosolarization, ca. 1981

this film so the images are usable.” The results unexpectedly resembled watercolor paintings. I became fascinated by this aesthetic transformation and began attempting to refine the technique intentionally.



Developed as 100 instead of 1000 ASA, late 1980s

During the 1990s, I experimented extensively with cross-processing and highly contrasted color images whose illogical colors occasionally produced expressionistic effects.



Still Life, cross-processing, about 1994

The Photographic Original

I became increasingly disturbed by the fact that photographic works in exhibitions rarely possess the aura of originals. In the late 1990s, I therefore began constructing my own large-format camera. Using a flea-market lens, I built a camera capable of directly exposing 30 × 40 cm baryta paper.

The subjects consisted of white body painting on black-painted bodies, producing black drawings on white grounds. Retouching was carried out directly on the paper using Farmer’s reducer. The resulting works existed somewhere between drawing, painting, and photography, resisting clear categorization within any single medium. Although the series received an award from the Dreisamtal Photography Club in 2000, it provo-



Self-portrait, original negative on baryta paper, 1994

ked more confusion than approval. Later, I returned first to analog photography and eventually to digital photography. In 2015, I began revisiting and further developing the visual language of the 1990s through digital processing. For more than a decade now, I have pursued a photographic practice whose images appear painted while simultaneously documenting and abstracting ephemeral art forms. Stylistically, the works draw on East Asian ink painting, which I have practiced intermittently

for nearly fifty years. They are staged constructions, often documented through video performance; some are photomontages, digitally manipulated in Photoshop, and occasionally retouched again by hand. Conceptually, the works engage with art historical references such as Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch and Pablo Picasso, as well as Zen philosophy (12 Levels), mortality and death (Totentanz), commitment, touch, appearance, and body painting as perhaps humanity's oldest art form — themes fundamentally concerned with reality itself.

AI and the Return of an Old Debate

In 2022, an AI-generated image by Jason Allen triggered intense controversy. Remarkably, its visual language strongly recalls nineteenth-cen-

tury academic painting — precisely the era in which photography itself emerged. Like Baudelaire once did, many now see AI as heralding the end of art. Yet, just like watercolor, photography, or film, AI is ultimately only a technique. Whether art emerges from it depends not on the medium itself, but on the artistic engagement with it.

The real challenge today, as in the nineteenth century, lies in learning to distinguish between naturalism and abstraction, and between realism and idealism. Photography, painting, and AI have never produced truth alone; they have always simultaneously documented, constructed, and deceived. The history of hybrid images is therefore not merely a history of technological innovation, but above all a history of our relationship to reality itself.



Self-Portrait with Nasobem,, 2024



Trans Standing Girl, A Tribute to E. Schiele 2023
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4reASd65QE>



Fru, *Artist and Model*, 2015
after Picasso, *Artist and Model*, Vallauris 25.12.53



Fru, *Baubo*, 2024
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVHhGM0Hk6Q>



Häusliche Unfälle
domestic accident
118 D / 194 CH / 90 UK / 366 USA

Tod, mein Begleiter,
du bist schamlos zudringlich,
noch hast du mich nicht.

Death, my companion,
you are shamelessly pushy,
yet thou hast not me.



Niklaus Manuel, *Death and the Maiden* 1517

Fru, *Totentanz*, 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJizkodGBI8>



In retrospect, photography serves as a bridge from the world of an art form that emerged through contact with a surface—with reality—to an art form of artificial intelligence that is created digitally—in a virtual world.

Based on our understanding of the technical possibilities of photography, we can see that the naturalistic photographic image can exist independently of any reality—a fact that Antonioni, in his film **Blow Up**, did not yet fully grasp in the sense we understand it today, but somehow sensed.

Significantly, it is an almost abstract photographic image that gives him a glimpse of reality—a photograph that resembles the non-representational works of his neighbor, the painter Bill (artist Ian Stephenson).

One of Antonioni's central themes is this: the closer you look, the less certain you become of what you think you see.

Fru, Comprehending the Touch, 2024

After

Cueva de las Manos, 13'00-9'500 BP

Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave, 37'000-33'000 BP

La Pasiega, 65'000 BP

Liang Metanduno cave, Sulawesi, 67'800 BP

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wpg9qnsnDK0>