

Image & Imagination. MARTHA LANGFORD, ed. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. 327 p. ISBN 07735-2969-1.

The concepts of reality and truthfulness have been mainstays of our traditional relationship with photography . Expressions such as “the mirror with a memory” and “the camera never lies,” reflect a long-held and comforting belief that photographs reflect the real. As such, imagination is often perceived, as editor of *Image & Imagination* Martha Langford notes, “as a breakdown in the relationship between photography and reality” (p. 5). Conversely, she views it as intrinsically linked to the photographic experience, and also as largely ignored in Western photographic history. In *Image &*

Imagination, Langford and others seek to break new ground in an exploration of the role of imagination in photography. While many points of imagination are explored, from the artist's to the subject's to the historian's, the book's ultimate, and undeniably intriguing, focus is the "life of the photograph in the spectatorial mind" (p. 4).

Most people are probably content with the idea that a photograph is simply a reflection of a visual reality; it reflects what was in front of the camera. Similarly, the photographer is the acknowledged author/creator of the image. This view discounts the many other factors potentially involved in the "creation" of a photograph, such as the role of the subject. Furthermore, numerous contexts affect the photograph after the image has been captured, and these contexts, these subsequent acts of authoring, affect how we view and understand it. Questioning conventional understanding of authorship is not new, and historians, theorists, and archivists such as Brien Brothman, Verne Harris, Tom Nesmith, Terry Cook, and Joan Schwartz have explored the concept of multiple contexts of creation, although not all exclusively in terms of this medium. Although applying this concept to photographs is not new, Langford takes the discussion to another level by specifically examining the role of the viewer in the life of the visual record. She argues that our perception of a photograph is formed by memories, emotions, knowledge, and experience and that "each time we are impressed by a photographic transformation of reality, our critical faculties are being led by our imaginations" (p. 7). In effect, what the spectator sees when faced with a photographic image is determined by the interplay of emotional and mental images in their consciousness. Langford and the other contributors – art historians and cultural theorists – want to raise awareness of the role of the viewer in authoring the photograph with the aim of engendering further discussion.

Image & Imagination is a direct result of the 2005 *Le Mois de la photo à Montréal*, a biennial festival celebrating contemporary photography started in 1989 to promote contemporary, photographic, artistic practice and theoretical investigation among specialists in the field and the general public. Langford, an associate professor of art history at Concordia University and the founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa, was the guest director for the 2005 festival. As such, she was responsible for choosing the theme of the event, selecting the artists, and creating the festival publication, among other things. *Le mois de la photo à Montréal: Image & Imagination* included twenty-nine exhibits, displaying the works of sixty artists from seven countries, many examples of which are found in the book.

The publication is modelled on the organizational framework of the festival and is divided into three parts. Part one, "Sightlines Into the Imagination," explores how our experiences, senses, or tools inform our photographic understanding. Part two, "Mirroring Ourselves, Recasting Otherness," examines individual and collective subjecthood/identity from the perspective of

social and spatial boundaries. Part three, “Pictures as a Way of Shutting our Eyes,” brings the imagination to the forefront in a discussion of photographic art requiring the explicit participation of the viewer.

Langford’s introductory prose is dense enough to seem a deterrent to any but the specialist reader. She presumes that the audience will have both a deep and broad understanding of multiple subjects, such as literary theory, and art and photographic history, among others. This is a shame, because many of the individual articles, while not easy reading, nevertheless have appeal to the casual archival browser, while others should prove engrossing to those with more understanding of the fields of art and photography.

The first article, “Through the Picture Plane: On Looking Into Photographs” by Ian Walker, for example, is an accessible introduction to the book’s overarching theme for archivists with only a casual exposure to the discipline of art history. Walker explores the way in which we read a photograph by examining how our senses, the image’s physicality, and the spaces in which we view the image mediate our understanding. He asks if we look *at* a photographic image – at an object – or if we look *through* it, using our memories and imagination to access the reality reflected in the image content. Using the example of a Walker Evans photograph, the author analyses his relationship to this image of long-standing familiarity, and wonders how much his perception is determined by the way or circumstances in which it is viewed. He describes his varying reactions: viewing it as a cheap postcard; as part of a book of photographs; as an enlargement for a gallery setting; or as an archival reproduction. Walker concludes that the “process of imaginative engagement which we undertake when we look at [the photograph] is integral to its meaning. It may be hard to define exactly what part of our eyes and our brain, our sense of sight and our sense of touch, our knowledge and our imagination each contribute to this process, but it’s evident that we understand photographs only by bringing those faculties to play” (p. 25).

Geoffrey Batchen’s “Dreams of Ordinary Life: Cartes-de-visite and the Bourgeois Imagination,” is another article with a more immediate and obvious appeal to the general archivist. Repetitive examples of *cartes-de-visite* photographs, featuring similarly-attired subjects in similar poses against similar backdrops can be found in most archives. *Cartes-de-visite* represent a shift in photographic practice as suddenly inexpensive photographs could be reproduced easily in greater numbers. Larger studios appeared, employing workers to operate the photographic equipment, and many aspects were thus standardized: pose, props, format, and print quality. As the photographer took a less active role, the subject took a correspondingly more active one, and made choices in terms of costumes and poses. Batchen notes, however, that the subjects invariably selected props and poses seen in other *cartes-de-visite*, and “by taking on that look, in subsuming their individual selves to it, these subjects performed a ritual of class declaration and belonging” (p. 68).

The result of this desire to express one's sense of self and one's place in society by being a part of it invariably results in a genre of repetitive and homogeneous photographs. Their homogeneity, Batchen notes, has left them largely ignored by historians, as they were often labelled as lacking creativity or aesthetic value. He argues that it is "the very banality of the cartes-de-visite portrait, the lack of imagination which shifts the burden of imaginative thought from the artist to the viewer" (p. 74). Rather than being dismissed for their lack of imagination, *cartes-de-visite* photographs offer an opportunity to study how these images were received by the contemporary viewer and, in turn, what effect this had on their creation. As Batchen observes, this has ramifications for the study of other routine or repetitive photographic forms.

Many other articles are sure to capture the interest of the reader, including Martyn Jolly's "Spectres from the Archive," which explores the genre of spirit photography from the nineteenth century to contemporary examples, and Petra Halkes's "Gottfried Helnwein's American Prayer: A Fable in Pixels and Paint," which examines technology and notions of reliability.

Interspersed between the nine articles are brief essays, most written by Langford, which describe the exhibits that made up the 2005 *Le Mois de la photo à Montréal* festival and introduce the various featured artists, including Evergon, Toni Hafkenschied, Shana, Robert ParkeHarrison, and Michael Snow, and their artwork. While Langford presents the essays as tools to help frame the ideas discussed in the articles and to stimulate the imagination of the reader, they create an inescapable dissonance in the book, as their subject matter, exhibits, and artwork featured in the festival, were meant to be seen in person, not in the pages of a book.

This presents an interesting challenge to the reader who must use her imagination to visualize artwork intended to be seen first-hand. Essentially, rather than reflecting upon a work of art and then pondering the role that imagination might play in understanding what is seen, the reader must confront both the imaginative and cognitive exercises at the same time. This may leave the reader feeling as if she had "missed the show" and wondering how different her understanding of the ideas discussed in this book might be had she also seen some of the actual exhibits, rather than only having them mediated through the context of the written word. As frustrating as this is at times, the reader cannot help but constantly be aware of images and imagining as she reads. Ian Walker best captures this confusion when he notes, "looking at a photograph is such a familiar activity that it's hard to analyse what happens when you do it" (p. 19).

For the art and photography lover, this book will appeal from a purely aesthetic point of view, with one hundred and twenty-five colour photographs and an impressive bibliography. For the archivist interested in current discussion about the life of the record, and explorations of complex and fluid contexts of creation, this book will have some obvious appeal. What are the

implications to recognizing the viewer's role in authorship? Does this extend to all viewers, from the initial intended spectator to the viewer in an archive decades after its creation? *Image & Imagination* is not an easy read and will not likely appeal to all readers. Similar to the experience of viewing art in a museum or gallery, there will be pieces that intrigue or excite you and some that you do not grasp at all, but all will stimulate your imagination.

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