The Nature of Photographs

By Stephen Shore
A Primer
The Nature of Photographs

How is this photograph different from the actual scene that Robert Frank saw as he stood in his Butte hotel room and looked out on this depressed mining town in the northern Rockies? How much of this image is a product of lenses, shutters, and media? What are the characteristics of photography that establish how an image looks?
This book explores ways of understanding the nature of photographs; that is, how photographs function; and not only the most elegant or graceful photographs, but all photographs made with a camera and printed directly from the negative or a digital file. All photographic prints have qualities in common. These qualities determine how the world in front of the camera is transformed into a photograph; they also form the visual grammar that elucidates the photograph’s meaning.
A photograph can be viewed on several levels. To begin with, it is a physical object, a print. On this print is an image, an illusion of a window on to the world. It is on this level that we usually read a picture and discover its content: a souvenir of an exotic land, the face of a lover, a wet rock, a landscape at night. Embedded in this level is another that contains signals to our mind’s perceptual apparatus. It gives ‘spin’ to what the image depicts and how it is organized.
The aim of this book then is not to explore photographic content, but to describe physical and formal attributes of a photographic print that form the tools a photographer uses to define and interpret that content.
Anonymous

Car by roadside

Date unknown
The Physical Level

A photographic print is, in most instances, a base of paper, plastic, or metal that has been coated with an emulsion of light-sensitive metallic salts or metallic salts coupled with vegetable or metallic dyes. In some prints, the base is coated directly with or imprinted with dyes, pigments, or carbon. A photograph is flat, it has edges, and it is static; it doesn’t move. While it is flat, it is not a true plane. The print has a physical dimension.
These physical and chemical attributes form the boundaries that circumscribe the nature of the photograph. These attributes impress themselves upon the photographic image. The physical qualities of the print determine some of the visual qualities of the image. The flatness of the photographic paper establishes the plane of the picture. The edges of the print demand the boundedness of the picture. The staticness of the image determines the experience of time in the photograph. Even the image of a photograph on a computer monitor is flat, static, and bounded. The type of black-and-white emulsion determines the hue and tonal range of the print. The type of base determines the texture of the print.
Colour expands a photograph’s palette and adds a new level of descriptive information and transparency to the image. It is more transparent because one is stopped less by the surface – colour is more like how we see. It has added description because it shows the colour of light and the colours of a culture or an age. While made in the 1980s, the palette of this image by Anne Turyn seems to date the picture a generation earlier.
127 DIE AS 2 AIRLINERS COLLIDE OVER CITY: JET SETS BROOKLYN FIRE, KILLING 5 OTHERS: SECOND PLANE CRASHES ON STATEN ISLAND
Stephen Shore
Room 28, Holiday Inn,
Medicine Hat, Alberta,
August 18, 1974
Thomas Demand
Sink/Spüle
1997
The tonal range of a black-and-white print is affected by the type of emulsion the print is made with. The composition of the film emulsion, the chemistry of the film and print developers, and the nature of the light source from which the print was made also determine the way shadows, mid tones, and highlights are described by the print; they determine how many shades of grey the print contains and whether these tones are compressed or separated.

This reproduction of a print by Richard Benson has an exceptionally long tonal scale with subtle, clear, beautiful separation of the low values. The original print is acrylic paint applied to aluminium. It was produced from eight halftone separations made from the original negative.