

# The Optical Problem In Photography: The Allan Chasanoff Collection

by Elizabeth Hansen, January 2008

The Optical. Or more fully, "the Optical Problem in photography," is the subject not only of this essay, but of a collection of photographs, a photo exhibition at Yale University Museum of Art, and, finally, of one man's obsessive focus (or at least one corner of it). This man is himself, the subject behind this subject. He is, amongst other things, the collector responsible for the grouping of photographs around this theme and for more than five years I have assisted him in archiving and analyzing his various collections of imagery; some of his own making and some he has gathered from myriad sources. Let's give him a name, Allan Chasanoff, from hereon out to be referred to, as I usually do when writing about him and his work, as "AC". Now on to the problem and promised definition, though I'm going to qualify it as a preliminary definition because it is a deceptively complex issue to explain and yet, we must start somewhere.

To state AC's characterization of this issue most simply, Optical photographs confuse the viewer. An Optical picture might be an image of recognizable objects where something doesn't seem quite right or is difficult to discern. Or it may be that we have no idea what we are even looking at in the photograph. Or it may be that at first glance, we think we see something that upon closer inspection is not as it initially appeared; we mis-see the picture. There are variations on this problem, so to keep it simple, we can say that these photographs are confusing and therefore distressing. Sometimes this confusion is speedily remedied. In other instances, resolution might take more time. We might be momentarily perplexed and then quite quickly see the photo "correctly." Clarification might persist upon subsequent viewings or it might be that each time we see the picture we must relearn to solve its puzzle. Still some images will remain mysterious to us, unsolved and unsolvable.

What does that mean anyway: to "solve" a photograph? In the case of AC and Optical I say solve to mean that what the eyes see no longer troubles the brain, that we have satisfactorily answered the question "what am I looking at?" and feel confident that we see it "as it was." But here's where it starts to get tricky, what if we're wrong? Or, what if our eyes can't see what was there before the camera lens for one reason or another? Or what if we can't be certain about whether or not we are seeing what was before the camera lens? This doubt is the underlying issue of the Optical problem.

To be clear, we're not talking about Op Art, that optically illusionistic style of painting that was very popular in the 1970s, nor are we particularly referencing those phenomena identified as optical illusions—those generally black and white illustrations whose contours and contrasts fool the eyes and brain in tandem and point out vision's physiological Achilles heel(s)—though photographs fitting such a description would be accommodated within AC's definition of Optical. We're talking about an issue that is particular to photography and grounded in photography's complex relationship to "reality." As Barthes wrote in "The Photographic Message":

"Certainly the image is not the reality, but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph."<sup>1</sup>

As viewers of a photograph, we are given a view onto something that was once discernable in the physical world, and for most of photography's lifespan, we relied upon assumptions about the "honesty" of photographic representation. It is from

photography's relationship to reality that the Optical problem is born and why it matters. But before we go any further with defining Optical and its significance, I'd like to take a look at where the idea of Optical came from to begin with.

How did AC become interested in this issue? Where to begin? Logically, of course, we must start at the beginning. But where exactly might that be?



Fig-1 Larry Fink, *Tavern on the Green*, 1976  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Allan Chasanoff Collection

October 1983, New York City. AC is visiting galleries in search of new pictures for his collection. He's been doing this for some years now, assembling photographs that begin to define idiosyncratic categories including: "5 Year-Old Boy," "Statue on Left-Hand Side," "The Eye Seeing/Not Seeing". But more importantly than falling into any pre-defined categories, the photographs have to simply "hit him," to grab him on a gut level. The categories have been forming along the way as a means to give some kind of structure to his visual ramblings, a finer focus, if you will. On this day in October, he steps out of the uptown Madison Avenue foot traffic into the Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery where a show of Larry Fink's recent photographs is on view. He quickly scans the room of self-portraits and continues to a smaller adjoining room where he is struck momentarily dumb before an image of ... "What is it?" he asks himself. What indeed!

The first glance at this photograph is like a slap in the face (see Fig-1). It is an immediate denial and rejection of any attempt to see the scene it purports to present.

In this black-and-white image, everything is partial, disconnected, blurry, or obstructed. In the foreground a disembodied hand holds an out-of-focus wine glass that impedes ready access into the middle and background depths of the photograph. It appears to block everything.

What we can see: parts of at least 5 hands, two with wedding bands, one arm bent at the elbow and wearing a wool jacket with a white shirt cuff peaking out, snatches of three faces, a beard, a bow tie, two buttons on a tweed jacket, a gold chain necklace paired with a string of pearls, a sweep of long dark hair, a closed mouth, part of a wooden table top, 2 wine glasses: one out of focus and raised to the mouth of a shadowy foreground figure, the other empty with another disembodied hand resting on its foot seemingly trying to call attention to its lack of contents (those are no absent-minded fingers!). As I write the description, the picture's contents become clear to me. Clearly we are witnessing a glimpse into a dinner party. The title tells me that it took place at Tavern on the Green. In my mind's eye, I now imagine the scene, but what we see—physically capture with the eye—is a confusing jumble of hands, wine glasses, fabrics, and fragmented faces. The photographer's position at this scene is excluded and we, the viewers, are excluded by extension.<sup>2</sup>

*AC says: That picture is a landmark picture for me. It penetrated my soul, not just my eye. If I was interested in Optical before...this one really saturated the idea. It still is dominant in my soul. I don't know what I'm looking at. It keeps changing on me.*

And sometime during the year 2000, AC analyzed this photo with SC, a former colleague.<sup>3</sup> Notations from that analysis:

*Optically one of AC's favorite images. AC loses[sic] the foremost face. He never noticed woman's chin and mouth just below the foremost face. Also did not notice other hands in the back ground. His eye is monopolized by the "blur" that is the foremost face ...*

Blur... yes, blur...but perhaps the "real" beginning of AC's Optical problem is sometime in early 1937. It is a brisk and bright February morning in Edgemere, New York. AC is an infant swaddled tightly many times over to protect against the frosty air. He is bouncing along in his buggy, flat on his back unable to move. From the apex of the sun shield of his buggy hangs a rattle for his amusement. Only it's not amusing him in the least. He has just learned to really see and he loves to see. It is pure pleasure. But this, this dangling noisy thing is blocking his way. HE CAN'T SEE ANYTHING but The Rattle!

This morning I was taking the bus from my home to my studio. I live in Paris at the moment and I like to watch the action on the street during my commute along the quays of the Seine. The sky was typically gray and it was starting to drizzle. A couple in their mid-thirties was pushing a two-year old boy in his stroller. They'd stopped so that the mother could put a plastic rain shield over the front of the stroller to encase and protect the toddler. He was adamantly protesting, leaning forward pushing away the plastic and crying "Non!" Nobody wants his vision occluded against his will, not a little boy in the rain who prefers getting wet to blurred vision, not little AC in his buggy—no one. Luckily for this little boy, his mother, not interested in provoking a real fit, abandoned the project.

But the infant AC was not so lucky. He was too little. He was pre-verbal and therefore incapable of making his wishes known vocally. Even if he cried, babies cry for lots of reasons, and certainly no adult would imagine that he was upset about a toy that was there to entertain him. He was bound so tightly in his clothes and coverings that even if his motor skills were advanced enough to push the rattle away or to move a bit to the side to change his perspective, he didn't have the freedom of mobility. And then, even if he had somehow been able to make his wishes known, it was 1937, and it is a relatively recent phenomenon that sees parents giving in to a child's wishes and whims. So, no, barring some miracle of profound communication, the little AC was destined to have his vision impaired by that obstructive rattle and he probably experienced that frustration each time he was put into his baby buggy.

In AC's own words from a document he began writing in August of 2000 :

*Whether it is actual historical data or I created it later is of no real consequence since I feel it to be true. I am sited in my baby carriage and it is winter and I am bundled up. Am hardly able to move. And a rattle is hanging down from the top of the carriage inconveniencing, disrupting my vision. I try to move to see past the rattle but am unable to do so. This deficiency of vision, this blockage was imprinted. I sense the incompleteness of seeing a whole object or scene nice and clearly. This extends to a great leap forward to influence the faculty of understanding. It becomes more an issue of psychology than vision per se.*

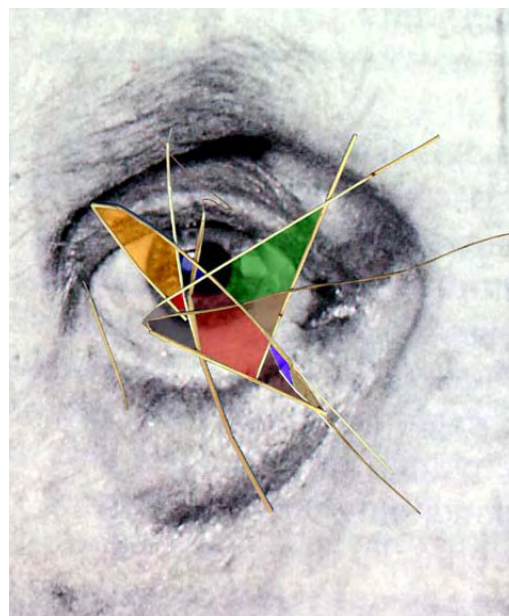


FIG-2

AC, eye1 made-1, 2000



FIG-3

AC, DSC08232-pr, 2005

*It is so hard for me to sit in the back of a car, especially in New York City with the obstructions in the taxis, and, of course, the head rests on the front seats.*

Flash forward...

Figures 2 and 3 are two of a much larger number of photographs made by AC that call to mind The Rattle story.

So, yes, AC makes photographs, too. So, maybe we should start there in his studio on East 40th Street in New York City. It starts with light bulbs in the early '70s. AC has designed and had constructed "a large motorized swivel lamp with twelve rheostated bulbs with accompanying moduled extenders and plexi etc." It "sits on a cabinet in which is stored bulbs, plexi, electrical devices, etc."<sup>4</sup>

It could be here, in fact, at this moment in time where AC begins unconsciously to define the issue that will become so important to him: the issue of Optical. For it is with this project that AC transforms the

blur from The Rattle to his photographic realizations. I must clarify that while the mechanism described above is indeed a three-dimensional and quite a sculptural object, it is in fact a tool for making photographs (a few films were also made). AC would prepare this device with his selection of light bulbs in different sizes and colors, using various extenders and tinted pieces of plexiglass as he so desired (see Fig-4).

He photographed the resulting composition of Figure 5, experimenting with the different possibilities of this particular arrangement: zooming in closer or further away, using longer or shorter exposures, and playing with various possibilities of movement (the base was motorized and each bulb was controllable by an individual dimmer) and stasis—all of this captured by his camera. There are literally hundreds of slides recording these different light bulb permutations taken over a nearly five-year span of time and the one thing that nearly all of them share in common is that, as a viewer, we are hard-pressed to identify the objects we see in the photograph as light bulbs: of light, yes, but light bulbs, no. The images are frequently confusing, often simply blurs of colored light. Many of them are what I would now call Optical, but pre-consciously so.

By 1975 AC is working in his studio on projects using light bulbs, lenses, and what he calls "paint squeezings." Materials used in the lens photographs include actual lenses (curved pieces of glass purchased from a scientific supply company for "hobbyists and science enthusiasts"), colored lights or gels, different tex-



FIG-4

AC, lampproject 002, 1961-1970

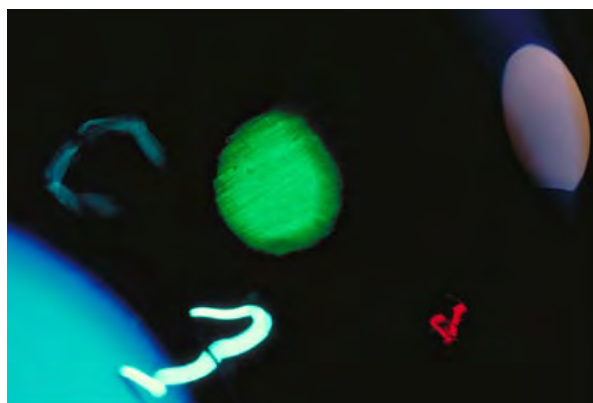


FIG-5

AC, F#135-1 or ST-1 #133, 1973



FIG-6

AC, F#135-15, 1973

tured materials used as grounds, drops of water, slides AC has taken previously (several of eyes), prisms, and other miscellaneous materials. These are confusing images and given their primary subject, the lens, we must imagine that AC is purposefully referencing the role of optics in photography. The concept of the Optical in photography is not yet clearly defined for him, but it is clearly bubbling away there in the background.

The "paint squeezings" are small sculptural objects that AC made, quite literally, of artists' oil paints squeezed from tubes (others incorporating the tubes themselves, stripped of all markings, were also made). They exist as sculptures

in their own rites, but AC also used them as the subjects of an extensive series of photographs (see Fig-6). These photographs are not at all what we would call Optical, but his work with paint will lead him to the next step in the formulation of his concept of Optical.

The previous three bodies of work demonstrate the beginning of AC's intellectual investigation into the question "what is a photograph?" Photographs are, essentially, made of light. AC played with this idea by using light as the subject of the light bulb photographs. Moving on to the instrument that makes photography possible, the camera, he then focused on one of its essential components, the lens. Having addressed the basic mechanical elements that define the technology of photography, he next turned to the question "is photography art?" He purposefully referenced paint and the idea of painting as a fine art form into his images in the "paint squeezings" series and later with photographs of painted objects.

Flash forward to 1982 (one year before AC's encounter with the Fink image). AC is back in his studio after a 5-year hiatus during which time, in uneasy deference to his job, he limited his photographic pursuits to vacation travels and weekend explorations of the streets and byways in and around New York. But now he is back in his studio and he is painting objects and photographing them. A trompe l'oeil element is frequently part of the photographs AC made in his studio at this time, as in the example below, in which he has painted the central red apple to match up with the color and form of the orange to the left and behind and those of the green apple to the right and behind (see Fig-7). This trompe l'oeil effect is meant to call into question which of the three pieces of fruit is in front of the others. The green apple on the right is also partially painted to align with the painting on the red apple thus creating a greater unity of color between the two objects and contributing to the illusion that we see the entire green apple in front of the red one. And yet, how successful is this illusion? We don't, in fact, have any trouble in determining that the central red apple is in front of the two other fruits, nor should we imagine that AC believes that he has fooled anyone.<sup>5</sup>

The paint is thickly applied in a most palpable manner and the color of the orange and the orange paint (on the red apple), while both clearly the color orange, are not of the same hue. So we are given to understand AC's intentions as an intellectual game. He is playing with the notion of representation in painting and photography. While referencing the still life painting tradition, he is also calling into question two aspects of the relationship that existed between painting and photography during the era of this photograph's creation: the debate about photography's legitimacy as an addition to the canon of fine art, and photography's purported culpability in "the death of painting." Before the advent of photography, painting was the interpretive medium of "reality" and painters who could create realistic semblances in accurate representations of three-dimensional space were greatly admired. This habit of viewing a work of art persists today and so while we know that the

central red apple is in the forefront and that parts of the orange and green apple are obstructed by the red apple's position, the painted surfaces, lead us to believe—if only for one moment— that we see the orange and green apple in their entireties. And then this illusion is photographed, documented to show us “the trick” and remind us that painting isn't real. Then again, this picture demands, is the photograph real?



FIG-7

AC, F#797-23, 1982

AC will describe that 5-year period of virtually non-existent studio output as a period of displaced efforts. He will say that because his work life required complete attention he no longer had an outlet for his photographic urges—he had been photographing regularly since the late '50s/early '60s—and that this sublated desire prompted him to begin collecting photographs as a kind of compensatory action.

In 1982, AC was continuing to amass his photography collection and back at work in his studio. He also began accumulating other imagery encountered in newspapers, magazines, bulletins, gallery

announcement cards, auction catalogs, and other sources and began organizing them according to theme. These themes mirrored categories that he was identifying and building his photography collection around. By 1984, one of those themes was identified and notated as “Optical Perceptual Problem.”

So, what I'm trying to say here is that it wasn't ONE thing or ONE moment or ONE image that made AC wake up and say, “the optical problem in photography...” It was an organic process, the result of years of his own photographic efforts and continuing investigations combined with an increasingly defined predilection to collect a particular kind of photograph—confusing ones— that AC began to refer to simply as “Optical.”

Recently, I spoke with AC about this period of time in the early- to mid-80s and about the birth and evolution of the Optical concept:

*“In beginning collecting I was developing many, many different categories...I was searching and searching and searching. And Optical became one of them. But I was also photographing at the time and I was always doing a lot of close-up photography which always has an Optical sensibility to it and somehow the combination of the two resonated” Really was defined with the Rattle mentality. “It might show up in a diary, an old diary. It was as you say, an organic process... and then it grew and became the Dominant...”*

And one other thing which AC took great pains to make very clear to me: the pursuit of this issue was not the outcome of an academic investigation, but rather was spurred on by a predominately visceral response to the images themselves. In his own words:

*“At first blush, there is ‘Oh, my.’... and my initial enjoyment is ‘oh, there it is again and I’m going to be able to see.”*

*“In the very first instant, seeing to me... as I trace it back to childhood, let’s say, even to the rattle, or the*

*pleasure of seeing something, there is a very basic aspect of pleasure: when I see something that doesn't make sense and then I'm able to see it. We've discussed that before. So, therefore there's huge pleasure in making sense, visually. There is a cohering, there is a connecting, there is an integration, there is almost a self that comes out of this ability to see. When you're one year old vs. when you're one year and one month old, whenever that connectivity happens. That's how I trace back to that. For some reason, I always go back to early childhood. So therefore that is essential in my interest at a very personal level on an existential level in the Optical. It's at the core, I believe, of an individual. And for some reason, because of the rattle or whatever other reason, because the Rattle isn't necessarily Optical per se, but it is blockage or I don't know how else you want to do it but it all loads together....but to be able to cohere, to be able to see something and to make sense of it visually instantly has a deep feeling in me."*

*"It starts as the pleasure of...it stuns me, that's all I can say. I know that that stunning is not going to stay."*

*"The pleasure aspect is the Optical second. We're stunned. Because I think it relates to the aspect that I then can see it. It's prior to the pleasure of being able to make it out. Let's say that we're 6 months old and we really can't see and then all of the sudden we can learn how to see. There is a pleasure in seeing. So, I'm speaking at this very existential moment of when 'oh my god' I couldn't see and now I can see. So the pleasure of seeing retroactively goes to that moment when I couldn't see and now I can see. So I think there is a touch of pleasure in that issue at a very primal level. That's why not being able to see clearly anticipates to being able to see and that's pleasurable. Now, if that Optical problem lasted for more than a split second or 3 seconds I think that I'd be very, very upset. But that doesn't take place so far."*

Really? I asked him, what about those images from the collection that are Optical each time we look at them or that still provoke confusion over what it is that appears in the photograph? He responded by talking about mastering the images in the collection. "I probably have mastered them 99%, not a hundred." "There's a difference between being affected Optically and knowing it's [the photograph] Optical. These things merge. I'm not big these days on either/or, things like that."

I was a bit perplexed. How could something that is in its first moment visually confusing and distressing be pleasurable?

*"I know it will be resolved. I am happy to find the problem again."*

*"Its from that little speck that initiates and starts the effort of utilizing the problem of the Optical. If I didn't have that little joy or whatever it is and mastery over that discomfiture I don't think I would have collected... the whole issue would not have arisen." If it were just another thing, if an Optical image were just like any other image of a picture of a person walking across the street, I wouldn't have... I have to have that little pleasure or disruption or whatever. "It's the beginning of the thread. So it starts from pleasure. And pleasure starts from discomfort."*

Later, AC wanted to clarify that pleasure and distress work in tandem for him: "Only the distress is going to permit the pleasure."

With the conscious identification of Optical, AC's interest in it began to strengthen. By the mid-80's, Optical photographs comprised a greater and greater percentage of AC's collecting efforts. And in his own studio work, Optical became the major

point of interest. He was focusing more energy on understanding what this Optical quality was, how it is achieved, and what it imports.

During this time of increased attention to the Optical, AC's studio work is concentrated on the still life. He builds elaborate set-ups incorporating multiple objects, fabrics, and art reproductions. These items are often partial, consisting of scraps, shards, and cut-outs. Everything is positioned on multiple levels or at various distances within the arrangement. Shadows become important elements as they interact with these distances. AC will then work a given set-up repeatedly over a period lasting anywhere from two weeks to four months, "going in" and "finding the picture" by changing his camera's position, angle, and distance in relation to the set-up as well as its depth of field. AC told me that the initial set-up was very important to him, that prior to constructing it, he had imagined it in his mind's eye. He described them as usually very bland and prosaic. Then he said he would realize that he had to disrupt it by adjusting it, breaking it up, and mutilating it. The resulting images are frequently overwhelming in their materiality. It is difficult to penetrate these images in which depth and space are terribly confusing. As our eyes start to enter into their represented spaces, it seems there is always something that snaps us out of the three-dimensional illusion of the still life and back to the surface of the photo and the realization that it is indeed a two-dimensional photograph that we are beholding.



FIG-8

AC, F#C2, 1987

In an example from 1987, AC combined pieces of fabric, cut-out bits from a reproduction of a Matisse painting, and shards of painted ceramic (see Fig-8).

The ceramic shards and the shadows surrounding them seem to suggest a certain depth that feels rather shallow, but still certainly palpable. Looking at the cut-outs on each side of the image, everything suddenly appears to snap forward to the surface of the picture. It almost seems as if the ceramic shards should be on the viewer's side of the photograph.

There is nothing very realistic about this photograph. There are few, if any, recognizable forms or objects. We see shards of painted pottery and patterned shapes as well as partial views of what appear to be paintings or illustrations of paintings. The individual elements are presented in a way foreign to our quotidian sensibilities and, as such, create an imaginative fantasy space. Still, this is a photograph and its contents are actual ceramic shards, scraps of fabrics, and illustrations arranged by the photographer for his camera. In this regard, it is a highly realistic, or representational, photograph. So, we could say that this photograph calls into question the relationship between photography and reality and perhaps also casts doubt upon the nature of "reality" itself.

Beyond both this inquiry into photography and reality and the confusion of trying to determine what we are actually physically looking at, there are other Optical aspects in the image above. Take a look at the left hand side, the area where the two patterned shapes intersect. Now look at the vertically striped bit just to the right of the mauve and yellow bit. Which one is in front? If we look at the bottom portion, it is clear that the yellow and mauve strip is in front, but if we look at the top portion, it seems the opposite is true. It is, in fact, strange when we first look at the image as it seems to be very flat with little illusion of depth at all, but the longer we look at the photo, the more we discover that there are indeed multiple levels of depth, though rather narrow, and that these depth-levels seem to shift about as we scan the elements of the composition.



Some time around 1980, AC was introduced to the work of—and became fascinated by—Giorgio Morandi, an Italian painter who worked during the first half of the 20th Century. AC had made—and began working with—a number of bottles fabricated to resemble those that Morandi painted as his subject over and over again. The artist Robert Irwin spoke eloquently about his own interest in Morandi's work:

*"The Italian painter Giorgio Morandi captivated a lot of us... Now, here was a painter who'd been repeating the same subject, the same theme, over and over again for years. In his studio, he had a collection of bottles and jars, and he painted them continuously: small paintings of groups of these bottles on his table, a kind of still life. So in one sense they seemed extremely traditional, extremely formal. They still had a subject matter in the most classical sense, the simplest, most direct kind of subject matter, unloaded in any way. This especially seemed the case when you compared Morandi with some of his bold, gestural contemporaries, say, someone like Pierre Soulages, with his modernist imagery, the strokes and slashes and all that. I mean, someone with a conceptual, literate eye, oriented toward looking at the imagery, would certainly think of the Soulages as the modern painting and the Morandi as the old-fashioned one. But if you looked at them on the physical level, in terms of how they actually dealt with the time and space relationships within the painting per se, the Soulages was pre-cubist, almost floating in like a seventeenth-century space, with its sense of distinct figure and ground; whereas the Morandi was essentially the same as a deKooning or a Kline, with its intimate interpenetration between figure and ground. In Morandi they were never really separate. In fact, even with the figurative elements, there were cases where his ground actually got in front of the figures or in many cases couched them so intimately that there was no separating the two. Physically he carved a space for each one of these elements, where the amount of space left by the so-called ground was exactly that which the object occupied, so that it was as if the air had taken on substance. They were really good paintings."<sup>6</sup>*



FIG-9

AC, F#757-9, 1987

The confusion of the figure and ground that Irwin describes as occurring in Morandi's paintings is an issue that undoubtedly attracted AC to the painter for it is a highly Optical issue. Indeed, many of the images in AC's Photo Collection, as well as his own photographs, reflect this figure-ground tension (see Figures 9 and 10).

While outside of the scope of this effort, the implications of such a dissolution or confusion of the distinction between figure and ground are enormous. One could argue that this distinction forms the basis of Cartesian perspective upon which metaphor the entire Western philosophical tradition is based. Calling into question the boundaries between figure and ground implicates those we imagine exist between subject and object.

Such an interest in space and its representation, as exemplified in Morandi's paintings and their exploration of the figure-ground relationship, is one that clearly interested AC. In fact, AC often employs a rather subtle tactic, an apparent flattening of the space, in his photographs. I sense a sort of Cubistic impulse here. It feels like AC offering a gentle nudge to remind the viewer, "Oh, yes, I



FIG-10

AC, YSPIXI.TGA, 1991

am looking at a 2-dimensional representation of something.”

The longer I look at these images, the more Optical they become. For example, let’s look at one image that AC made outside of the studio before his concrete identification of the Optical issue: Figure 11. I don’t find this particularly Optical when I first look at it.



FIG-11

AC, F#581-17 or Misc 4 #96, 1980

As I begin to analyze it visually, I notice that there are several blocks of space defined by different colors, patterns, and degrees of focus. My first look at this image is completely untroubled. I see quickly that I am looking at a display of objects in a shop window, however, as I start to focus on the various blocks of space, the space itself begins to collapse. My eye becomes bothered by the blur of material on the right-hand side of the photograph and the combs start to float, developing aggression, as though they are marching towards me. The small army of combs, rather than receding gently into space as contentedly passive objects, advances antagonistically. Now, here’s what I find tricky.

This is what I see, but this does not guarantee that anyone else will see what I see, does it? And if this image hadn’t been categorized as “Optical” (by others I might add, this image was categorized before my work on the database), it’s doubtful that I would have even considered it thus.

Which brings up an interesting point in this whole Optical thing: we don’t all see things the same way. Without pretending to be an expert in what is really a scientific inquiry, I do want to mention a few issues. An individual’s biology, medically diagnosed visual or perceptual problems, let’s say, can cause differences in what is seen. While working to prepare this essay, in fact, (work that entailed a lot of reading and looking at images on the computer), I found myself becoming unbearably and inexplicably fatigued. A visit to the ophthalmologist provided the diagnosis of convergence insufficiency, which means that, though I have 20/20 eyesight, I have difficulty uniting the visual stimuli received by each eye into one cohesive whole, a binocular anomaly rather than a lenticular defect. So, where a person with normal convergence ability would see one object before them, I might see two. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one could actually train oneself to see this way, to diverge the singular perception into its two component views.

*“Irwin, who was fascinated by the ability of the two eyes to integrate their separate perceptions, mastered a technique for separating their focus: ‘Both Wortz and I learned how to do this,’ he claims. ‘We taught ourselves by placing a dot on a window and gazing both at and beyond it, thus allowing two planes of focus, one for each eye. Or else, by staring at a single pencil long enough to become conscious of the separate images we were receiving from each of our eyes. I can still do it any time I want. It takes a few minutes concentration, but I can just separate them, for example, having one eye register foreground and the other background.’*

–Lawrence Weschler, from *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin.<sup>7</sup>

In a fascinating article on stereo vision printed in the June 19, 2006 issue of The New Yorker magazine, Oliver Sacks writes

that "perhaps five or ten per cent of the population" have little or no binocular vision.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, according to the article, even amongst those of the population with normal vision there is enormous variation in stereoscopic vision and depth perception depending on whether one has a tendency to use more binocular or monocular indicators. So, there is a certain amount of subjectivity in vision just within this one aspect of visual perception.

Still another issue relates to perceptual phenomena known as inattentional and change blindness. The former happens when we fail to see something that was there before us, either because our attention was focused on something else or because it is so foreign to us that our brains fail to perceive it. One disquieting example of inattentional blindness involves an experiment in which viewers were asked to watch a short video of two teams passing a basketball and to perform some task related to the action occurring in the video, such as counting the number of passes, while watching. During this video, a person walked across the scene carrying an open umbrella or wearing a gorilla suit. Shockingly, on average, fifty percent of the viewers failed to notice him. A related phenomenon, change blindness, describes a situation wherein a person fails to notice large changes to a view, such as one person substituted for another or a skyscraper that disappears from a photograph. Such failure to perceive these changes is usually attributable to one or a combination of three causes: 1. normal eye movement (those near-constant unconscious shifts of focus within the visual field necessary for visual perception), 2. a visual disruption that prevents consistent monitoring of a scene (such as a truck crossing between the viewer and object of view), or 3. gradual change over a period of more than 10 seconds. It seems incredible that we wouldn't notice such seemingly obvious changes, but see for yourself:

[http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/djs\\_lab/demos.html](http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/djs_lab/demos.html)

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=8fixJ6xGnqg>

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=mAnKvo-fPs0>

As I said, these phenomena are really outside of the scope of this essay, but I did want to note the existence of such factors as relevant to an examination of the Optical.

Having identified Optical as an issue, AC became more rigorous in his selection of this type of photograph for the collection. Not all photographs are equally problematic, some are not problematic at all, and of those photographs that are problematic, not all show us something that was once there in the world, able to be discerned, but, rather, might have been altered via some trick in the taking or printing of the photograph, or, these days, through computer modification. As a guiding principle for new acquisitions to this category of imagery, AC began insisting that any additions to it must meet the criteria of having been made "through the taking lens," that is to say, that what we see in the finished image represents what was before the photographer's camera and was, therefore, able to have been apprehended in the world.<sup>9</sup>

*EH: Why make the distinction between "through the taking lens" and one achieved through some kind of manipulation?*

*AC: "Well, if it was seen through the taking lens that means it existed....it's a somewhat defining aspect that it occurred in real life."*

*EH: Why does that matter?*

*AC: "Because I am not only worried about the problem of the propaganda of a picture, or whatever you want to call it, but also the mis-seeing in real life as well."*

*EH: Why does it matter if a photo is achieved "through the taking lens" if we now have the doubt of whether it was truly*

made without manipulation or not? What I mean is, in the computer age, don't we explain away any seeming disruption to visual unity with "it must have been computer-manipulated?" and isn't this the REAL danger of contemporary photography?

AC: "[I'm] trying to say that the world that we see out there has confusion in it. And what you say, we get used to not seeing the confusion."

AC: "Really they're almost two different things, but they do relate."

EH: I think most viewers normalize anything that doesn't make sense. We want to believe that what we see is reality.

AC: "Well, the reason I like Optical images is because that's automatically not the case."

AC: "Again, I'm speaking to you, why it's important 'through the taking lens', that means that it existed in real life in relation to being seen, rather than manipulating it in the camera, and manipulating it significantly, you know, when you make a print, you're always manipulating it to some extent, because there is no original. But there is a common-sensical moment when you can pretty much agree that, yes, it was taken, you can agree that it was taken through that lens and pretty much trying to show what it was. And again I'm just going to say to you that if it existed and you can see it 'through the taking lens'...then it existed in reality to some extent and that's critical for me."

By defining categories within the ambiguously defined concept of the Optical, AC and SC made efforts to analyze how and why photographs are qualified as Optical by defining different categories of ways that the images he collected were Optical. They came up with the following breakdown:

bisected	mirror / glass / reflection	self conscious
color to color (same)	movement	selectivity of frame
color to color (different)	Not Resolved	selectivity of focus
Continuation of line	object behind object	shadow
distortion	object into object	shape
From Above	peculiarity	tonal non-optical
Foreshortening	perspective	Trompe D'oeil (participitory)
Interior Geometry	Post Manipulations	
material excess	scale	

Despite AC's interest in this categorization process he says that the impulse to analyze the photos in this way is really tertiary to his joy in both the Optical moment of confusion and his interest in what the Optical problem means for photography and our culture. To him, defining what makes a photo Optical is really a scientific investigation "and I'm really not a scientist," he has asserted. Analyzing the photo collection using categories to refine the Optical concept, was, in his mind, a way

of bringing attention and further investigation into all of its facets. "For me, Allan Chasanoff, I'm not preoccupied with what makes a photo Optical, but I do think it's important to know."

In exploring his thinking on this point, I have asked AC if it is indeed fair to say that he is not as interested in what makes a photo Optical as in what the fact of its Opticality imports? He responded that he senses it on two different registers: 1. the joy of the Optical moment and 2. the extension and reason for the Opticality.

*AC: "The extension meaning 'What does it mean for our culture and how can we use this Opticality?' and from the point of view of science, why is this 2-D thing acting strangely to us and making it Optical. It's a 2-D issue. We're not there."*

Paradoxically, despite the photograph's "documentary" association (or perhaps due to that very association), photographs deprive the viewer of the ability to verify, to judge for oneself—as AC said, "We're not there." For example, in AC ID #1370 (see Fig-12), a somewhat unreasonable black spot dominates the top third of the image. We can't verify why or what it is.



FIG-12

AC, F#803-29, 1982

If I tell you that it's a matte black rubber ball, you might feel reassured and say, "Okay, it is a matte black rubber ball." But, if you are relying on my explanation to make sense of the photo, what are the implications if I am a liar? Or what if I myself have been misinformed and, though I believe it to be a matte black rubber ball, it is, in fact, a trick or effect created in the printing? What does dependence on information outside the image itself lead to?<sup>10</sup> In the end, AC says that this image isn't Optical for him because he knows that the black circle is a racquetball.

In fact, AC often finds images less Optical than I do, but then this is unsurprising when it comes to examining his photographs because he was the one there taking the pictures and (most of the time) remembers what his camera captured. I accept this discrepancy of accord on the qualification of an image as Optical. It makes sense that Opticality would be subjective—obvious in a particular case to one person and invisible to another. I have, however, a hard time believing AC when he tells me that, not only does he not recognize Opticality in some of his pictures, but, in fact, most of his Optical photos are accidents.

*EH: I'm not accepting your protestations that they're accidental or that you're not trying to...*

*AC: Yeah, some of it's very obvious that I am trying.*

*EH: Yes, and succeeding.*

The photographer's "insider knowledge" of the making of a given photograph highlights our rather obvious disadvantage as viewers of the photograph and points to the photographer's power. Even if the photograph is "straightforward" or made "through the taking lens" it is presented to the viewer as a *fait accompli* marked by a fixed vantage point. We, unlike the

photographer, can't move around, behind, closer to, or within the scene presented in the photograph. We cannot see what was just beyond the borders, outside what was caught within the frame of the image. We cannot interact with it— touch it—for example. We can see only what is in the picture. Seeing in the second-degree, so to speak, can pose problems and frustrations that normal looking at the world doesn't. At least in the "real" world of first-degree vision we can probe what we see. We can attempt to verify.

Looking again at AC ID #1403 (see FIG-8, page 8) with this idea of first-and-second-degree vision, we can wonder what the result would be if the viewer were allowed to see the entire scene in context. In the privileged shoes of the photographer, we might not be confused by the scene before our eyes, or at the very least we might no longer be distressed by the sight. In fact, isn't this often the case with much of what we consider confusing photography?

So, what does AC think Optical means for our culture?

When I first looked at Victor Guidalevitch's photograph *Stagnation (Boats docked in harbor)* (Fig-13), I dismissed it as not very Optical until I read the comments in AC's collection database: "water line of left ship is in fact higher than viewer first realizes. Reflection."<sup>11</sup> I was suddenly transfixed. At first I had identified the bottom edge of the boat on the left as that part that meets the water with no reflection. After having read the comments, I was forced to reconsider this imagined positioning and then, with some difficulty, I was able to see it "correctly" with the water line on the left hand boat falling in between the two white stripes, the bottom stripe being a reflection of the top one. Even when I know how I am supposed to see it, it is difficult to hold the components of the photograph in the correct position; that reflection demands to take on weight and volume! Interestingly, after having seen the photo correctly and, simultaneously having no problem seeing it as I originally did, I realize that my preliminary untroubled viewing should have been troubling indeed. If the bottom of the boat really were located where I first imagined it, logically these two big boats would be fused together. The positioning I had first imagined is not physically possible, yet this didn't initially bother me. My brain read: two big boats, one little rowboat, two crossed chains, some box-like thing in the foreground: Ok, check. I didn't stop to wonder if the arrangement made physical, spatial sense, taking for granted that within a straight-seeming photograph what I saw existed in the world and therefore

must conform to the laws of physics. I find it troubling to think of how many photographs—but not only photographs— we see without really examining them. Of course examining every photograph or newspaper article or sale circular is impossible; our brains are already processing a great deal of information and we have to accept most things at face value or risk being paralyzed by information overload.

To compare the Guidalevitch image with another photograph,—this one also made "through the taking lens"— of a still life set up in the photographer's studio. Clarence John Laughlin's *Still Life with Cala Lilly and Mirror* (Fig-14), features multiple spatial planes at disconcerting angles creating the sensation of peering down at the vase from above. This vase, and to an even greater degree the twin vase behind it, is threatening to slide off the surface and crash at our feet. The space represented in the photograph is not logical, it does not seem to obey laws of physics. In fact the photographer achieved this effect through the use of mirrors, but though I know the account of the photo's creation, it is still difficult to imagine an arrangement that would yield the results I see. While I don't



FIG-13 Victor Guidalevitch, *Stagnation (Boats docked in harbor)*, 1930 - 40, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Allan Chasanoff Collection

know, for certain, what I am seeing here, I feel relieved knowing that my confusion results directly from the photographer's intentional efforts to confuse me.

Does the fact that the confusion in the Laughlin image is the result of the photographer's setup—that is to say, his physical manipulation of the objects presented to the camera's lens— while the Guidalevitch photo's disorienting quality is caused by the alignment of actual objects in space converted to 2-D perspective—a found, rather than made, arrangement— perplex us differently? Do we question the photograph/photographer in the former and vision in the latter? To take it one step further, are we pre-disposed to question the photograph/photographer in an image such as Laughlin's and pre-disposed to accept the "truth" of the photograph unquestioningly while doubting the limits of vision in a photograph such as the Guidalevitch?



FIG-14 Clarence John Laughlin, *Still Life with Cala Lilly and Mirror*, 1937, Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

*If the implication is that photos cannot be trusted, does this necessarily mean that the eyes cannot be trusted?*

AC: *"I don't know. That's what this whole issue brings up. That is I believe that's one of the major issues that I'm asking the Optical problem to develop. Is a photo more reliable than the memory of what we saw?"*

AC: *"I think the implication that I am making is that, and this is by extension, and that is if we're not sure about the photograph, which is really all I'm mostly interested in, we do have to question a little bit about vision in general and what we take for granted in vision and the limitations and the partiality of different cultural visions and it brings the whole thing into question. It's not really about truth per se. I can't deal with such a metaphysical term ... we've got to be very careful. And that's where we get into memory too. We've talked about the perceptual being connected to the memory problem. Because even though you knew the Guidalevitch picture...go through your history. I think it's really very interesting and write about your own history of that image. That even when you thought about it in the future after studying it you still knew that there were two boats, and there were three.<sup>12</sup> And so we're talking about the memory of the image now and not just the looking at the image. And I think that's a nice issue of what happened to you. We then go back to certain pictures remain Optical for us and certain pictures do not remain Optical for us when we see it, when we remember it—there's all sorts of different parameters that take place."*

A fair number of "Optical" images include in AC's Photo Collection are impossible to decipher because our view of the elements within the frame is so restricted that we cannot possibly make sense of what we are looking at. There are various causes for this inability to decipher such images, including: removal of context (i.e., super close-up, etc.), lack of clear focus, purposeful abstraction, or physical obstruction of the photo's contents.<sup>13</sup> I find this particular sort of Optical imagery almost too frustrating to contemplate for long. They feel aggressive, as if taunting that yes, indeed, the deck has been stacked against me and their riddles will never be solved. I feel cheated. I can't possibly win such a game, a game, for example, like the one being played in AC's photographed set-up (Fig- 8, AC ID #1403). With its partial and esoteric components the conceits of this photograph ensure that I will never know, for one thing, just how much depth really existed in the first-degree experience and I feel frustrated with the eternity of my confusion. I turn my back on these kinds of photos rather quickly. I told AC this recently and his response was:

*"So you asked the question, so you go into the photo and you're having some problems. Big deal. So? It doesn't have to add up. That's the whole point. So my answer to you is to be pissed off and ask somebody a question later. It's not the end of the world. I don't go to a museum to be finalized. You can go to a museum and end up with questions.*

I must admit that my use of the phrase "turning my back rather quickly" in describing my reaction to such images doesn't accurately reflect that I likely spend more time looking at these photos than I might spend in front of less troubling images, even those I might be particularly fond of. So, if my reaction is any indication of a more general outcome, the frustrating photographs succeed in slowing down the viewer provoking a question about the photograph's fundamental relationship to "reality."

*AC: "Whether it was made by an artist or not made by an artist, whether it's a photograph of a photograph or something else ... the only limit I gave myself, because I wanted some parameter, was that the photographer pretty much saw it through the taking lens and if I'm wrong on some of them then I'm wrong, but at least the question was being brought up. And that is, if it makes you question the image, in any way, shape, or form, it's important."*

The issue of questions and questioning introduces a way of approaching why the Optical is important to AC and suggests a return to Roland Barthes for a moment:

*"Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code; from which proposition an important corollary must immediately be drawn: the photographic message is a continuous message."<sup>14</sup>*

In discussing this particular Barthes quotation in *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought* Martin Jay points out, "photographs also had a second-order capacity to signify, which Barthes identified with their connotative power: the cultural resonances activated by their reception."<sup>15</sup>

Both aspects of photography's power as described by Barthes— its relationship to reality and its ability to trigger associations (consciously or unconsciously)— present troubling possibilities to AC. This issue, as well as AC's discomfort with it, dovetails with his particular arguments about the impact of mass media on the individual and, while explication of this argument is outside of the scope of this essay, a specific facet of his case is germane to the Optical problem. According to his theory, AC contends that because the ability to broadcast, print, or otherwise publish and distribute on a large scale is outside of the legal and/or financial capacities of most individuals, the individual's relationship to mass media is characterized by one-sided receivership producing frustration at not being able to "talk back." For most of us, this frustration at lack of response opportunity is experienced on an unconscious level therefore our compensatory actions are unacknowledged or misunderstood. While most of the photographs discussed in this essay don't qualify as belonging to the mass media, to the extent that their context in the museum or gallery has identified them as "art," the images have received official sanction that influences most of us to view them differently than a photo by, say, Aunt Sally.

*So, what's the danger in that? I asked AC.*

*AC: That we're being spoken to and we don't know what's being said. It just works on you.*

*EH: Kind of like subliminal messages?*



*AC: I mean not even subliminally, but directly. We cannot talk with them. They just are. And we just accept them. Maybe we can talk about them in words, but very rarely do we ever do that. We can do that, but you really can't talk about it in relation to its own structure, which is in picture back at you. The Asians are much better with this because there is some pictorial aspect to their language. So at the first instance they're not just going abstract.*

Because of the Optical photo's capacity to perplex or momentarily stun the viewer, it can cause a disruption in the otherwise unremarkable and placid receiving of the photograph. To resolve—or at least attempt to resolve—the confusion, the viewer must slow down and really look at the picture. The existence of the Optical disturbance has value in its ability to disrupt simple acceptance of the photograph's transmission of "reality."

*To what end does this disruption function?*

*AC: Whatever will question the photograph in its relationship to reality is important to me. I don't care how. And one of the best ways to question it, maybe the only way that I know of was to question it, in the first instance which is Optical.*

*AC: I don't care what they do, as long as they question. It is the act of questioning that is so absolutely critical. Not just to receive that which you're getting.*

*EH: Ok, what is being questioned here? The photograph?*

*AC: I'm using the photograph here as an instance of a larger questioning and hopefully, if you question the photograph, you get into the habit of questioning.*

*EH: So we are talking about a much larger issue here...*

*AC: It depends on what level you want to deal with. My ideal would be that it work on a very high level, but it may not. On whatever level it provokes is fine with me, that is I'm referring to the Optical collection.*

*EH: So the Optical collection is a provocation?*

*AC: I wouldn't just say it's a provocation. It's also a statement. It's a provoking because we're used to either bypassing it or simplifying it or whatever and therefore it's saying to you look at this thing more carefully to try to understand what is. I'm also trying to provoke by trying to say use questioning in general. Maybe all provocations are statements as well, philosophically.*

*EH: You are asking something from people.*

*AC: Yes, if you want to say it that way, I'm asking people to watch out for imagery, especially imagery that is situated in a higher, authoritative environment—either the newspaper, the magazines, or even the museums, anything. Watch out for the image. Television. Watch out for the image. It's a dangerous thing. I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I'm just saying you gotta understand it.*

*EH: Yes. You want people to look, examine and not just take things at face value.*

*AC: I don't really care very much on a very basic level...as long as the questioning is activated, as long as the viewer gets activated somehow and not just sit there sucking in. Whatever will question the photograph in its relationship to reality is*

*important to me. I don't care how.*

*EH: So, it's safe to say that that is one of your goals, to raise consciousness of seeing?*

*AC: Yeah, but I don't want to be propaganda. I just want to make consciousness. I don't necessarily want to say what it should be conscious about. It's not propaganda. It's just the opposite.*



FIG-15

AC, multi-mix-1, 2000

I asked AC if he thought that "special effects" or "trick photography" work to produce an Optical effect anymore. I was thinking of images that he had made combining both "tricks" in the setup of a straight image (an item glued to glass which then appears to float) and computer-assisted compositions (i.e., ID# 1023, FIG-15).

I wonder if, in the "age of the computer" where nearly everyone is aware of the existence of Photoshop, we don't just gloss the floating vase—not even realize that it is defying gravity—if we aren't so inured to the concept that seeing is not believing that we don't just sort-of register, "ok, floating vase, computer drawing of chair, little Greek figure, block of wood, etc." It seems to me that some of the images that we have described as Optical are less Optical than they once were. We might still wonder: "what is that?" but has technology insured that we are less troubled by such questions?

Ultimately, now that photography exists in the "computer age" when we know that the photographer has the opportunity to manipulate an image, does the distinction—between an Optical image created by the photographer's direct effort and an Optical image generated exclusively through "the taking lens"—continue to have importance? And if it is important, to what extent is the distinction significant?

*AC: People would say that this [AC ID# 7538, FIG-16] is computerized because you could easily do this in the computer. That's why, one of the reasons, I have to make sure that I'm able to say whether it was real or not real. The Optical Age is over because of this issue of the computer. There's no mystery in this anymore, even though they would've been wrong [in assuming that it was made in the computer instead of being a straight, unmanipulated image].*

*EH: Do you really believe that? We've discussed this before and I've written two very contradictory things: 1. We normalize everything, if we can't explain something, we say the computer did it, and 2. We want to believe that what we see is true.*

*AC: "Yeah, but at the very contextual level since it's a picture and we're looking at it there is this certain amount of peace already there and completion because we know it's a picture, which is a different context. And we can never forget that. We know we're looking at a*



FIG-16

AC, 01-14-07-AROUND-22X, 2007

*picture.*

*EH: As soon as we encounter something that seems not right, we tell ourselves that the photographer must have manipulated it.*

*AC: "I agree. Right now there's a quick answer we use and we will not struggle; even if it's real." "That's a harmful thing because... even if it's a difficult image, let's say like the Laughlin, people will not bother to look for anything deeper."*

*EH: That's one of those areas where computer technology in photography could be dangerous.*

*AC: "Yes, at this moment in history. But countering that is the ability more and more for people to make their own things, their own pictures, so therefore, we know that the computer is doing this. So there's a beginning crossover point that's taking place now. And maybe in 50 years then we will not believe at all the nature of the image as a reflection—no pun-- coming from the outside but something that the individual has chosen to speak with."*

*AC: "My overall statement was just going to be: seeing is complicated and don't trust it. That's all. And then using it as a metaphor to: don't trust anything. Which is what I want to put inside the museum in order for you to doubt the museum. A little bit."*

## APPENDIX I:

Images and Analyses from AC's larger photography collection (includes photographs donated to Yale University Museum of Art and Houston Museum of Fine Art)

**Kathleen Seltzer, *Untitled (Satin Skirts)***

This black and white photograph is full of sensuous folds of fabric, two plates, and a few body parts: arm (hand hidden behind skirt), two hands hold plate (one nearly obscured by similarity of tone between it and fabric). What are we looking at? How many people are involved? Where are the rest of their bodies in relation to the arm and hands? The close-crop restricts context and prevents certain identification. This is a problem of limitation. The viewer is denied context or vantage point that would otherwise allow identification of the elements in the photo.



Kathleen Seltzer, *Untitled (Satin Skirts)*, 1980  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Jed Devine, *Untitled (Cups, Pears, Woman)***

There are multiple perspectives presented simultaneously such as cannot be encountered in reality. It appears that perhaps the area where the floor meets the wall is reproduced and presented at a slightly different angle. I don't believe that this is a straight image, but, rather made from multiple exposures and yet, because it's composite elements are so soundly even mundanely based in "reality" it is still visually distressing. [NOTE: I am seeking verification of this photograph's "through the taking lens" status.-EH]



Jed Devine, *Untitled (Cups, Pears, Woman)*, 1988-1989  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Don Dubroff, *Untitled #31 (church interior)***

In this photograph, though our viewpoint is restricted, we have no doubts about what we are seeing. We are clearly looking at architectural details in a highly ornamented church. The problem here is one of determining the proper depth order of those elements. The dome in the upper left corner can appear both convex and concave, and once this instability is noticed, it is hard to hold onto either view, yet, we know exactly the identity of that which we see.



Don Dubroff, *Untitled #31 (church interior)*, 1982  
Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Suzanne Opton, *It's Because You're Standing on the Bed***

This photograph appears to capture an exterior, perhaps urban, scene (as in a garden behind a building) with trees and shadows viewed through an unidentifiable obstructing element. The repetitive patterning of lines adds to the chaotic confusion and a general sense that there is too much information to process, to separate out and identify. The blur, caused by the short horizontal-ish lines in what would seem to be the foreground, serves to occlude a clear view of the contents of the photo in much the same manner that the blurred hand and wine glass complicate the Fink image discussed earlier (and much as the rattle did to the infant AC).



Suzanne Opton, *It's Because You're Standing on the Bed*, 1991  
Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *La Del Piru***

This is an image that becomes more and more Optical the longer it is observed. It is a black-and-white soft-focus photograph of a truncated female nude partially obscured by leaves and shadows. At first blush, she appears to be standing with her weight supported more by her left leg, her right arm bent, perhaps her right hand hooked onto her right shoulder, and her left side turning away from the camera. Perhaps her left arm is akimbo. Even given this plausible explanation of her physical state, there is a disquieting asymmetry to her shape. Upon closer examination, her right "elbow" is revealed to be her right breast, or maybe you even saw it correctly as a breast to begin with (especially if you are pre-disposed to seeing breast shapes), but even if you had "solved" that issue, her form still becomes quite disturbing. Where is her left breast? Where indeed is the boundary of the left side of her body? It seems to be disintegrating into the shadow of the left hand side. Indeed, now her body seems to be breaking apart (beyond the fracturing generated by the photographer's framing which leaves her a photographic quadriplegic) into separate pieces and sections. This is a confusion born out of obstructed and missing information.



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *La Del Piru*, 1979  
Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Connie Bigelow, *Daffodils***

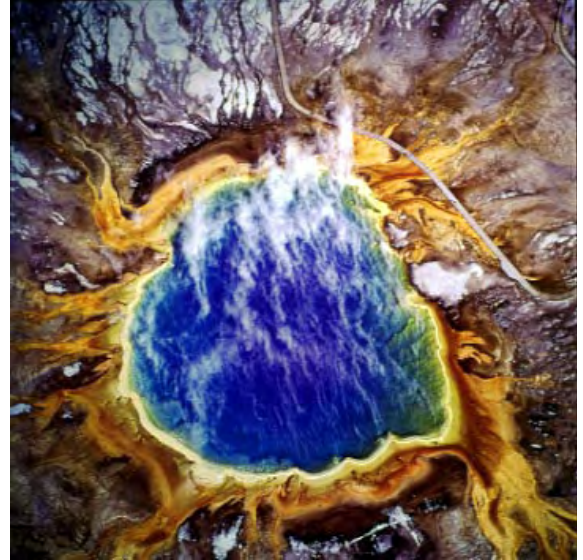
I believe the viewer is at an impossible disadvantage to know what we are looking at here. Perhaps the photograph was taken at very close-range and we are seeing a small detail magnified to a larger than normal scale. The title says "Daffodils" and yet aside from the green and yellow colors that could correspond to those found in daffodils, there is no shape or form that suggests that we are looking at actual daffodils. It appears that the background is some kind of painted surface and the foremost elements also seem to have been at least partially painted, but in neither the background nor the foreground can we discern what the elements actually are. This type of Optical is a result of the photographer's choice in framing. We are denied the larger context or any clues that would aid in identification.



Connie Bigelow, *Daffodils*, 1994  
Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**David Maisel, *Grand Prismatic Spring with Tourists, Yellowstone, Wyoming***

This image appears to be of a natural formation, but it is devoid of visual clues within the photograph to indicate scale therefore we cannot be sure of the object's size. We are told via the photographer's title that it is an aerial view of Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park. The title also includes the word "tourists" so I think good, I will see some human forms and be able to judge the size of this landscape accordingly (the spring is 250 x 380 feet), but I don't see them, at least not in the reproduction. So, it is a kind of abstraction (the photographer's vantage point here farther away and above what we could see without mechanical aide) and prohibited knowledge of scale that lends to this photograph's Opticality. What, in fact, makes this image particularly Optical is the unusualness, or even the seeming unnaturalness, of the natural formation. The landscape's feature looks like it comes from another planet, is something microscopic, or has been altered or exaggerated in some way. It is its uniqueness as something we don't come across everyday that makes it difficult to identify with any degree of certainty. That and the fact that the image was taken from a great distance above its subject. But having once visited this particular spring in Yellowstone, I imagine that one would readily identify the subject of this photo even if one had only seen it from the ground as surely kiosks near this attraction that sell aerial-view post cards would have been unavoidable!



David Maisel, *Grand Prismatic Spring with Tourists*, 1987  
Yale University Art Gallery, Allan Chasanoff Collection

**Tomio Sieke, *Quai des Orfevres***

The photograph above presents a tormenting view of architectural details, most prominently, an arched underpass giving way to a vertical wall. A change in wall surface is visible at the diagonal crack where, presumably, part of the wall's stucco has naturally deteriorated or been intentionally chipped away. What should be a straight-forward, non-confusing image begins to trick the eye; a result of the tonal shift between the darker value of the curved arch and the lighter gray of the wall nearest to the arch. This produces an effect in which, alternately, the wall appears in front of the arch and behind it. The viewer's ability to establish a stable focal point becomes challenging and the eye cannot hold the archway and its adjacent wall in their proper positions simultaneously.



Tomio Sieke, *Quai des Orfevres*, 1943  
Yale University Art Gallery,  
Allan Chasanoff Collection



Allan Chasanoff, *1579.31a*, 1997

**Allan Chasanoff, *1579.31a***

Similarly, AC's photograph is a classic example of the Optical. While I know what it depicts—no matter how many times I see this image—I still do not see it "right."

## APPENDIX II:

## Optical vs. optical illusion - An email exchange between AC and EH

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Hi Allan,

<http://www.michaelbach.de/ot/>

That's a link to an interesting site about optical illusions. Have a fun.

--

**received!****I do not think we see 'eyeball to eyeball'-****wander lust eyes****we see what we believe****eye dotings (I do things)****sweep no more, my lady****Pairs is a nice city****ptomaine is another day****Allan**

--

Anyway, I came across that site in trying to define "optical illusion" as contrasted to Optical. It is a slippery little slope, but it is still, I think, as I thought before: "optical illusions" can be included in Optical (I am thinking, for example, of the kind of Optical characterized by that photo you made in Jordan, AC Photo Elizabeth ID# 4561) but are not the principal defining focus (ha-ha!) of Optical.

I think that optical illusions can be characterized as perceptual phenomena resulting from the peculiarities of our human vision system (eyes, optic nerves, brain, etc.)--how we see-- whereas Optical images have less to do with the functioning of our vision system than with the limitations of the photographic representation--how what we see is presented to us.

"Optical illusions" are instances of seeing things differently than they "naturally are" (for example, we see spots where there are physically none) where photographs that are Optical may be characterized by this trait, but the reasons for this most often have to do with the fact of it being a photograph as opposed to a peculiarity of the way that we see. And, if we do imagine that we see an elbow that is in fact a breast (as in the Bravo photo) or a water-line that is much higher than we first esteemed (Guidalevitch), we can then also see it correctly whereas we can't unsee the spots. The two are related to the extent that they result from our natural instinct to make sense of what we see (and the resulting frustration when that impulse is perturbed). It does start to answer my question of whether

this investigation into Optical, that calls the photographic representation into question, then also implicates vision more generally. The answer would be, of course, yes and no.

At least this is what I think right now. My gut tells me there is a very real difference, the question is can I succeed in expressing what that difference is? Any help you'd care to lend in this endeavor would be much appreciated!

Incidentally, even with optical illusions, research indicates that an estimated 5% of the population with normal vision will not be able to see a given optical illusion.

p.s. The site, while rather sprawling and largely outside of what we're talking about, does have some interesting and pertinent information from a more science-based angle including:

-a bit on tendency/bias to see a face

-one-shot learning

-how translation from 3-D to 2-D or vice versa affects our ability to judge size, depth, etc.

--

**Elizabeth-**

**we have discussed this many times- I have no aversion to discussing the issue of optical illusion but that is not the focus of my work- both collecting and making-if you need that to assert your individuality and sensibility that is fine- if you need to make a logical statement about seeing and mis-seeing from a physical and scientific basis I do understand-**

**actually, optical illusions sort of bore me-**

**I am coming from a technological and historical and cultural pov-**

**painters 'gave up' realism mainly because of the photo- that also took with it the larger story telling that was imbedded in much of earlier Western painting- there was a definite endorsement of the 'realness' of the photo- it was sort of absolute-**

**that which optical illusion calls forth is sort of imbedded in the photo I am interested in-**

**as well, the democracy of the photo as well as its new context was very critical- mega pov-**

**for 150 years the photo held sway- that was what I was up against-**

**the computer is mucking in that arena now, thankfully-**

**of course, memory sits all over this-**

**enough-**

**I feel I am repeating-**

**Allan**



## Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Flamingo published by Fontana Books, London. 1984. p. 17
2. see [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html/res=9401EED7163BF93AA35753C1A965948260&sec=&spon=&page\\_wanted=2](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html/res=9401EED7163BF93AA35753C1A965948260&sec=&spon=&page_wanted=2)
3. SC is Steve Caruso who worked for AC from 1995-2006.
4. Description from AC Project database.
5. AC makes a distinction between being trompe l'oeil and playing with the concept of trompe l'oeil. "This photograph," he says, "is NOT trompe l'oeil." "Or," he further qualified, "it might be that photography itself is trompe l'oeil." Allan Chasanoff, "AC Structure-Development," unpublished document. Started 8-24-00.
6. Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. University of California Press, 1982. Pp. 56-57
7. Ibid, p. 130
8. Oliver Sacks, "Stereo Sue: Why two eyes are better than one," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2006. p.71
9. AC informed me that this happened very early on in the collecting process. There are, to his knowledge, only two photographs in the larger collection that do not fit the specified criteria.
10. See "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes, in *Image Music Text* for exploration of this issue.
11. From an unattributed comment in the Photo database. It was most likely made by AC or by SC in consultation with AC.
12. AC is referencing a discussion we had about the previously discussed Guidalevitch photograph. I didn't have the image before me, but had studied it in some depth. My belief that I "knew" the picture—that I remembered with a reasonable degree of accuracy its contents—was proven wildly inaccurate as I remembered only two boats instead of the actual three, a rope instead of the chains shown in the picture.
13. See Appendix I at the end of this document for a discussion of some Optical photographs from AC's Photo Collection.
14. Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Flamingo published by Fontana Books, London. 1984. p. 17
15. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California. 1994. p. 442