

# Bridging distances across time and place in photography

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## Abstract

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, people praised photography in particular for its remarkable realism, which also produced the medium's truthfulness. When no camera was present, there was no photograph. This essay discusses several views and photographs that reflect on constructing history and presenting the not-photographed past in photographs. A photograph of Napoleon Bonaparte thereby serves as a major illustration. Although the methods applied may vary (from

straight to staged and manipulated), in terms of their intended effect, all the photographs discussed here strongly depend on the common expectation towards photography: that it represents the visual reality in front of the camera. The case studies also address several other characteristics, such as de-contextualization through framing, to demonstrate photography's power to 'suggest' that a photograph depicts the not-photographed past.

“Photography, because of the presentness of its referent, can only be history, it cannot represent it.” This characterization of photography by Clive Scott (1999, 29) addresses an oft-mentioned, medium-specific aspect of photography. We are familiar with the genre of history painting, which provides us with a view of events that in many instances took place long before the painting's creation. This genre does not surprise us anymore. However, given our expectations of the medium of photography, as articulated by Scott, seeing a photograph of an event that happened before the invention of photography will not just surprise many of us – it will even disturb us.

This essay concentrates on several arguments that address characteristics of photography that allow particular photographs to suggest that they represent the not-photographed past. My argument will demonstrate that views that stress photography's outright inability to achieve such an effect have in fact helped photographers to create it in a convincing way. As such I do not claim that photo cameras can record things that passed without being photographed; rather, I discuss characteristics of photography and several photographs that are 'suggestive' of the power of photographs to visualize not yet recorded history ('photographing after

the fact'). My argument also explores the relationship between these concerns and history as a complicated combination of reconstruction and construction. A photograph of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington taken by the American/Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto will serve to illustrate some of the main points.

### Photography as source of information and its lack of information

We know many places, people, and artworks only through photography. We are not able to see them for 'real' for a variety of reasons: they are too far away, we are not really allowed to see them, or they do not exist or live anymore. Although each year scores of tourists flock to the Taj Mahal in India or the Great Wall of China, far more people only know these places 'very well' thanks to the countless snapshots taken of them. And if most of us will not personally meet famous politicians or other important leaders on a daily basis, we seem to know them 'well' from photographs in newspapers or television news bulletins. At least we will recognize them instantly if we happen to run into them.



1. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington*, from the series *Wax Museums*, 1994. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy of the artist.

But what about historical figures like Napoleon Bonaparte? Do we know exactly what he looked like? Napoleon died in 1821, almost two decades before photography was invented. Thanks to portrait paintings, drawings, engravings, sculptures, and a death mask we can imagine what Napoleon looked like. So how could Hiroshi Sugimoto take an un-manipulated

analogue photograph of him <sup>[fig.1]</sup>? The black and white photograph of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington (1994) is part of a series entitled *Wax Museums*, and this answers our question. This series of photographs was shot in Madame Tussaud's wax museums and other waxworks museums. The individual photograph, without the title, does not inform us about the location of the recorded scene. This lack of context explains the surprising effect of the photograph. As a wax museum visitor, we know what to expect; we know we are looking at wax models, even though they may look frighteningly real at first sight.

Similarly, when visiting a cinema, we expect to be exposed to a constructed story. In fact, there are some fifty movies, if not more, about Napoleon, of which Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) is probably the most famous. Film and photography are both lens-based media, but in a cinema we know we are watching actors. According to Roland Barthes, in his *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1981, 79), this difference between photography and cinema explains why he dislikes cinema. In his view, a photograph offers a direct image of someone at a certain moment in the past, but cinema only presents the past indirectly, through actors. This may explain why Sugimoto's still photograph of Napoleon surprises us more than looking at all those Napoleons moving about in movies <sup>[see film frame in fig. 2]</sup>.



2. Film frame from Abel Gance's movie *Napoléon*, 1927. [source: N. King, *Abel Gance*, London: BFI Publishing, 1984]

In the case of famous movie stars, looking at the star herself/himself may take precedence over the role he or she is playing. Likewise, photographs of movie stars in magazines or biographies focus on their being a celebrity. Usually these images are taken on the film set during a photo session. Movie stars such as Jean Harlow tended to be photographed in stereotypical ways, to make them immediately identifiable. Sugimoto's photograph of Harlow <sup>[fig.3]</sup> follows this same logic, but was taken in 1994, which is surprising when one knows that the actress died in 1937. This photograph of Harlow is also part of the *Wax Museums* series. No wax museum visitor will mistake the wax model (most probably modelled on the basis of photographs) for the real Harlow, but when juxtaposing a portrait of Harlow taken in 1934 <sup>[fig. 4]</sup> and Sugimoto's photograph, it is almost impossible to sense the difference between the two black and



3. Hiroshi Sugimoto, Jean Harlow, from the series *Wax Museums*, 1994. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy of the artist.

white images. This suggests we do not see any difference between a direct picture and an indirect, doubly mediated picture. This observation confirms the claim by Victor Burgin as put forward in his *Thinking Photography* (1983, 61): “A photograph of three people grouped together may, in reality, have comprised a live model, a two-dimensional ‘cut-out’ figure, and a wax dummy. In the actual presence of such an assembly I would quickly know them for what they were. No such certainty accompanies my cognition of the photographic group.” In a similar way, Sugimoto’s photo series shows that as a result of the grain of the photograph the skin of the figures in the photograph looks less artificial than the skin of the real wax figure, while the photograph’s black and whiteness camouflages the artificial colour of their skin.



4. George Hurrell, photo portrait of Jean Harlow, 1932. [source: <http://www.hurrellphotos.com/default.asp?ID=4&action=largeimage&imgid=226>]

In particular, however, Sugimoto exploits the role of camera framing in his two photographs, which cuts off the context of the photographed scene. Actually, the context of the wax museum is replaced by the context of the photo series. The consequence of this context is that Sugimoto’s Napoleon

and the Duke of Wellington look even more 'real' as a result of the juxtaposition with 'familiar' photographs of still living famous people, such as the British Royal Family and famous politicians, and movie star Harlow, whom we know through lens-based media.

Sugimoto's photo of Napoleon and the Duke thus owes its surprising effect not only to photography's role as an important source of information on places, people, and events (which spectators are unable to experience personally), but also to the blind fields of photography that may heighten the effect of 'reality.'

### Representation of historical events

Whereas Burgin used the example of a group of three kinds of figures to demonstrate a characteristic of photography in the representation of people, Roland Barthes, in his abovementioned essay, compared photographs of groups of people with a *Tableau Vivant*: "In the photograph, time's immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: time is engorged (whence the relation with *Tableau Vivant ...*)" (1981, 91). The *Tableau Vivant*, 'living picture' in English, was a form of theatre in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. It consisted of a group of costumed people posing in a theatre setting. This static scene was only shown to the public for several minutes. They had to experience the scene as if looking at a huge painting. Today, we would experience it as a three-dimensional photograph.

*Tableaux Vivants* would refer to ideal, future worlds or to past worlds, by copying statues from antiquity and other scenes from stories or paintings. Some photographs from the 19<sup>th</sup> century show *Tableau Vivant*-like scenes, specifically staged for making a photograph, as in Lewis Carroll's *Saint George and the Dragon* (1875). The theatrical setting is so evident in photographs such as these that they could not be confused with photographs of real events.

The Madame Tussaud's scene of Napoleon also functions as a *Tableau Vivant*, albeit through posing wax models instead of living people. It raises the question as to which historical event the scene of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington refers to. Napoleon is shown on his deathbed with the Duke at his side, but this never really took place. Napoleon died in 1821 in exile on the island of St. Helena, a place the Duke in all likelihood never visited. Moreover, it is equally likely that the two men did not meet face to face at the Battle of Waterloo, where the English defeated the French, after which Napoleon was exiled to Elba. Does this mean that the scene depicted is devoid of any historical content? What we see in fact is closely related to the history of the Madame Tussaud Museum. Marie Tussaud, née Grosholtz, was a specialist in producing wax casts. During the French Revolution she made the death masks of people executed by guillotine. Death masks and mortuary paintings were originally a practice confined to the rich and powerful, but had gradually become more commonplace (to be replaced, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, by post mortem photography) (Ruby, 1995). According to Nancy Spector (2000, 21), Tussaud was forced to make death masks in 1793 to prove her allegiance to the Revolution. In 1835,

after having moved to England, she founded her famous collection of wax figures. Napoleon on his deathbed became one of those wax figures. The Duke, a resident of London, is said to have visited the collection often, most notably to view Tussaud's imagined scene of Napoleon's deathbed. After the Duke died in 1852, Tussaud's successor (she died in 1850) created a wax figure of the Duke that was meant to represent his visits to the collection. So what visitors of the Madame Tussaud's Museum are actually looking at is a depiction of the real Duke of Wellington looking at a rendering of Napoleon's death scene. In other words, there is more historical truth to the scene than one might initially suspect: as a visitor to the exhibit, the Duke was integrated into it (Schürmann, n.d., n.p.; Bashkoff, 2000, 29).

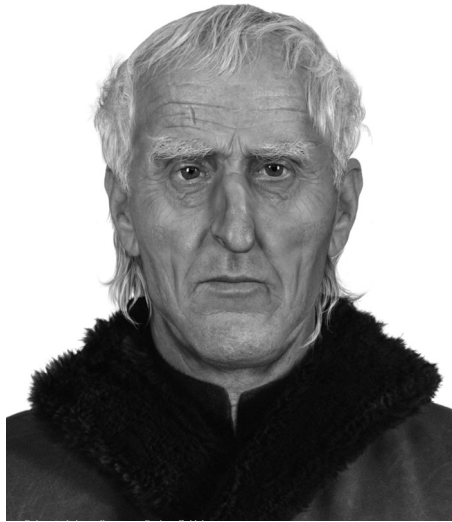
Yet what are the implications for our perception of Sugimoto's photograph? It appears to be an interesting example of a photograph taken of an event that passed without being photographed, even though the latter might have been possible. Photography, invented in 1839, was already an often-applied medium in the years immediately preceding the death of the Duke. One may wonder, however, whether the rooms were light enough for early photographic techniques. Should we conclude that Sugimoto's photograph is more truthful with regard to the figure of Napoleon than that of the Duke? Because Napoleon died before the invention of photography, Tussaud had to base her portrait on other visual media, probably copies from visual material created on the spot by eyewitnesses. Napoleon's death mask, possibly made on 6 May 1821, the day after he died, by one of the seven surgeons present at the autopsy, was copied many times in the following decades. Between 1840 and 1845, the Tussaud collection even acquired a copy (Watson, 1915, 9 and 193). But there was also a portrait painter present at Napoleon's deathbed named Joseph William Rubidge. He drew a portrait of Napoleon dressed in his uniform and hat. This sketch was reproduced in England as an engraving in over a thousand copies (162). It is not inconceivable that Tussaud also saw that engraving.

The wax figure of the Duke is based on the well-known person and a 'realistic' scene, but does this make his appearance in Sugimoto's photo more truthful? If a photographer had been able to take a photograph of the Duke visiting the Tussaud collection in about 1850, it would have looked like Sugimoto's photograph, the main difference being the living Duke versus his wax statue. From this perspective, then, the Duke is less truthful in Sugimoto's representation of Napoleon's deathbed.

### Strategies in various kinds of photographs of historical figures

Sugimoto's photographs could only present an event from the past thanks to the staged historical scene. The next example shows how manipulated digital imagery can create a 'photographic' image on the basis of paintings and other visual sources than photography, quite similar to how Marie Tussaud created her historical wax figures.

Digital photography is most often praised for its ability to show the world in the future, or as an alternative to present appearances. Media



5. Forensic facial reconstruction of the skull of Nicolaus Copernicus. © Pultusk Academy of Humanities, and Dariusz Zajdel MA, Polish Police Central Forensic Laboratory.

philosopher Jos de Mul has argued, for instance, that digital photography does not represent reality as it is, but as it could be (2002, 165). Scholars express less interest in the power of digital photography to make a ‘visual reconstruction’ of the past. An intriguing case in point for discussing this capability is the colour ‘photo portrait’ of Copernicus <sup>[fig. 5]</sup>. Nicolaus Copernicus, who died in 1543 at the age of 70 after challenging the ancient belief that the sun revolved around the earth, was buried at the Roman Catholic cathedral in the city of Frombork, Poland. In 2005, a team led by Jerzy Gassowski, head of an archaeology and anthropology institute, found what appeared to be the skull of the Polish astronomer and clergyman after a one-year search of the tombs beneath the church floor. (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9913250/> [accessed June 14, 2010]). On the basis of this skull and a painted portrait of Copernicus (from the Okr?gowe Toruniu Museum), a method of visualization was applied which is also used for police reconstruction portraits. For many years, police reconstruction portraits merely consisted of drawings or wax models based on material evidence, such as skulls, or eyewitness accounts.

The computer-generated reconstruction of the face of Copernicus shows a white-haired man with a large nose and a small scar above one of his eyes. Although scientific methods were applied in this visualization, there are many doubts about the portrait (and the skull). I do not want to elaborate on that discussion, but on the fact that the supposed appearance of Copernicus was not presented as a drawing-like or painting-like picture, but as an analogue-like photograph. It even looks like a passport photo, which nowadays has to be a frontal image (instead of the almost three-quarter view), or like a mug shot taken in a police station. This association with official state identification documents seems to strengthen the image’s truthfulness. However, the constructed colour photo actually looks

'too new.' We expect portraits of people who lived in the past to express the ravages of time. Lev Manovich addresses that problem in his essay 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography.' He concludes that digital images are not inferior to the visual realism of traditional photography; they look perfectly real – all too real (1996, 65).

Doubts as to whether this 'photo' of Copernicus proves that photography is able to bridge distances either in time or in place continues a discussion that is as old as the medium itself. An interesting anecdote from that history is mentioned by Rosalind Krauss in her essay on the famous photographer Nadar. In the second chapter of *Mémoire*, Nadar mentions a letter he received from Monsieur Gazon requesting a photographic portrait of himself. Gazon expects the photograph to be taken in Paris, while he himself remains in Pau. Nadar forgets the whole business until twenty years later, when a young man presents himself in Nadar's studio claiming to have perfected the means for carrying out Gazon's request: long-range photography (*photographie à distance*). Nadar is sure that this is impossible and will always remain impossible (Krauss, 1978, 33). By now, more than a century later, we note that the ultimate goal of computer-generated imagery mainly appears to be the creation of an image of a model that is absent and that looks like an analogue photograph, which is in fact the exact same wish of Monsieur Gazon.

These new technical developments, however, have not rigorously changed our expectations towards photography in general. Like Nadar, most people still doubt whether photographs can really show us people who did not stand in front of the camera. Manipulated digital photographs are no longer called photographs, but digital images, which are more closely related to drawings and paintings than they are to analogue photographs. In this respect, the confusion provoked by both Sugimoto's portraits of wax figures and the portrait of Copernicus owes much to this persistent belief in photography; likewise, it only lasts as long as the illusion of the un-manipulated photograph of a living being.

Still, Manovich differentiates various expectations of photography. We tend to trust some genres, such as press photographs or portrait photographs, but we distrust the truthfulness of commercial photographs (1996, 61). The above-discussed photographs all relate to the genre of portrait photography, including its supposed truthfulness. In the same vein, we expect family snapshots to be true, like, for instance, the series *Living Together* (1996) by Norwegian artist Vibeke Tandberg. But Tandberg plays with our expectations. She digitally created a new personal history: a childhood with a twin sister. A quite similar method lies at the root of the German artist Matthias Wähner's series *Man Without Properties* (1994), a reference to the novel by Robert Musil. Wähner used historical photographs from a press archive of the German magazine *Quick* to 'insert' himself digitally into them, thus also inserting himself into the past.



## History as reconstruction and construction

Tandberg's and Wähler's photographs, in which the photographer him/herself is inserted, function as a kind of constructed personal history, whereas Sugimoto deals with collective history. In *Questioning History. Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art* (2008), Frits Gierstberg signals three possible levels of historical consciousness, while admitting that the nature of these distinctions is artificial. The first is the existential level, in which one is aware of being here yesterday and still being here tomorrow. This consciousness of one's own past is a major component of personal identity, even though our perception of time and the past changes in the course of our lives. We know how unreliable memory can be: we may forget certain things and we may remember things that never happened or that occurred very differently. Thus our memory deforms historical reality (Stok, 2008, 48). This level of historical consciousness is addressed in Tandberg's and Wähler's work, exaggerating the 'remembering' of things that never happened.

The second and third levels of historical consciousness, which are hardly differentiated by Gierstberg, both deal with the awareness of a past that can, in principle, be shared with others. We are part of a society and culture with a history (Stok, 2008, 48). More specifically, at the third level, we are aware that historical 'facts' influence the course of history. This provides a basis for imagining and representing particular historical situations and events, or the past in general, but also for discussion about it (Stok, 2008, 49). The questions evoked by Sugimoto's and Tussaud's visualization of the Duke's visit of Napoleon's deathbed appeal to this third level of the spectators' historical consciousness.

With regard to the perception of the spectators, one could also assert that Sugimoto's and Tussaud's representations of the event share through their 'realness' the fact that the spectator is stimulated to experience 'being part of the historical event.' But which event do spectators actually experience looking at Sugimoto's photograph? They experience from their 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective Sugimoto's visit to the Tussaud Museum in 1994, Sugimoto's experience of the Duke's vantage point of about the 1840s, and the Duke's experience of a historical event in 1821, the death of Napoleon. Thus this photograph presents history as 'looking from the here and now into the past' in several stages. It can be called a multi-layered historical experience.

As the previous sections demonstrate, the contemporary photographs discussed that deal with historical figures or events in one way or another, share in common the fact that they are delusions, in the sense that they seem to be analogue photographs in the category that we may refer to as 'that-has-been.' Although this term was coined in 1980 by Roland Barthes as a medium-specific characteristic of photographs, photography was praised for this ability from its very beginnings. Does this mean that nowadays photographs have become less reliable as historical documents than before? Remarkably, if we define the photographs discussed as combined visual constructions and reconstructions, this observation parallels with the view that written history is also a combination of construction and reconstruction

that is reworked (and sometimes even manipulated) all the time. Frits Gierstberg observes in his abovementioned essay that debates from around the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the issue of historical representation, involved a continuum of views ranging between two extremes. At one extreme was the traditional, positivist stance that the past can be fully known, while at the other was the view of the postmodernists and narrativists, who claimed that there is no reality, historical or otherwise, outside of language. According to them, history consists entirely of construction, rather than *re*-construction (Stok, 2008, 50). His conclusion is that most historians take an intermediate position, in which writing about history is seen partly as a process of reconstruction, however subjective it may be, and partly as a creative act. This in-between position also fits the key works discussed in this essay. It implies, in my view, that written history, artefacts, memory, and photographs (such as the ones discussed) can function as complementary means to investigate possibilities of how 'that-could-have-been,' as well as provide insight into how we (re)construct history, based on information, technologies, and expectations. With regard to the theme of this essay, the history of the death mask of Napoleon is an interesting example of the complicated reconstruction of history. G.L. Watson mentions in his profound investigation – based on many and very diverse documents he collected – that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century there even existed several 'original' death masks of Napoleon. It appears hard to prove which one is the original and who made it. Moreover, one may wonder if the mask was actually made the day after Napoleon's death. Watson's investigation was published in 1915, but a comparison of the information on websites of museums owning a copy of 'the' death mask shows that the uncertainties ('the blind fields') are still not cleared up.

Several common definitions of history, memory, and photography show some striking similarities that confirm their close interrelationship. Looking at (analogue) photographs is often defined as a way of looking from the here and now, by means of the photograph, into the past. Writing history can also be defined as looking from the here and now into the past, although in a rather figurative way. Memory is considered to be a continuation of the relationship with the past. But photography is also said to continue a relationship with the past. So, what are the differences? One of them is that the photographer is expected to have been there and then, whereas the historian is expected to reflect on the past from a distance. As this essay has shown, this situation has changed in the case of the manipulated digital photograph, even though one should not forget that the manipulated analogue photograph has been around since photography's beginnings in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, if only in the margins of the medium's history.

Evidently, both photographers and historians relate the present to the past, bridging distances across time. Another parallel is that both written history and memory are seen as fragmented, incomplete, while often photographs are equally seen as isolated and decontextualized moments and places. Of course I realize that this comparison of definitions of photography with those of history and memory is based on definitions of analogue, un-manipulated straight photographs taken in the past and looked at in the present. Although this is not the case in the above-discussed

photographs, given that they are all pre-photographic (staged) or post-photographic manipulations, my argument underscores that they heavily rely on the characteristics of straight photography for their power of persuasion.

#### Artistic reflections on history since the 1990s

The photographs by Sugimoto, Tandberg, and Wähler deal with history and are all from the 1990s. Is this a coincidence? The authors of the 2008 volume *Questioning History. Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art* observe an increasing interest in history among contemporary artists in the last two decades. In their introduction, the editors note that the emphasis on history is part of a long artistic tradition (e.g., history painting), but they also see a break with that tradition. The artists involved do not aim to depict historical events, but seek to reflect on the representation of history. This interest can be explained in part by the large and growing role of visual media in shaping our historical consciousness. One will find both authentic and wholly constructed images of the past in documentaries, news, educational programs, animated and live-action films, books, and websites. Contemporary artists, in reaction to this phenomenon, try to develop new ways of thinking about history and its representation (Stok, 2008, 9). What does Sugimoto's photo of Napoleon and the Duke tell us about the representation of history? Its title, *Wax Museums*, indicates that Sugimoto reflects on how these museums present history, instead of suggesting that he staged the scene himself. Additionally, the historical scene he shows us, covering various points in time, is created on the basis of several media (drawn, engraved, and modelled portraits of Napoleon; eyewitness accounts of the visits of the Duke and [photographic] portraits of him; wax models) and presented by means of photography. As such, Sugimoto's photo is an instructive example – if not a visual metaphor – of the multifaceted way in which history is 'made' today.

In fact, the main historical moment that serves as a subtext of this scene is the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, when the English defeated the French. This makes it interesting to compare Sugimoto's photograph with *Waterloo 1815, The Fall of the Imperial Guard* (2001), a photograph from a series on *The Course of History* by Bart Michiels [see pp. 137-143 and fig. 6]. This series consists of colour photographs taken at sites of historical battlefields. As regards his Waterloo photo, Michiels comments: "At Waterloo, I found in a grass field a patch that was flattened. It was also the very spot where Napoleon's elite troops and cavalry fell on the ridge, sealing the fate of the emperor" (quoted by Atherton, n.p.). In this quote the photographer connects the present moment to a historical moment through association. But these different moments in time can also be related in another way. Clive Scott, in his reflection on 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century street photography, has claimed that the photograph in fact performs the coincidence of different temporalities, timescales, different speeds of perishability: "A chair is slower than a fruit, a building than a cloud. As we look at the instant presented in a photograph, we see it as, among other things, a weave of times, seen, for that instant, in cross-section. It is the coincidence of

different durations” (2007, 46, 47). From this perspective, it is interesting to ask which element of the recorded location in the photograph by Michiels actually witnessed the presence of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington in 1815. What about, for instance, the soil? Has its composition changed after a time span of nearly two centuries? The grass depicted is perhaps the ‘progeny,’ as it were, of the grass that was there in 1815.



6. Bart Michiels, *Waterloo 1815, The Fall of the Imperial Guard*, 2001. © Bart Michiels, courtesy of the artist.

Michiels’ series was one of the artistic contributions to the *Imaging History* conference in Brussels. In a discussion about this series during a break it appeared that almost everyone who looked at them fully trusted their indexical nature, which means that they were convinced and also wanted to believe that Michiels’ photographs were indeed taken at the actual battlefields. The possibility that they were taken at some random places in or around Brussels seemed disturbing. Surely, paintings created in an artist’s studio on the basis of artistic imagination would not have the same effect. In this case, again, the observed responses do not seem to differ very much from Barthes’ belief in the ‘that-has-beeness’ of photography.

The title of Michiels’ photograph is crucial in establishing the specific historical reference. Although in Sugimoto’s photo the subject clearly relates to history, the title also plays an important role. This title, *Wax Museums: Napoleon Bonaparte and The Duke of Wellington*, not only explains what we are looking at; it also turns Sugimoto’s series from a seemingly staged image into a straight documentary photograph of a place where history is presented. Conversely, the title *The Course of History: Waterloo 1815, The Fall of the Imperial Guard* manipulates the spectator’s perception of Michiels’ straight photograph of a grassy field.

In conclusion, I would argue that the strategy used by Sugimoto – to make us believe that photography is able to record the not-photographed

past – does not differ so much from that in the other examples discussed. Although the examples vary from analogue to digital, from straight to staged, and from un-manipulated to manipulated photography, they all rely on the belief of the spectator in the ‘having-been-thereness’ of the photographer and the truthfulness of portrait and documentary photography. Moreover, they all capitalize on the blind fields of photography. When in the (near) future the complete digitization of photography and increasing manipulation of photographs will have caused spectators to mistrust each and every photograph, Sugimoto’s *Wax Museums* series and the portrait of Copernicus will be deprived of their initial suggestive effect, and the belief in Michiels’ ‘having-been-thereness’ is bound to get lost. Will this also render these photographs less interesting? If anything my argument in this essay is meant to demonstrate that if we continue to consider history as a combination of construction and reconstruction that is continually being reshaped, photographs such as the ones discussed here may grow even more important for our reflection on history and on the complex processes involved in its (re)construction.

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