CAMERA LUCIDA

a humanities exhibit exploring the essence of photography

translated from the images and ideas of Roland Barthes' book of the same name
PART ONE
WELCOME TO THE CAMERA LUCIDA

a state-of-the-art facility that combines modern and classic media
to produce a subjective study of photography for a universal audience

The Camera Lucida exhibition, a two-floor structure styled in the shape of a camera, opens with an external staircase that rises to a set of doorways on the second floor. This entrance, constructed to model a lens, prompts the audience to physically enter a camera in the abstract search for the essence of photography.

The interior of the exhibit begins with a theatre. Modeled after a traditional museum display and offering the only seating in the entire exhibit, the theatre embodies a familiar, classroom-like atmosphere. A large projector screen dominates the theatre and features an instructional video showcasing the technical and chemical components of photography. These components, as well as the very concept of cinema, become juxtaposed against Barthes’ subjective study of the essence of photography in the following segments. This contrast serves to define the exhibit as a series of oppositions.

Upon exiting the theatre, the audience enters a long hallway comprised of three interactive learning nodes. The nodes teach the verbiage of Camera Lucida to the audience as tools needed to experience photography. The learning experience is fluid and linear, as the nodes are not closed off, but connected. Sound travels between the areas, allowing audience members to speak amongst themselves and to interact with the exhibit without inhibition. The audience does not linger in a particular node; they engage with photographs and then continue on.

Each node contains text, instructional audio, and opposing images to define key concepts. The audio dialogue, first triggered when an audience member enters a node, can be repeated on command by pressing a labeled button. The audio consists of viewing instructions, historical context, and narrated text from Camera Lucida to explain key terms. In each node, the voice reciting the audio differs, diffusing the sense of a single operator or narrator. Each node also contains eight images, with four on one side and four on the other.
The first node studies the concepts of spectrum and operator, located on one wall of the node, against the concept of spectator, defined the opposing wall.

**OPERATOR**
“Photography-according-to-the-photographer”

**SPECTRUM**
“I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing”

**SPECTATOR**
“...the Spectator whom I was and whom I now wanted to investigate”

Next, the audience enters the second node to investigate the concept of studium. Studium denotes a polite reaction, positive or negative, to the “the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” of a given photograph. Simply put, the studium provokes a simple response: “I like” or “I don’t like.” Each half of this node pairs a photograph from Barthes’ “like” category against a photograph from the “don’t like” pool. One half features media-related photographs—pitting sensationalized images against subtle, nuanced images; the other half will pits erotic images against pornographic images.

"I LIKE"

*War*

"I DON’T LIKE"

*Affection*

Finally, the audience enters the third node. This node functions as an instructional display of the concept punctum. Using the previously-defined studium as a foundation, the display introduces punctum in stages, gradually building toward a complex, abstract definition. Unlike the preceding areas, the display provides a case study of Barthes’ interaction with a single image from the Camera Lucida book.
This image—the James Van Der Zee “Family Portrait”—begins the first half of the node display. A plaque to the left presents the *studium*. The next facet of the display provides the participatory, skeletal definition of *punctum* as the detail that draws in a viewer. Accordingly, the display features simplistic viewing devices to highlight noted key details in the photograph. The viewing devices consist of color-coded pipes that extend from the ceiling of the exhibit to the floor. A hoop-like viewing area sits suspended at a designated height in the center of the pipe. These devices can be approached by the audience to reveal the location of a detail in the photograph.

In this first instance, the audience approaches the red viewing device. After seeing the photographed women’s Mary Janes as the highlighted detail through the circular viewing structure, the audience visually traces the red pipe to its intersection with the red line on the floor. The red line travels from the floor to the wall and then climbs upward to intersect with the red-framed plaque that presents Barthes’ first *punctum* of the photograph: “the strapped pumps.” A small, isolated image of Mary Janes sits adjacent to the red plaque to further clarify the viewing experience of the audience.

Maintaining the exhibit’s sense of opposition, the display then undermines the presented *punctum* by suggesting that the “strapped pumps” are a misidentified aspect of *studium*. The display offers two other photographs by Van Der Zee and then contextualizes the historical interest behind this particular *punctum*—the operator’s documented use of costumes and poses, the dated Mary Jane fashion trend, and the subsequent middle class performance in the original photograph.
Finally, the node qualifies *punctum* by introducing the “blind field” of photography. *Punctum* becomes defined as the fantasy and imagination that accompanies a partial detail. Textual and auditory information instructs the audience to imagine things beyond the anesthetized, motionless image.

The analysis of the photograph continues on the opposite side of the third node and *punctum* becomes qualified as a time-dependent concept. A plaque and coordinating audio reveal the actualized *punctum*: a necklace. The photograph works within Barthes, he realizes that the woman’s necklace—“slender ribbon of braided gold”—resembles that of his deceased family member, and then labels the necklace as the true *punctum*. This textual revelation is posted next to a photograph of Barthes’ aunt.

The next segment complicates *punctum* and renders it the product of a mental, rather than printed, image. A viewing device extends from a plaque on this wall to the Van Der Zee portrait and focuses on the original necklace. A photograph of an enlarged pearl necklace and gold necklace also sit adjacent to the yellow plaque to show that the woman of the Van Der Zee family portrait wears a pearl necklace, not the “slender ribbon of braided gold.” Through the translation of the necklace across photographs, *punctum* becomes mobile through space and time. Audio dialog instructs the audience to close their eyes after viewing the photographs.
The audience reaches a single elevator at the end of the final node. A quote, printed on the floor, wraps around the entrance of the elevator: “I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography.”

The elevator pierces down through the floor of the punctum display and leads to the lower level. The elevator allows an audience member to literally pierce—or, in the verbiage of punctum, prick—the floor of the exhibit.

The elevator also serves to break the constant stream of motion through the first segment. Only a few audience members may use the elevator in a given moment, thereby creating an emphasis on the individual.

Finally, the elevator quarantines the bustle and sounds of the first part of the exhibit as it ferries the audience into the silent second half.

The elevator opens into a short transitional hallway. This segment is poorly lit; only the dim glow from the neighboring room illuminates the area. A curtain-framed doorway leads into the next section. The parted curtains suggest a loose, easily penetrable barrier.

By stepping from the darkness, through the curtains, and into the light of the neighboring room, audience members symbolically engage in the process of discovery and entrance into the unfamiliar.
PART TWO
MAP: LOWER LEVEL

ELEVATOR

ARC I

ARC II

ARC III

WINTER GARDEN PHOTOGRAPH DISPLAY
After exiting the hallway, audience members enter a central chamber. In stark opposition to the first half of the exhibit, this segment features a quiet and contemplative atmosphere. Sound absorbing material lines the ceiling and no audio stimuli are present.

The chamber is dominated by a picture frame mounted to a pillar. Printed in lighted white text, a poignant quotation and the phrase “The Winter Garden Photograph” adorn the floor space leading to the pillar.

This Winter Garden Photograph display represents the central concept of Camera Lucida’s second half. The personal, never-printed, perhaps nonexistent photograph drives Barthes’ subjective study of the essence of photography. Accordingly, strategic lighting completely obscures the image within the frame on the pillar and a raised, circular barrier on the ground closes this display off from the audience. Unable to access Barthes’ Winter Garden Photograph, each individual in the audience must generate, discover, imagine his own central image.

“Something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this particular picture. I therefore decided to “derive” all Photography (its “nature”) from the only photograph which assuredly existed for me, and to take it somehow as a guide for my last investigation. All the world’s photographs formed a Labyrinth.”
Mirroring the three nodes of the exhibit’s first half, three arcing walls line the chamber. Similarly, each arced wall houses eight framed images (24 total). This parallels Barthes’ construction of the Camera Lucida book: two parts with 24 chapters in the first half and 24 chapters in the second. Each of the three arcs bends back toward the central room.

Although defined by open space, the room feels unstructured. Audience members branch off to explore the arcs and to apply the terminology and dualities of the first part of the exhibit to this second, less structured area. Regardless of their path, however, audience members must always revisit the central chamber and central idea.

The arcs embody the following general categories: the science of light, *That-Has-Been*, and *There-She-Is*. Each of these categories illustrates a facet of *noeme* and, consequently, point to the essence of photography.

To literally illuminate *noeme*, each image within this lower half of the exhibit appears on an LED monitor, rather than on a printed and mounted document. An artificial light (like that of a greenhouse) emanates from the images and creates a hallucinogenic atmosphere for the audience. Additionally, a given LED screen, when prompted by a computer timer, rotates through different photographs of the same theme. The result is a fluctuating, more subjective audience experience of the collection—i.e. every audience member will view a different series of photographs.

Every arc contains at least one photograph from the *Camera Lucida* book; these images remain static, to be viewed universally by every audience member.

A quote from *Camera Lucida* accompanies each LED-projected photograph; however, unlike the top floor of the exhibit, no audio, instruction, or further explanation is provided. Audience members attempt to create meaning from the display without explicit guidance and, consequently, the process of discovery becomes subtle and subjective.
“For the noeme “That-has-been” was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (the discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object.”
“Color is a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, color is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses).”
The second arc studies *That-Has-Been*: the historical certainty of photography. The images showcase historic events and the sense that all things photographed are dead or must die.
“He is dead and he is going to die...”
“All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death.”
The final arc features *There-She-Is*: the recognition and the look of an identity beyond a photograph. Like the final part of Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, this arcing wall focuses on families and individuals, rather than events, locations, scenes. Audience members, when confronted with these photographs, engage in the imaginative, *punctum*-driven search for the essence of an individual.
“Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”
“I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die.”
After meandering through the arcs, audience members linger in the displays to revisit images, study themes, and assemble meaning from the collection. An impression of madness slowly rises from the deprivation of natural light, sound, direction and sense of time. The experience primes audience members to recognize a madness in the oppositions inherent to the photographic collection. This message of madness—never printed or directly explained—becomes apparent to some, but not all, members of the audience before they choose to exit the exhibit.

DISCLAIMER

The Camera Lucida exhibition cannot guarantee that an attendee will discover anything beyond studium in a given display, especially immediately.

Most audience members will leave only with a vague understanding of the terminology of Camera Lucida; however, the project aims for at least a few individuals, upon later reflection, to be haunted by a specific image or some aspect of the exhibit itself.
“Photography—according-to-the-photographer” 10
“I pose” 11
“...the Spectator whom I was” 16
“the figures, the faces” 26
“the strapped pumps” 46
“slender ribbon of braided gold” 53
“blind field” 57
“I would have to descend” 60
“All the world’s photographs” 73
“For the noeme” 80
“Color is a coating” 81
“He is dead” 95
“All those young photographers” 92
“Photography is a kind of primitive theater” 32
“I passed beyond the unreality” 117

References

All quotations are drawn from Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida
Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: reflections on photography.

Walker Evans at work, ca. 1929. Photographer that used a hidden camera to capture images of subway passengers.

James Van Der Zee. Family Portrait. 1926. From Camera Lucida, in the chapter “Punctum: Partial Feature” (44).

Photograph by Lt. Gen. Nikolai Vlasik, Stalin’s bodyguard. Date unknown.

Niepce: The Dinner Table. Around 1823. From Camera Lucida, marked as “The First Photograph” (86).


Lower Manhattan (1942). An originally black-and-white photograph with retouched color.


Iraqi soldiers carrying coffins. REUTERS/Atef Hassan. “No, nothing to say about these photographs in which I see surgeons’ gowns, bodies lying on the ground, broken glass...Oh, if there were only a look” (111).

Joey Ramone with the World Trade Center in the background.

A subject’s look.


No looks.