

Miniatures, microcosms and the camera as microscope

By Hannah Richardson and Laura Guy

'A man sets out to draw the world...

As the years go by, he peoples the space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses and individuals...

A short time before he dies he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.'

– Borges, *Afterward*, October 31st 1960.

The notion of the microcosm implies an idea that one thing encapsulates in miniature the characteristics of a larger whole. In tracing the origins of an artefact we sometimes find, written in miniscule letters, a similar template. This template faintly charts an outline - one that resembles a more permanent, present state.

Perhaps we should begin with a negative. We can chart its own origins to an abbey in Wiltshire. Here, in 1834, William Henry Fox Talbot prescribed a lattice structure at the root of photographic practice. Within physics we also find a lattice like arrangement organizing the very smallest particles - atoms, ions or molecules. The compact surface of a negative, itself a miniature drawing of space, holds within it information so detailed that Talbot himself suggests a microscope as necessary for its accurate viewing. Martin Froben Ledermuller's 1760 publication, *Microscopic Delights of the Mind and Eye*, describes the use of a solar microscope in combination with a camera obscura. In his example a light is placed behind a small insect specimen so that the image is magnified and the user can record the projection, tracing it by hand. This particular model perfectly illustrates the historic associations between the origins of the camera and the microscope. In fact Talbot figures as much in a history of microscopy as that of photography. Extending this, with focus Lupe as microscope, the photographer's role becomes similar to that of the scientist trying to classify and understand her specimens.

There is an idea within Romantic poetry that the practice of examining the world through its smallest components is somewhat reductive. Richard Dawkins contests this, suggesting that an analysis of the small scale reveals to us the far larger - and otherwise incomprehensible - processes of the universe. Here a comparison can be drawn with those scientific instruments of the Enlightenment that demonstrate, in minute gold filigree, the workings of planets or, similarly, we can see this methodology as carrying the metaphorical weight of a proverb. A reflective approach to scientific practice allows parallels to be drawn more readily between the projects of the scientist and the photographer. Likewise a discourse of archival practice has consistently, if somewhat precariously, rested between these two disciplines. Considering this notion of '*the* archive' provides us a framework with which to negotiate this common ground. A likeness between both the photographer and scientist within the specimens they seek and these collections that they make.

Alike to archives, the act of collecting provides us with a certain, subjective method of remembering and preserving our experiences. Collections are, in many ways, a careful assembling of ones self - within the choices we make, the things that are kept (an idiosyncratic ordering of objects) and those that are forgotten. Certain fragments are awarded a kind of permanence (be it in cabinets, drawers or the corners of attics) and others are discarded, lost in time. The parts that are left out are often as telling as those that remain. The collection rejects a notion of the external or exterior, refusing an object's history and instead imposing upon it a new order that is without original context. The collection symbolises the miniature, and implies the gigantic. Rested in a hand, the collected object asserts upon its holder a pleasing feeling of power and largeness. Archives act in a similar way, simultaneously acting to destroy those histories that they try to preserve.

There exists no finality within collections, as the conservationists' choices demonstrate. In these collections we find another lattice, that of many parts constructing one whole. Through this notion a comparison can be drawn between the approach of the photographer and that of the archivist, taxonomist or taxidermist. These parallels often mean that we talk of an objective observer. And, yet, we are not sure we have ever met a photographer of this nature. Instead, we see translators, processors, and participants - photographers whose practice aims toward mapping a world through their documentation of various experiences. Similar to the collection we elect how we are to be remembered through the things we opt to photograph and in how we wish to be photographed. These photographs act to direct us to an exterior, each an indexical symbol of a world lying outside of the album, book or wall series. Robert Adams writes, in reference to Minor

White, that “he knew that great pictures cannot just be about particular landscapes, but have to direct us to more, even eventually to the whole of life.”¹

If images begin to stand for their subject matter, they can also – quite by accident – direct us elsewhere. We see here how the role of the photographer often transcends various fixed definitions. Talbot’s subject was a window, a surface revealing the nature of the medium of photography. This window directs us to a camera that simultaneously looks onto and obscures the world it separates us from. The notion of the window is invariably complex, and viewing the camera to be separating one and other may no longer be a useful parallel to draw. G. L’E. Turner refers to the microscope of the 17th century that caused only aberrations. Similarly the camera distorts a world as often as it mirrors it, the boundaries of the image exist at once solid and liquid, both surrounding and expanding. The photographer preserves yet occasionally gets into shot by mistake. Sometimes a thumb in front of a lens or a shadow appears, unplanned, in the photograph. These are representational of the things we accidentally preserve within collections and do not mean to, likewise referencing the things that we realise, with hindsight, we should have kept. With this, the subject of the image becomes less tangible and begins to break down – a small stone thrown through a lattice window.

Finally we approach Borges and the artist who realises before his death the true nature of his project, that the labyrinth of his lines traces the lineaments of his own face. Slowly we see the faint template that we began with grow to monumental proportions - the photograph acting as a lattice of elements that reveal a meaning larger than the sum of its parts. We attempt not toward permanence in the images we take, they appear simply as an aim toward that of survival. Like the collector or archivist we seek to endure in those histories we take on and those that we create in the process.

¹ Adams, Robert, *Beauty in Photography*, Aperture, 1981, p91-92