



# Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography

*By Geoffrey Batchen*

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## **Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography** By Geoffrey Batchen

In an 1828 letter to his partner, Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre wrote, "I am burning with desire to see your experiments from nature." In this book, Geoffrey Batchen analyzes the desire to photograph as it emerged within the philosophical and scientific milieus that preceded the actual invention of photography. Recent accounts of photography's identity tend to divide between the postmodern view that all identity is determined by context and a formalist effort to define the fundamental characteristics of photography as a medium. Batchen critiques both approaches by way of a detailed discussion of photography's conception in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He examines the output of the various nominees for "first photographer," then incorporates this information into a mode of historical criticism informed by the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The result is a way of thinking about photography that persuasively accords with the medium's undeniable conceptual, political, and historical complexity.

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### Editorial Review

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If, by 1725, all the chemical and optical necessities for the practice of photography already existed, why wasn't the art form invented until 1839? Geoffrey Batchen, an associate professor of art history and author of *Burning with Desire*, has an interesting answer: people simply weren't ready for it. Along with a blossoming in literature, philosophy, music, and science, the 18th century was also host to a whole new way of thinking about nature and landscape. The camera obscura, a portable box equipped with a lens or a mirror, was a popular tool that people used to first capture views and then trace them. The ability to reproduce a scene--however imperfectly--whet people's appetites for more exact methods, leading first to what Batchen calls the "proto-photographers," and then sometime later to the invention of Louis Daguerre's daguerrotype and Henry Fox Talbot's photography in the same year.

Batchen's history lesson is filled with eccentric characters and fascinating insights into passions and obsessions of the Age of Enlightenment. The book becomes controversial, however, in Batchen's assertion that the early photographers, rather than trying to capture reality, were, in fact, attempting to deconstruct it--long before Jacques Derrida created the theory of deconstruction. Whether or not you end up agreeing with Batchen, *Burning with Desire* is a unique look at photography's roots, one sure to engender heated discussion among enthusiasts of the art form.

#### Review

This is an original and provocative rethinking of photography's origins and the scholars who inhabit the 'battlefield' of opinion that seeks to define its essence. In highly readable prose, Geoffrey Batchen deploys Foucauldian and Derridean insights to issue a challenge to the medium's postmodernist as well as its formalist critics, shaping an argument about photography and power that flies in the face of received wisdom.

(Carol Squiers, Senior Editor, America Photo)

*Burning with Desire* in its lucid and innovative blend of historical and theoretical reflections, will quickly become an enduring and indispensable text within contemporary studies of photography and visual culture. Especially amid current debates over whether or not we have entered a "post-photographic" era, Geoffrey Batchen's work will be essential reading for its deeply intelligent archaeology of the material and philosophical status of the photograph.

(Jonathan Crary, Columbia University)

I wholeheartedly recommend Geoffrey Batchen's book *Burning with Desire*. It is a cultural studies or cultural history text, with ramifications for art history, the history of philosophy, studies in visuality, contemporary theory, and, of course, photographic history. Batchen writes with great clarity and pedagogic patience about ideas that are often judged difficult. I have no doubt that the book's lucidity and range will make it popular with scholars in all of these fields, as well as in graduate seminars.

(Mary Warner Marien, Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Fine Arts,

Syracuse University)

Given its ambitious and groundbreaking scope, *Burning with Desire* is bound to become a touchstone for any further consideration of the topic of photography's invention.

(Douglas R. Nickel, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

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(Douglas R. Nickel, Assistant Curator of Photography, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

#### About the Author

Geoffrey Batchen is Professor of the History of Photography and Contemporary Art at the City University of New York Graduate Center. He is the author of *Burning with Desire: The Conceptions of Photography* (1999) and *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (2002), both published by the MIT Press.

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