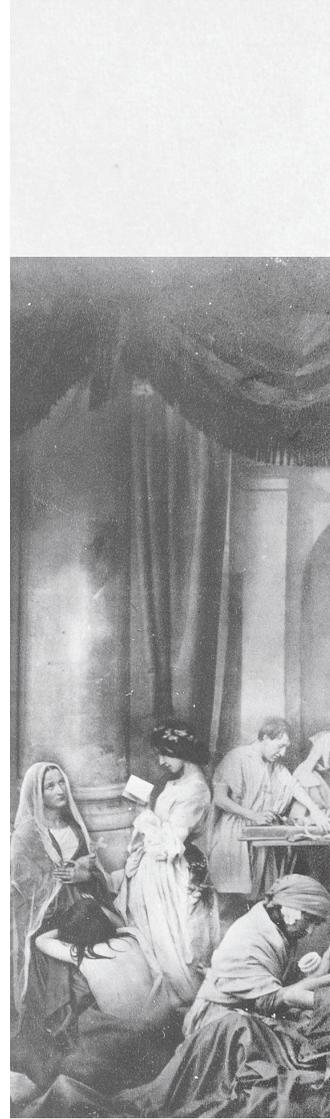


# DISILLUSIONED

*Victorian Photography and  
the Discerning Subject*

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## Shadowy Organization

*Combination Photography, Illusion, and Conspiracy*



THE FIRST PRACTITIONERS TO RECOGNIZE HOW EASILY THE PHOTOGRAPH might be manipulated, and to seize upon the possibilities of this vulnerability, were not the many innovative digital artists working today, nor were they the renowned modernists who cultivated photomontage early in the twentieth century. A pair of photographers who appear on the scene in 1850s Britain, and who would go on to produce some of the most controversial images of the nineteenth century, make stronger claims to that distinction. Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson wagered their commercial success on the proposition that viewers would be able, and indeed interested, to engage with photography in a way that was predicated from the start upon a recognition of its fundamentally mediated status.<sup>1</sup> The process of composite photography or, as it was termed in the voluminous debates that greeted its proliferation in the 1850s, “combination” printing, represents one of the most intriguing of the photographic developments that suggest the limitations of our current perspective. This innovative technique, through which practitioners sought to overcome photography’s technological limitations by assembling portions from distinct photographic sources into a single coherent tableau, elicited a contentious discourse about the camera’s truth-telling capacities and this seemingly hostile hybrid reality.<sup>2</sup> As the critical response to the combination photographs of Rejlander and Robinson attests, fashioning one image out of several troubled the early conception of photography, as the properties of neutrality and objectivity were quickly undermined by images that had no holistic referent in reality.

The commitment of the nineteenth-century viewer to the unalloyed reality of the camera, an assumption upon which so much of our understanding of the visual culture of the period has comfortably rested, is one that these

often-neglected images compel us to reconsider. In particular, recovering the status of these photographs as “worked” objects, as things that are the result of human labor rather than the imprint of nature and, therefore, vulnerable to manipulation, will help us to understand the complex social and political associations that the medium generated. It is especially instructive, then, to examine the parallel rhetorics of photographic and labor conflicts in the 1850s in Britain, with particular reference to the most controversial combination image of the period: Oscar Gustave Rejlander’s *Two Ways of Life*, exhibited in 1857 at the Manchester *Art Treasures* exhibition (fig. 10). The explicit theme of this photograph—which was also implicitly that of the event in which it was initially displayed—was the two possibilities of existence for workers in modern industrial Britain: as one critic present at the exhibition put it, to be “a criminal in the grip of the police” or to be toiling “industriously in the workshop.”<sup>3</sup>

*Hope in Repentance*, as Rejlander’s *Two Ways of Life* was initially titled, was in fact composed of more than thirty negatives, and depicts a bearded sage guiding two young men through an archway set against a rustic vignette. Newly arrived in the city, they are confronted by two very disparate scenes, which represent the choice that every young man must make in the modern economy. The prologue of a text that Rejlander had almost certainly read and upon which his photograph may in some schematic way be based, G. W. M. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* (1846), chronicled the divergent paths of two young workmen in a modern industrial city: “From this city of strange contrasts branch off two roads, leading to two points totally distinct the one from the other. One winds its torturous way through all the noisome dens of crime, chicanery, dissipation, and voluptuousness; the other meanders amidst rugged rocks and wearisome acclivities, it is true, but on the wayside are the restingplaces of rectitude and virtue.”<sup>4</sup> The left-hand side of the composition consists of social actors who embody those temptations that can befall the rebellious: a prostitute, a bacchante, a murderer, a group of idlers, and a pair of men hunched over a gambling table (fig. 11). The culminating figure of these enticements at the extreme left of the photograph leaves no doubt about the future of those who succumb: a pinioned man being taken away, that “criminal in the grip of the police.” The wayward youth seems already to have yielded to the women who stand before him, embarking on a journey that will lead inevitably to a carceral fate. The antithetical possibilities that unfold before the second youth—allegorical groups indicating religion, marriage, good works, and mental application—conclude at the far right with an industrious group of workers: the carpenter at his bench, the mechanic wielding his hammer, and a woman weaving a textile (fig. 12).

Despite the vitality of the political valences with which Rejlander’s image engaged, the intensity of the reaction to *The Two Ways of Life* has traditionally been understood in precisely the apolitical terms that his critics offered at the time. The dominant analysis was then, and has continued to be, that the photograph offended the prudish sensibilities of contemporary viewers who believed that the entire scene—of debauched nude women in the company of impressionable young men—was a single one taken from life. As Malcolm Daniel has put it, “the supposed impropriety of Rejlander’s image lay in the implied truthfulness of the image in toto—the fear that Rejlander had staged exactly such a scene in order to photograph it. . . . [T]he moral criticism of

Society taking and maintaining its proper place amidst the societies established for the advancement of Science and Art in this country," lamented one reviewer, remarking dourly that "it has allowed itself to be overridden by the commercial element; and unless, ere yet it be too late, the council resolves to return to and maintain a far more independent position, the fate of the Society is sealed."<sup>3</sup>

That fate was, as this writer presciently noted, perhaps inevitable, for the Society's exhibitions had already ceded so much ground to the burgeoning practice of photography for profit: the catalogues had begun to list prices, and more than a few members fretted that the once-noble ambitions of the annual event seemed little more than an elegant frame in which to swaddle crass appeals to potential buyers. Some of the more reactionary members even sought to prohibit the display of photographs that had been on commercial offer, but they were ultimately rebuffed.<sup>4</sup> The Society suddenly seemed to them more akin to the street of bird-sellers and petty entertainers than to the contemplative redoubts of the Linnaeans.

Many of the increasingly irascible members of the Photographic Society, and the influential critics who comprised a newly vibrant photographic press, seethed over two particular dimensions of these images: their volume and their unoriginality. In an intemperate moment, Alfred H. Wall, a prolific commentator for the relatively conservative *British Journal of Photography*, exclaimed that "cheapness is the order of the day. In the advertisement columns of the daily papers almost every week shows us an increasing number of those photographers who are bent upon underselling their rivals. The carte portraits, the 'postage stamp' portraits, and the fifty reproduced portraits for half a crown, readily suggest themselves." With new maladroit practitioners flocking to the lucrative pursuit on a daily basis, he wondered, "Where, then, is this race of cheapness to end?"<sup>5</sup>

The blizzard of photographic production noted by Siegfried Kracauer in his classic essay on photography was one that characterized not only the Weimar Germany in which he was writing but, perhaps even more acutely, the early years of the medium's industrialization. Kracauer saw in this accumulation not just the odiousness of quantity that his British predecessors bewailed but also—perhaps counterintuitively—a possibility for a revolutionary reexamination of the capitalist realm that enabled this glut. "Photography," he asserted, "is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production," one that reifies the defining features of that system.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Kracauer proposed, this repetitive confrontation of the production of photographs might in fact enable "a liberated consciousness [that] would be given an incomparable opportunity . . . less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before, it could prove its power in dealing with them." The vacuity, superficiality, and repressiveness of the world of mass production could be revealed to the populace that knew where, and how, to look for it. This explicit link between judgment, visual acuity, and the discernment of the capitalist basis of the proliferating photograph is one that Kracauer articulated most directly, but the connection was forged at the time of photography's first marriage to industry. In this chapter, I will explore visual discernment as both a recreation and a prerequisite for productivity in the modern economy. It proceeds by excavating the conceptual bases on which a number of putatively frivolous photographs operated to modulate a particular kind of visual autonomy: one in which discernment itself was both commodified and infused with the logic of production.

It was an enterprise of urgency to a culture ever more permeated by the promise of capitalism and depended upon the malleability both of visual belief and of the exemplary visual medium through which that belief could be secured.

#### AGENCY AND GOOD TASTE

In the appeals of the grouchy gentlemen amateurs, there is almost an obsession with the sheer quantity of photographs being produced under these new and very unsettling conditions. With the emergence of glass-plate collodion negatives, the tight license restrictions on Talbot's calotype, which had been the exclusive means of producing photographic multiples, were no longer an impediment to the execution of photography on a mass scale.<sup>7</sup> It is remarkable how rapidly the transfer of the positive-negative principle into the public domain shifted its aesthetic and political valences, for the venerable practice of the amateur was almost instantaneously recast as a vehicle for the moral degradation of culture at large.<sup>8</sup> The increasing vehemence with which social-improvement organizations like the Society for the Suppression of Vice condemned salacious photographs, and the broad support their interventions enjoyed among those displeased by the medium's new ethos, indicates how intimately the notion of photography's multiplicity was intertwined with its presumed immorality.<sup>9</sup> One correspondent inquired of the *Photographic News* why images "of an indecent character are suffered to be openly exposed in the shop windows, so that a man who takes a walk with his wife and daughters dare not venture to look at the windows of many of our photographic publishers?"<sup>10</sup> Naturally, the insalubrious photographs in question were, almost without exception, multiples, spawned by the proliferating collodion process. The cheapness of the images was twofold, residing in both their tawdry subject matter and their wide availability. The quest to rid the visual world of pornographic indecencies rarely extended to the erotica produced and circulated discreetly among a higher stratum of society.<sup>11</sup> If the gentleman might have a monogamous relationship with his unique, deluxe bit of pornography, where was the harm? If, in contrast, a photographed woman shared that relationship with any workingman with the requisite coins, that was something else entirely. The promiscuity that mass-produced photographs enacted was at least as destabilizing as that which they depicted.

Of equal alarm to this multiplicity of *production* was the fact that these piles of images seemed to betray a repetition of *conception* in which the unoriginality of the physical object was matched by the paucity of creativity of its representation. The same reviewer who wrote so uneasily about the commercial infiltration of the 1859 Photographic Society exhibition cringed at the chief defect of these offerings: "The impression that we receive on entering the rooms is, that they exhibit a stereotype-like sameness—a repetition in character, with slight variations."<sup>12</sup> Wall was more direct in linking this sameness to the exigencies of mass production:

You may picture one of these "artists" for yourself, if you please. He is popping about in his sky-parlour studio, from one to another of a row of canvasses. With four sweeps of a brush filled with blue paint four

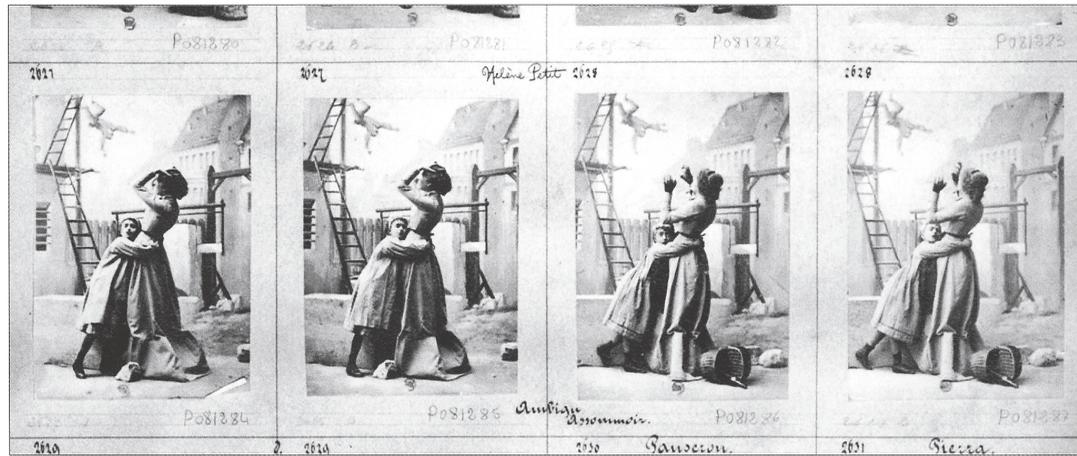


FIGURE 27  
Page from the index  
books of the Nadar  
Atelier, *Hélène Petit  
dans "L'Assommoir,"*  
c. 1879.

heaving poor Coupeau from the roof over and over again, an abusive tactic even by Victorian labor standards, it is clear to the viewer of these images that the fall and the narrative crisis it precipitates is neither externally “real” nor, equally important, unique. And yet that was the very criticism of, and basis for, the expansion of commercial photographic production: the irrelevance of uniqueness, at the conceptual level of the ingenuity or singularity of the scene, and at the material level of the endless availability of these mass-produced diversions.

It is especially ironic to recall the biography of the chronoscope or “time-seer,” an instrument first invented in the late 1840s to measure the time of falling bodies, and that helped to verify Galileo’s assertion that such objects are uniform in their rate of acceleration. Later this device would help to set a standardized time signal, free from the errors associated with human astronomical observation.<sup>37</sup> The rate of Coupeau’s descent is an extravagant hybrid of these desires for the chronoscope, his plummet made uniform among all his observers. His fall is outside of time, but nevertheless reifies the regularization of temporality that reached its apotheosis in this uniformity of viewed time. The negation of the singularity of the moment achieved in these images evokes Eugène Delacroix’s antithetical admonition to painters: “If you are not skillful enough to sketch a man falling out of a window during the time it takes him to get from the fifth storey to the ground, you will never be able to produce a monumental work.”<sup>38</sup> Whatever rapidity and contingency might have governed Delacroix’s scene, and the artistic potency required to render it in time, the Nadar studio’s imagery hardly aspired to monumentality; indeed, in incarnating its temporality of repetition and large-scale production, the monumental would have seemed an irrelevant touchstone.

André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri’s innovation of a multilens camera allowed cartes-de-visite to be produced in such quantities that many commentators christened the 1850s an era of “cartomania.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, this novelty was part of a broader conceptual change, in which individual, standalone images relinquished their dominant position in the public’s experience of photography. With his cartes, Disdéri could fashion on a single collodion negative plate four or more tiny images, economizing—and standardizing further—the production

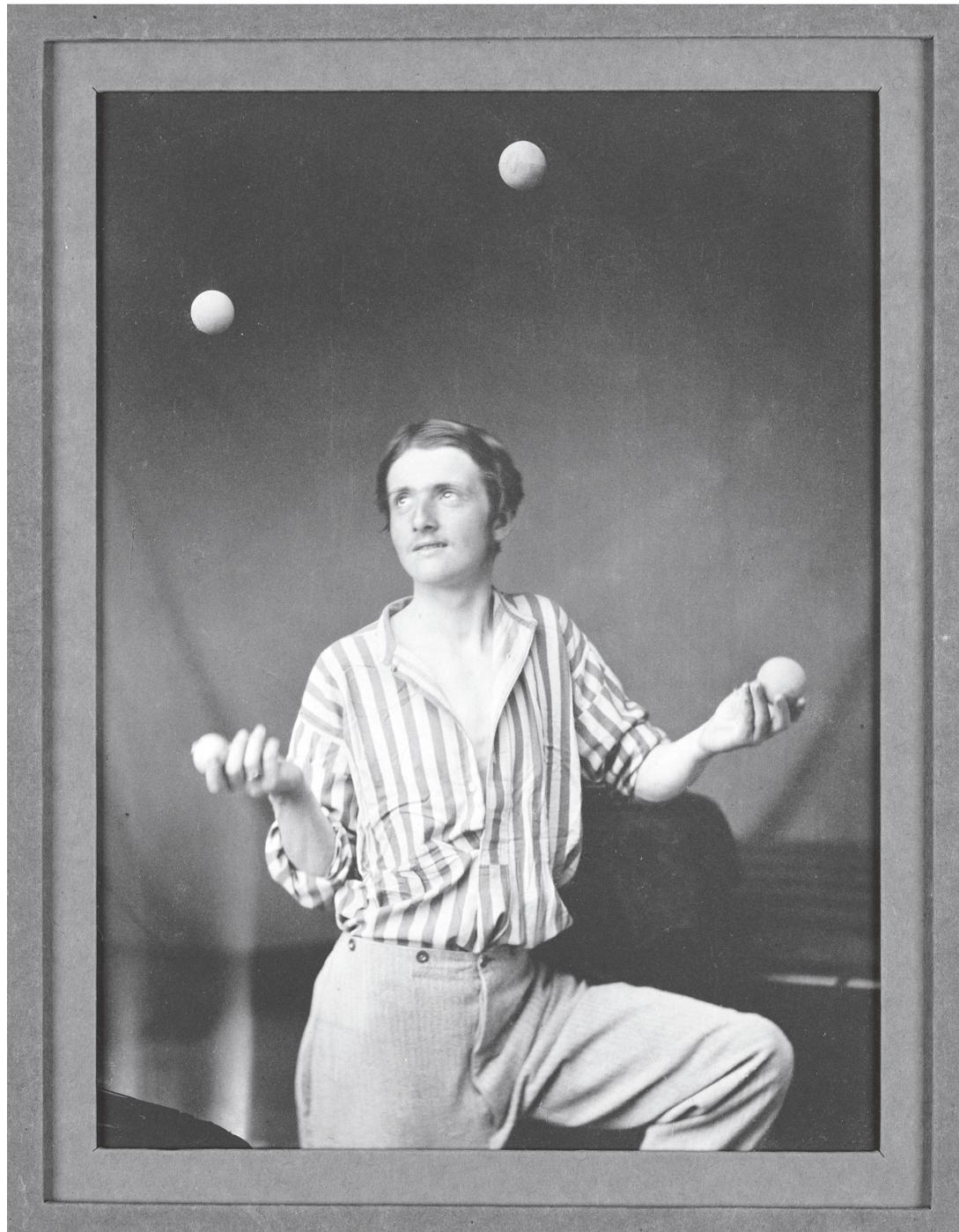
of the photograph. In one sheet of *The Juggler Manoel* (1861), Disdéri shows us a well-known entertainer and, ostensibly, his great skill at keeping his objects aloft. However, as in the case of the airborne Coupeau, we note that while Manoel’s pose varies among the four cartes, his ball remains stationary. The use of the figure of the juggler is telling here, for he was a type that stood for a particular kind of visual discrimination that would be asked of viewers, one that is evident in this uncut series, but rather more submerged in the single image.

Rejlander’s *Juggler* (c. 1860) demonstrates a more impressive trick than his French counterpart: two projectiles aloft and two more poised to join them (fig. 28). As remote from didactic purposes as juggling seems to our sensibilities, in the nineteenth century it was closely associated with a mode of training the eye and the mind to act in concert, and was proposed on more than one occasion as a vital addition to the nation’s school curricula. William Hazlitt, upon seeing an Indian juggler, exclaimed that “it is the utmost stretch of human ingenuity which nothing but the bending the faculties of body and mind to it from the tenderest infancy with incessant, ever-anxious application up to manhood can accomplish.”<sup>40</sup> Another admirer asserted:

The tricks performed by jugglers afford a most wonderful example of the perfection that our senses and organs are capable of attaining under the influence of exercise. . . . He must know the exact spot whither his ball will go, calculate the parabola that it will describe, and know the exact time that it will take to describe it. His eye must take in the position of three, four, or five balls that are sometimes several yards apart, and he must solve these different problems in optics, mechanics, and mathematics instantaneously, ten, fifteen, twenty times per minute.

He concluded accordingly that “juggling has sufficient advantages as regards the development of the touch, the quick calculation of distances, the nimbleness of the fingers, and the accuracy of the eye and of motion, to cause it to be added to those gymnastic exercises which children are taught at school.”<sup>41</sup> The number of visual scientific lessons that were consolidated into this practice is breathtaking, but its pedagogic efficacy is articulated with surprising regularity. Equally puzzling is an almost exactly contemporary definition of the term “juggling” as something apparently quite distinct from this noble exercise: “juggling, n., deception, imposture, artifice.”<sup>42</sup> It was a pursuit, then, seen as deceptive to those uninitiated in its modalities, but also beneficial to those who might be initiated into them, a celebration of visual acuity and a denigration of visual gullibility. The airborne figure is in this sense akin to the stuffed specimen: they are both generic indices of the nature of the deception they are perpetrating. They occupy a place in photographic production that seemed especially suited to a program of visual discrimination, a place demarcated by an ambivalent relationship to the temporality of photography and its industrialization. And this temporality was one thread in the larger web of increasingly rationalized time that dictated the demands upon the viewers to whom Rejlander’s and Robinson’s photographs ostensibly appealed.

The discernment of motion exemplified by the keen eye of the juggler was, to be sure, a key locus of visual discrimination in much of the perceptual theory



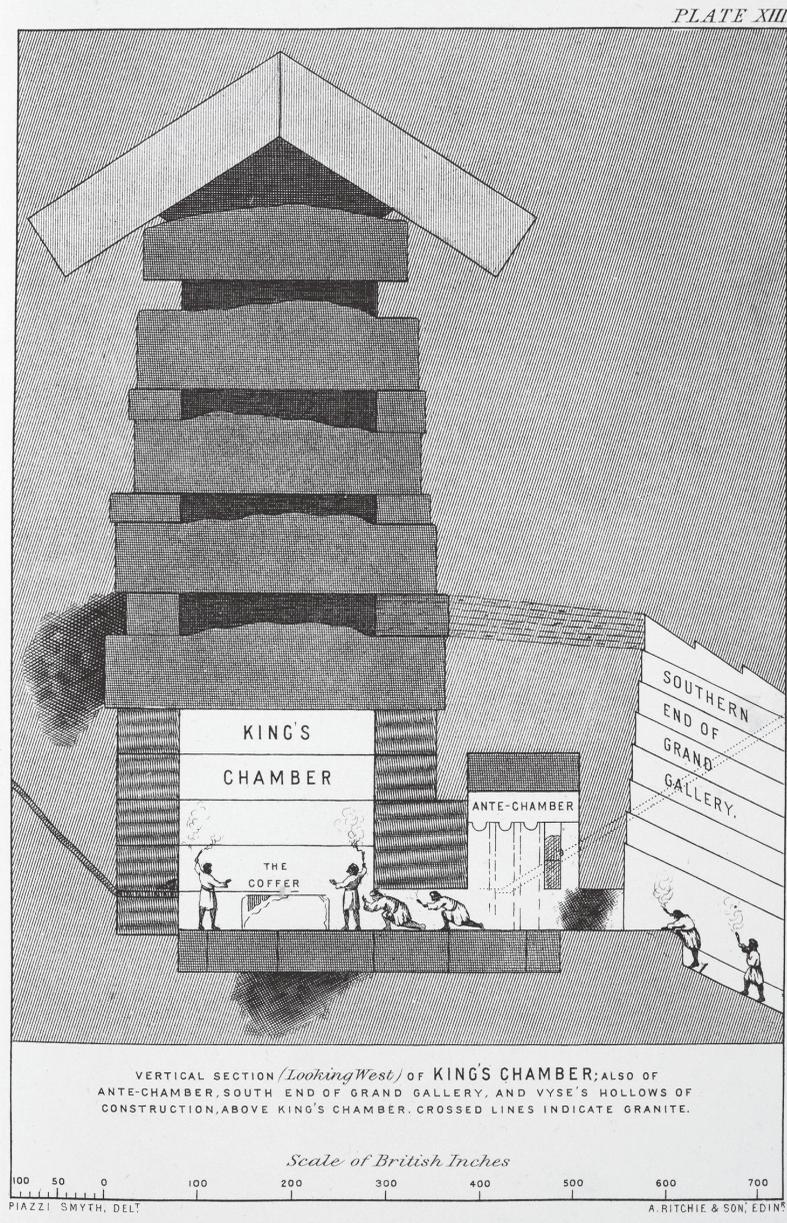
**FIGURE 28**  
Oscar Gustave Rejlander, *The Juggler*,  
c. 1860. Albumen print. © NMPFT / Royal  
Photographic Society / Science & Society  
Picture Library. All rights reserved.

of the nineteenth century. More important, the ability to discern the *illusion* of motion was a major preoccupation of these investigations. One experimenter, Silvanus Thompson, lamented that “there are frequent occasions of conflict between the receptive faculties of the senses and the reflective faculties of the intellect. . . . [O]f all the senses none is more frequently the seat of such deceptive judgments than that of sight.” As his chief example, he noted that under certain circumstances “the retina ceases to perceive as a motion a steady succession of images that pass over a particular region for a sufficient time to induce fatigue.”<sup>43</sup> A principal failure of the perceptual faculty was, then, an inability to discern motion by virtue of the fact that motion itself is made up of a “succession of images.” That is, Thompson’s account is implicitly invested in the notion that movement is comprised of a series of divisible, successive moments of immobility; time must be divisible if a “moment” of stasis can exist within a motion. This conception is deeply rooted in a classical philosophical debate on the nature of time and space, for it resurrects, in the guise of physiological experimentation, Zeno’s paradox of the flying arrow, which Aristotle’s *Physics* dedicated itself to resolving. Zeno paraphrased his predecessor’s claim: “If everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always occupying such a space at any moment, the flying arrow is therefore motionless.”<sup>44</sup> Time, according to Zeno, is parceled out into discrete “nows,” a reality made visible only in the form of an object in flight. It is striking, and not happenstance, then, that the very account of time underlying industrial development—of its divisibility and exchangeability—is one whose expression resuscitates an ancient representation. The “now” of the juggler’s trick not only harbors a sophisticated account of photographic temporality, but it cultivates in its perceptual pedagogy an ideological time, the time of the modern worker and viewer.

#### PREPARED FOR ANY CONTINGENCY

The didactic respectability of the precocious viewers in *A Young Naturalist* and *The Flycatcher* has its wrong-side-of-the-tracks counterpart in another of Rejlander’s photographs from the same period. *Two Urchins Playing a Game* (fig. 29) takes the visual skills cultivated by the juggler and his implied viewer into the streets, where a young boy glances skyward, preparing to catch an airborne object that is temporarily above the frame of the picture. It would be difficult, upon seeing this photograph, not to be struck by the extraordinary affinities it shares with the much later image made by Henri Cartier-Bresson of a boy similarly awaiting the return of his object into the field of the photograph. *Valencia* (fig. 30) seems almost to be a direct reenactment of Rejlander’s photo, yet it is precisely the notion of staging a photographic homage that points to the crucial distinction between the two. One could hardly find a better embodiment than *Valencia* of Cartier-Bresson’s mantra, which crystallized in the title of his 1952 manifesto, *The Decisive Moment*. For him, this decisive moment was one characterized by “the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as a precise organization of forms which gave that event its proper expression.”<sup>45</sup> This celebration of the serendipitous accident, the fetishization of the singularity and ephemerality

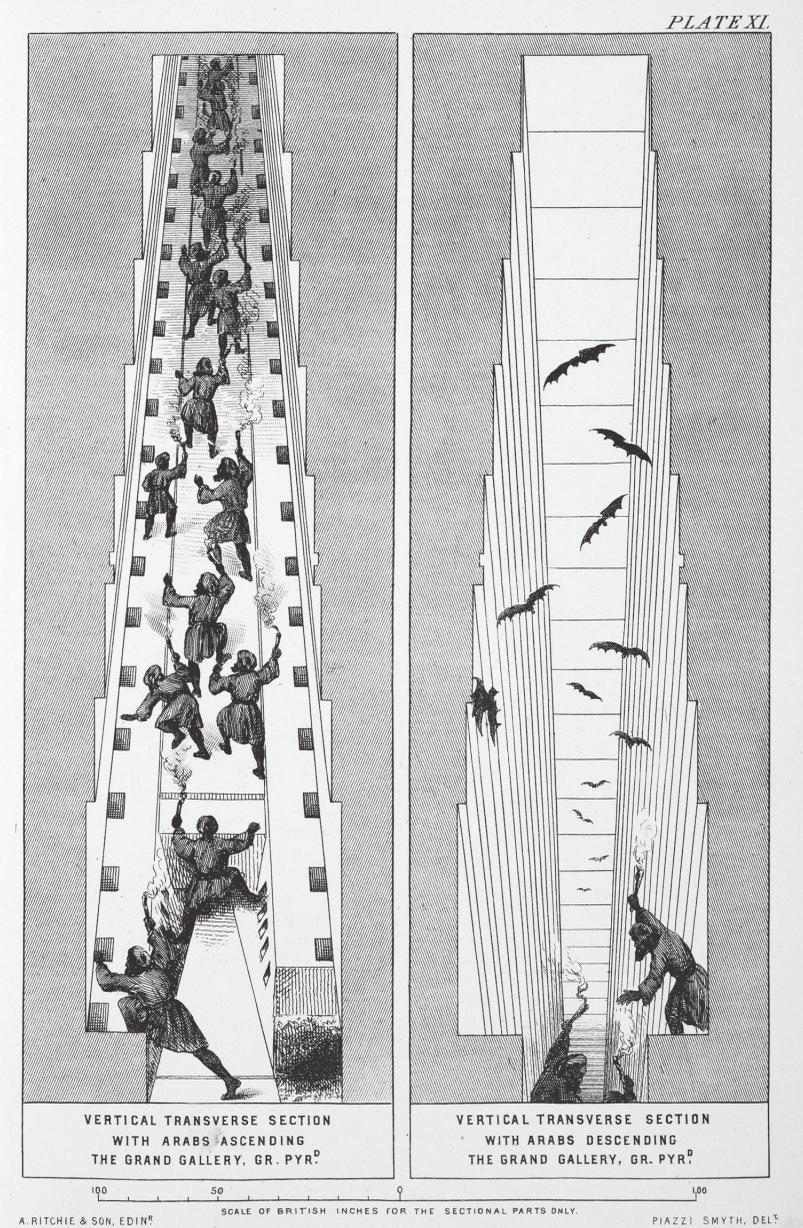
**FIGURE 62**  
 Alex Ritchie, *Vertical Section (Looking West) or King's Chamber*, 1874. Plate XIII, Charles Piazza Smyth, *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid* (London: W. Isbister, 1874). Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.



picture produced was a rather different one. Perhaps the most startling of all the photographs that Smyth produced in Egypt is the one in which his wife dutifully stands beside the sarcophagus, which has been enframed by four adjustable measuring rods (fig. 64). Here the British inches are not relegated to the margins but have encased the coffer completely, providing Smyth with a record of the object's dimensions and its susceptibility to measurement in Smyth's terms. Mrs. Smyth's presence is quite puzzling: surely she is not there to provide a sense of scale, for the measuring sticks aspire to show in absolute, quantitative terms the size of the sarcophagus; nor does it appear that she is holding the rods in place. Perhaps, as most critics of Smyth's work have argued, he was simply inattentive to any aesthetic concerns, merely wishing to record as much data as

PLATE XIII.

**FIGURE 63**  
 Alex Ritchie, *Vertical Transverse Section with Arabs Ascending the Grand Gallery*, 1874. Plate XI, Charles Piazza Smyth, *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid* (London: W. Isbister, 1874). Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.



accurately as possible. The effect of the photograph, however, is to underline the distinct degrees of utility of the medium for measurement. While the inanimate coffer is easily subjected to the metrical agenda of Smyth's voyage, and is translated readily into terms against which another object might be favorably or unfavorably compared, Mrs. Smyth is not so effortlessly accommodated: she does not fit into the frame from which a general principle can be extrapolated. She is a particular woman, a fact that seems heightened in this juxtaposition, for the crudely typologized Egyptians in the engraving are as abstract as the coffer's promoters imagined the object of measure to be. Even here, in the sanctuary of the central unit of humanity's measure, the particularity of the photograph is insisting upon its inadequacy as a mode of universal measure.