Crop Circles

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The default method of framing images in photography (not to mention graphic design) is between the four ninety-degree angles and perpendicular edges of a rectangle. But, as JAMES LANGDON discovers, a more eccentric approach to framing and cropping can be found by tracing the evolution both of the photographic process and our way of seeing.

My attention has recently been caught by a series of encounters with unusually cropped photographs. We generally understand the term ‘cropping’ as the practice of narrowing the rectangular frame of an image to remove anything that is not useful to the message being delivered. Or, in a more positive sense, to focus precisely on a specific subject. But its fullest meaning might also include the framing and editing of images in many forms: from the simplest of graphic devices—an oval frame, perhaps—to montage, collage and the dark arts of doctoring and retouching photographs. In post-revolutionary Russia, for example, having declared Trotsky an enemy of the people, the dictator Stalin had the image of his rival removed from numerous significant documentary photographs. This was undoubtedly an act of cropping.

In a history of images, cropping may be a recent phenomenon, certainly tied closely to the invention of photography and the emergence of mechanically mediated images. Today we find that the means by which photographic images have come to be recorded and distributed: film, sheet paper, digital sensor, computer screen, are almost always rectangular. And yet the rectangular frame is not essential to the production and reproduction of images. It is a construct: a convention that rationalises the display of images. The origins of this construct are in the methodologies of industrial production, but its impact on the way we read images should not be overlooked. The collection that follows is by no means an exhaustive body of research, more a brief typology of images that share a healthy self-consciousness about their edges.

John Baldessari Close-Cropped Tales

John Baldessari’s book Close-Cropped Tales presents, in six parts, a series of found photographs cropped into polygonal frames of three, four, five, six, seven and eight sides. The photographs—most appearing to be production stills from action scenes in various obscure black-and-white Hollywood films—are a deadpan mixture of comic, slightly disturbing and puzzlingly ambiguous. The selection and cropping process is not arbitrary: it suggests a kind of reductive formal economy in which only the sites of specific narrative interest in an image are included in the frame. In one example from ‘A Four-Sided Tale’, a snake, a prostrate man and a barking dog occupy the three extremes of the frame, its constrained graphic form exaggerating the predicament of the subjects.

Each composition has an overt push-and-pull between what is included and excluded from view that functions contrary to the typically passive consumption of an image framed in a conventional rectangular format. Baldessari’s angular cropping can only be read as reductive: we know that outside the frame exist portions of the image that the artist has chosen not to reveal. Simultaneously, the dynamic that these edgy graphic forms produce on the page has a disparity with their banal subject matter. The frames have an unfamiliar, clipped rhythm: their incongruity asserts the idea that the content of each image we encounter be considered directly and urgently in relation to its frame.



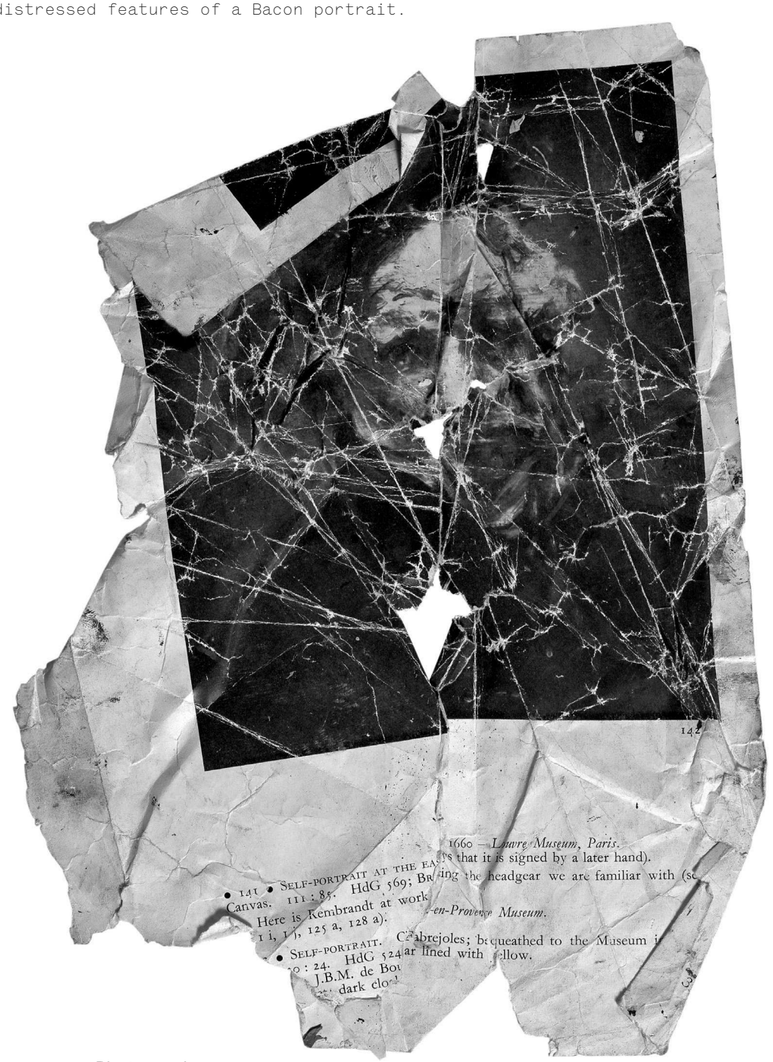
John Baldessari, from Close-Cropped Tales (CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, 1981)

Francis Bacon Incunabula

Often cropping and framing photographs is a process of straightening edges to make tidy graphic objects for a page layout. In exhibition catalogues, reproductions of paintings are routinely prepared with the corners and edges of their canvases cropped perfectly square, conforming to an expectation that paintings are primarily images rather than objects.

Yet cropping doesn't always mean narrowing or abbreviating. A beautiful example is a recent book documenting printed ephemera recovered from the artist Francis Bacon's studio after his death in 1992. Bacon hoarded great quantities of everyday printed matter in the studio: catalogues, magazines, newspapers and photographs, all of which were a source of reference in the process of painting. Over time these items would be folded or overpainted; sometimes incidentally, sometimes very deliberately emphasising or distorting particular imagery.

The treatment of this material in Martin Harrison's book seems to represent the fullest sense of what a reproduction can be: each item is scanned and digitally isolated with exceptional fidelity, and accompanied by comprehensive documentary provenance. The resulting images have an extraordinary quality on the page: the complexity of the unbound graphic forms produces a heightened sense of the presence of the original objects. Sometimes a single item will be shown in several arrangements, revealing the way in which its folding or marking might have been considered by Bacon. In the example here, a reproduction of a Rembrandt self-portrait has been repeatedly folded until the cracks in the paper's surface make distortions to the figure which are immediately suggestive of the distressed features of a Bacon portrait.



Ephemera as reproduced in Martin Harrison's Francis Bacon, Incunabula, Thames & Hudson, London, 2008



Sherrie Levine President Collages

Some framing devices are commonly used to classify images. Think of a rounded rectangle identifying a still image from a television screen, or a light bulb appearing in a 'thought cloud' above a cartoon character's head as evidence of an idea dawning. Both of these examples are relatively neutral, in the sense that they are understood as aids to the clear expression of the context in which an image is intended to be read. A more coercive effect can be seen in numerous archetypal propaganda posters, where an ambient image of an agitated crowd or a symbolic piece of architecture might typically be framed inside the letterforms of a slogan.

American artist Sherrie Levine's series of President Collages use a framing device loaded in a more contrary spirit. Photographs of women from the pages of glossy magazines are cut out and framed by the graphic silhouettes of American Presidents, suggesting a commentary on the representation of gender and power. Despite this subversive shift, there is a clarity and directness in these compositions that could hardly be expressed more economically. Men are powerful, definitive and bold, their presence containing women, whose image is superficially glamourous or domestic. The frame here is more than a mute graphic form, it provides an active commentary on the image it holds.

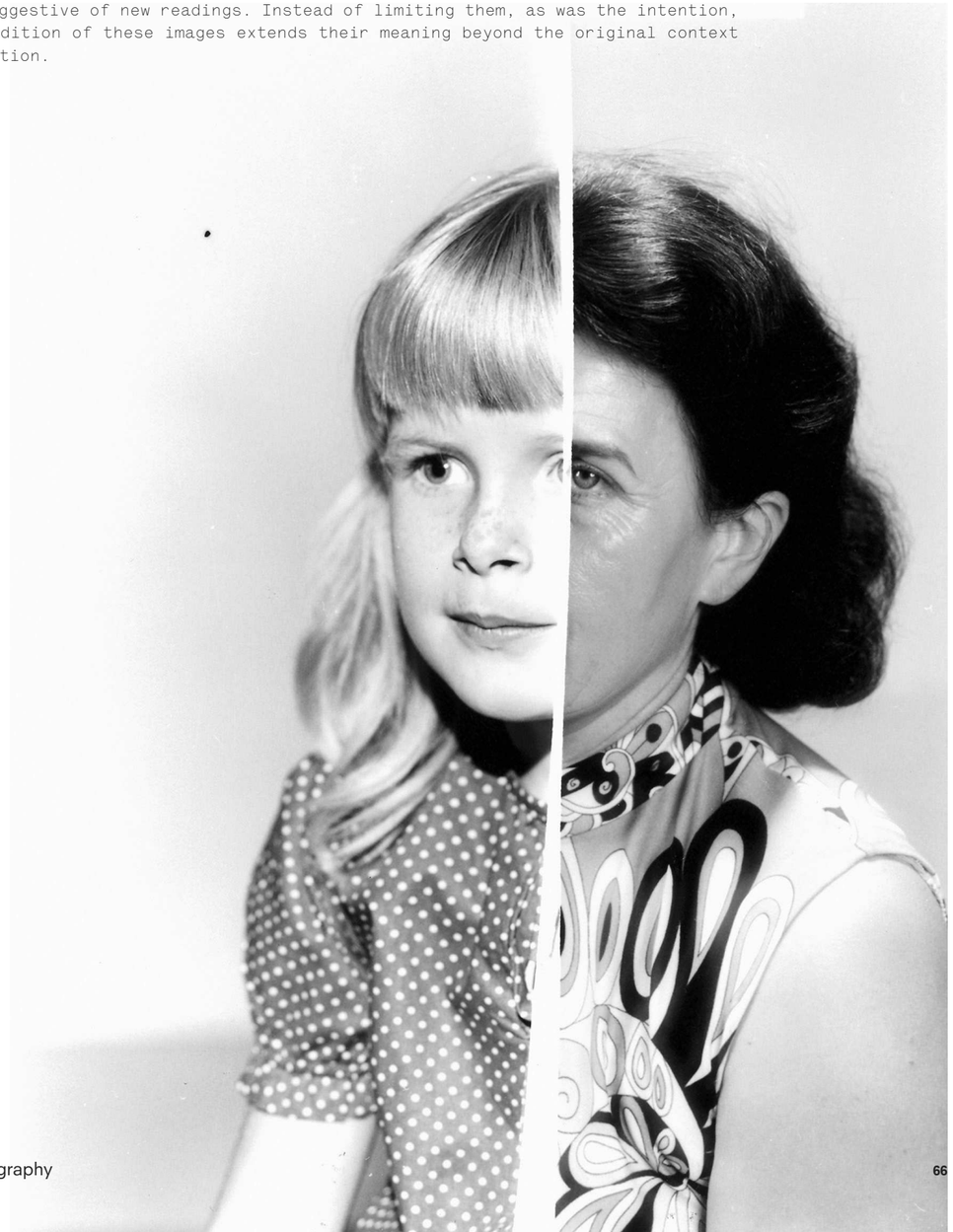
Sherrie Levine, President Collage #1, 1979. Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift. Reproduced courtesy of Scala, Florence.

Joachim Schmid Photogenetic Draft

Counter to the idea of cropping loaded with a particular meaning might be a notion of arbitrary cropping. Yet this is a more problematic subject. How to remove or transgress the traces of meaning left by the action of cropping?

In 1990 German artist Joachim Scmid established the Institute for the Reprocessing of Used Photographs. This institutional alias disguised what was actually a one-man operation. Driven by a fascination with the global proliferation of photographic images, Schmid distributed through the press a polemical call to individuals and organisations requesting that they send their used photographic negatives for recycling at his 'facility'. Amongst many other materials (a collection which eventually consumed his Berlin apartment), the artist received a batch of negatives from a Bavarian firm specialising in individual studio portraits. Likely fearing that these might be used for some commercial gain, the sender had systematically cut each negative in half. In these spliced formats, Schmid discovered a kind of 'found' cropping, and began pairing fragments from different portraits with common proportions to produce what he calls Photogenetic Drafts.

The original action of cropping here is not an artful one, but a functional gesture of negation. In Schmid's recombinations that gesture is repurposed, becoming a restriction that is suggestive of new readings. Instead of limiting them, as was the intention, the cropped condition of these images extends their meaning beyond the original context of their production.



Joachim Schmid, Photogenetic Draft #24, 1990. Courtesy of the artist.



Jeff Wall, 8056 Beverly Blvd, Los Angeles, 9am, 24 September 1996. Silver gelatin print, 203.5 x 256cm. Courtesy of Jeff Wall Studio.

Jeff Wall 8056 Beverly Boulevard

"All lenses create circular images. Film is rectangular. Normally cameras are equipped with a lens that gives you an image bigger than the film being used, so the circular edges of the image are not recorded. When you use a bigger camera you have the option to change lenses, and change the relation between lens and film size. I like to do that sometimes because normally one never remembers that images are circular. Noticing it, experiencing it, tells you something about what photography really is, by means of reminding you about the relationship between the lens and the film." Jeff Wall

This image and the statement reproduced above reveal something of the prehistory of cropping and express succinctly the point of this enquiry: that making evident the mechanisms of cropping and framing refreshes our critical faculties and keeps us sensitive to what is happening at the edges of the images that we consume. Lastly, the idea expressed formally by this image in such a modest, matter-of-fact way, extends the discussion here to include this most critical idea: that all images mediated by a lens are not inherently rectangular, and it naturally follows that they are almost all inherently cropped.