

Report on a work in progress,  
written against Roland Barthes's  
*Camera Lucida*

James Elkins  
jameselkins@fastmail.fm

# Organization of this lecture:

1. Some thoughts on the influence of *Camera Lucida*
2. Five key concepts in *Camera Lucida*
3. The work in progress, *Camera Dolorosa*

# I. The influence of *Camera Lucida*

Photography has an increasingly complicated body of theory that supports (or seeks to support) its practice.

As a preliminary assessment:

A. Literature in the origins of photography,

—tracing it for example from the *camera obscura* (Peter Galassi)

—or from capitalism, science, and leisure (Jonathan Crary)

B. Literature in the theory of photography

—investigating claims of its pictorial nature (Joel Snyder)

—using semiotics to explain photographic images (Rosalind Krauss)

C. Literature in the place of photography in relation to fine art

—on vernacular photography (Graham Smith, *History of Photography*)

—on surrealism and women photographers (Rosalind Krauss)

—on the new photography (Struth etc.) as “painting” (Michael Fried)

Four examples of the criticism of *Camera Lucida* (which has left it in place):

1. Graham Allen (*Roland Barthes*) and others: it a solipsistic book, whose two parts work against one another, producing no clear theory—more a meditation on loss and memory than a book about photography;
2. Jacques Derrida: it is a book whose unusual form intentionally undermines its theoretical claims in accord with Barthes's concept of *écriture*;
3. Margaret Olin, in the journal *Representations*: it has a structure determined more by Barthes's desires (to possess a photograph that could serve as a memory of his mother) than by the photographs he actually studied.

#### 4. The book *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

The book begins with a roundtable

(Margaret Olin, Margaret Iversen, Diarmuid Costello, Joel Snyder, Jan Baetens, Graham Smith. . .)

and continues with thirty responses

(Walter Benn Michaels, Alan Trachtenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Geoffrey Batchen, Carol Squiers, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Victor Burgin, Liz Wells, Michel Frizot, Johan Swinnen, Michael Leja. . .)

and yet there is no agreement on:

1. Whether Barthes should be argued about at all
2. What the basic terms of the book are
3. Whether there is useful theorizing “after” Barthes

So: over a quarter century after the book was written,  
*Camera Lucida* is still photography's main point of reference  
(along with Peirce, Bourdieu, Flusser. . .).



\$9.95

ROLAND BARTHES was born in 1915 and studied French literature and classics at the University of Paris. After teaching French at universities in Rumania and Egypt, he joined the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, where he devoted himself to research in sociology and lexicology. He was a Professor at the Collège de France until his death in 1980.



Arthur W. Wang

"This is a great book—flawed, impossible, infuriating, and moving . . . But he has accomplished in this extraordinary book something finer than mere polemic. En route to his last painful discovery, Barthes takes the reader on an exquisitely rendered, lyrical journey into the heart of his own life and the medium he came to love, a medium that flirts constantly with the 'intractable reality' of the human condition."

—Douglas Davis, *Newsweek*

Cover design by Charles Skaggs

THE NOONDAY PRESS  
a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
19 Union Square West / New York 10003

ISBN 0-374-52134-4



9 780374 521349

900000



# ROLAND BARTHES

## Camera Lucida

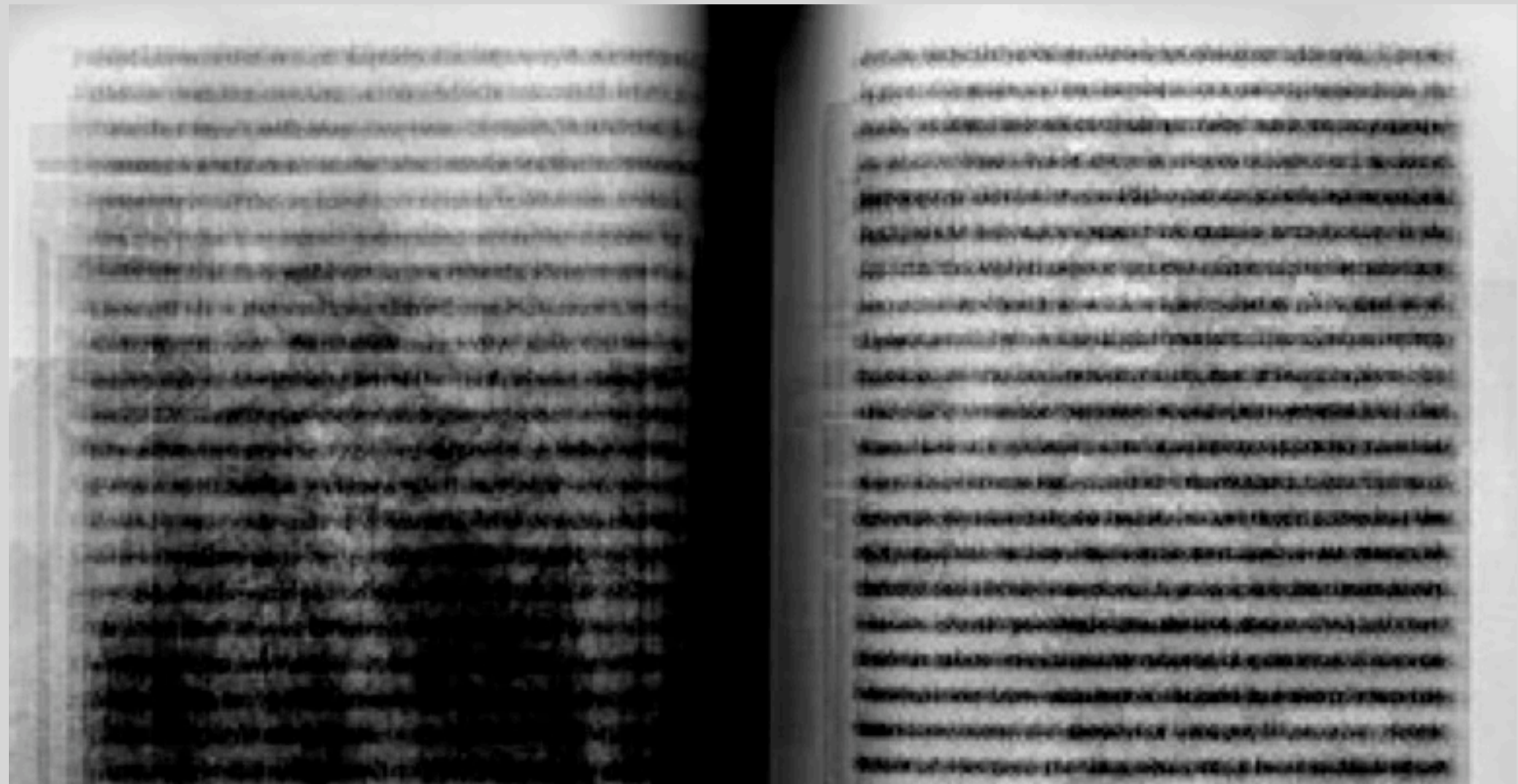


*Reflections on Photography*

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD HOWARD

Roland Barthes's book in the English translation.



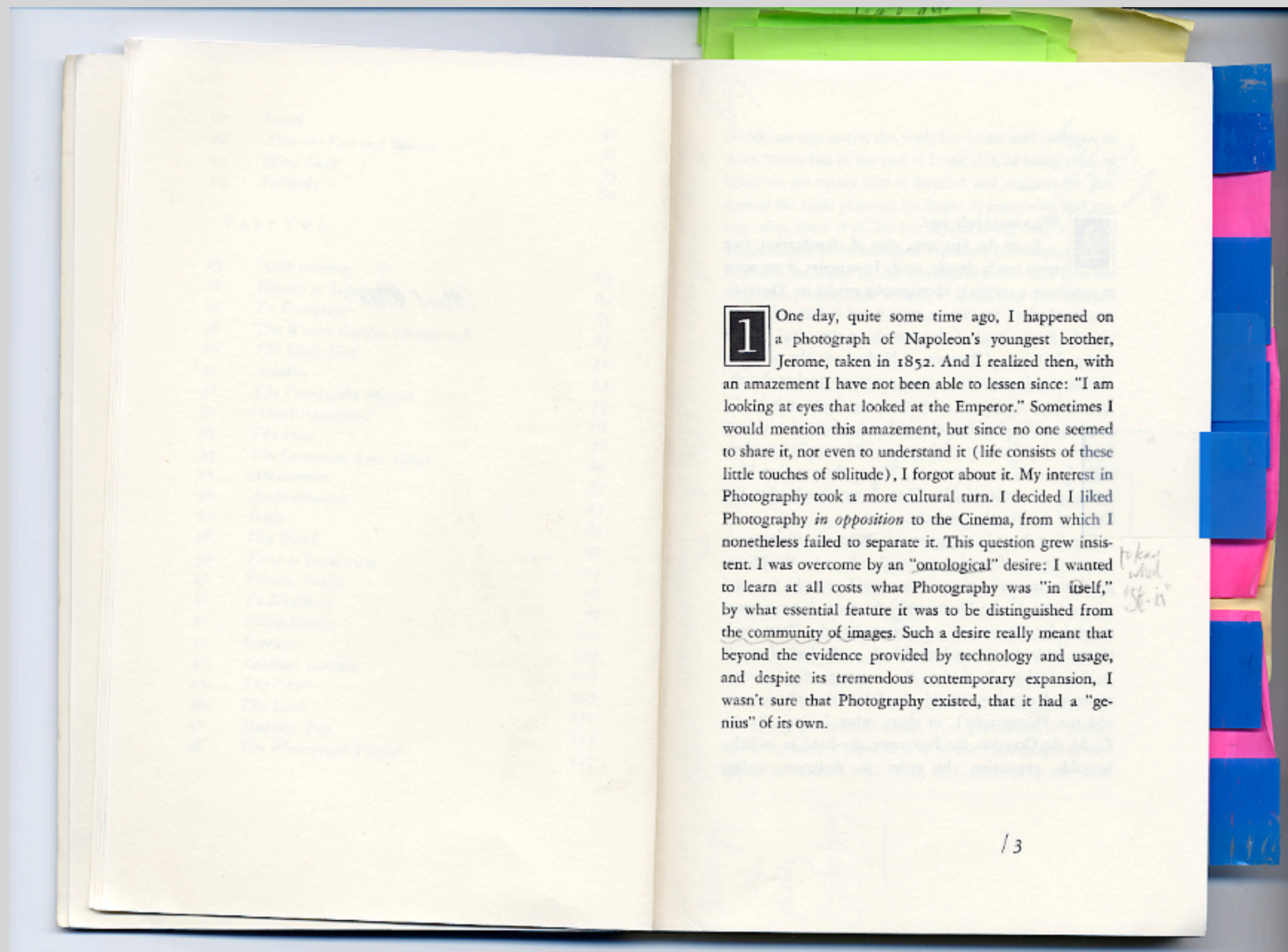


Idris Khan, *Every Page...* from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, detail

### 3.The work in progress, *Camera Dolorosa*



This is the opening section of *Camera Lucida*.





**1** One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor." Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand it (life consists of these little touches of solitude), I forgot about it. My interest in Photography took a more cultural turn. I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an "ontological" desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own.

## Barthes's §1.



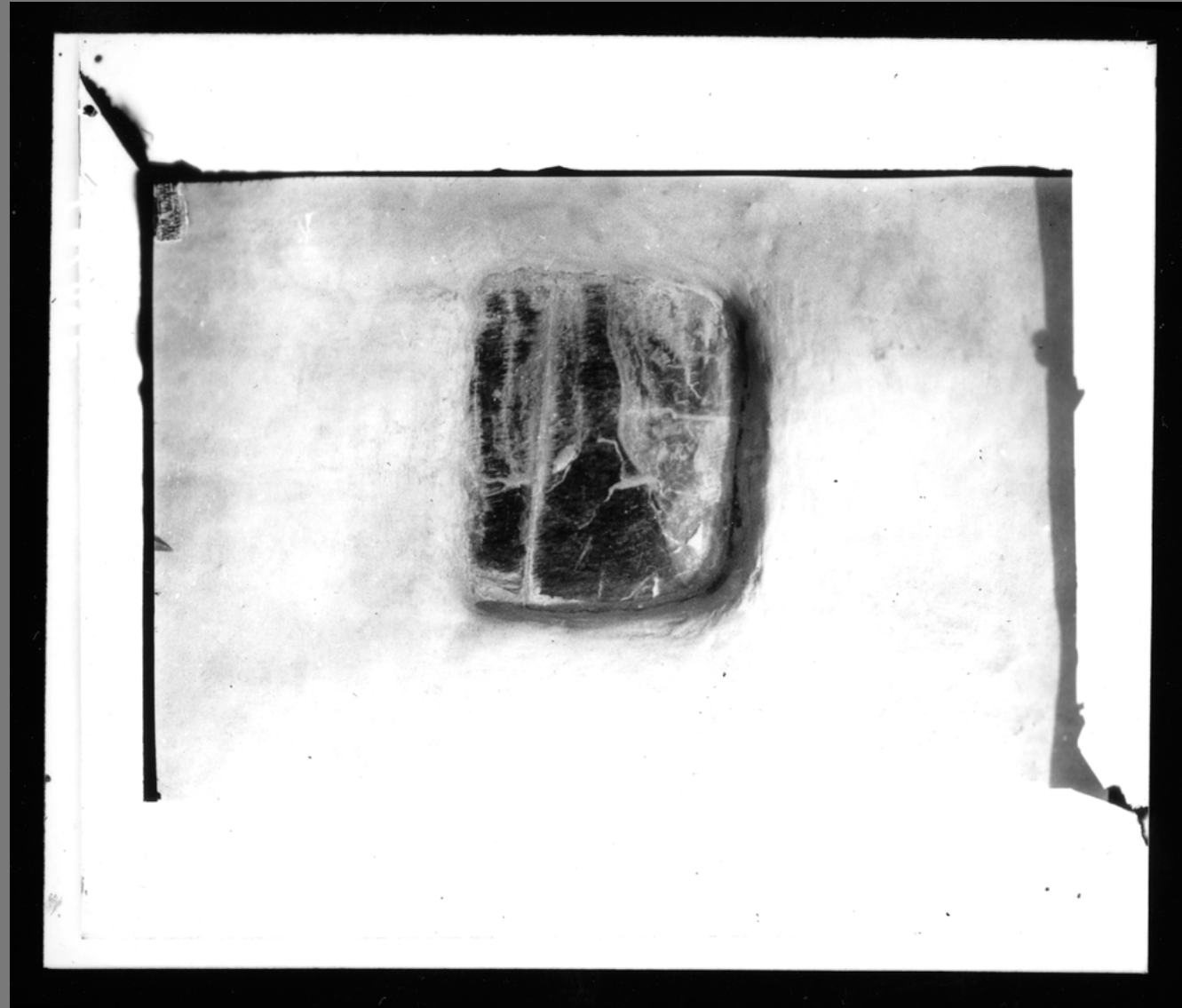
**1** One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor." Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand it (life consists of these little touches of solitude), I forgot about it. My interest in Photography took a more cultural turn. I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an "ontological" desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own.

Barthes's §I.

The selenite window is the first of three models I propose in place of the *camera obscura* or *camera lucida*.

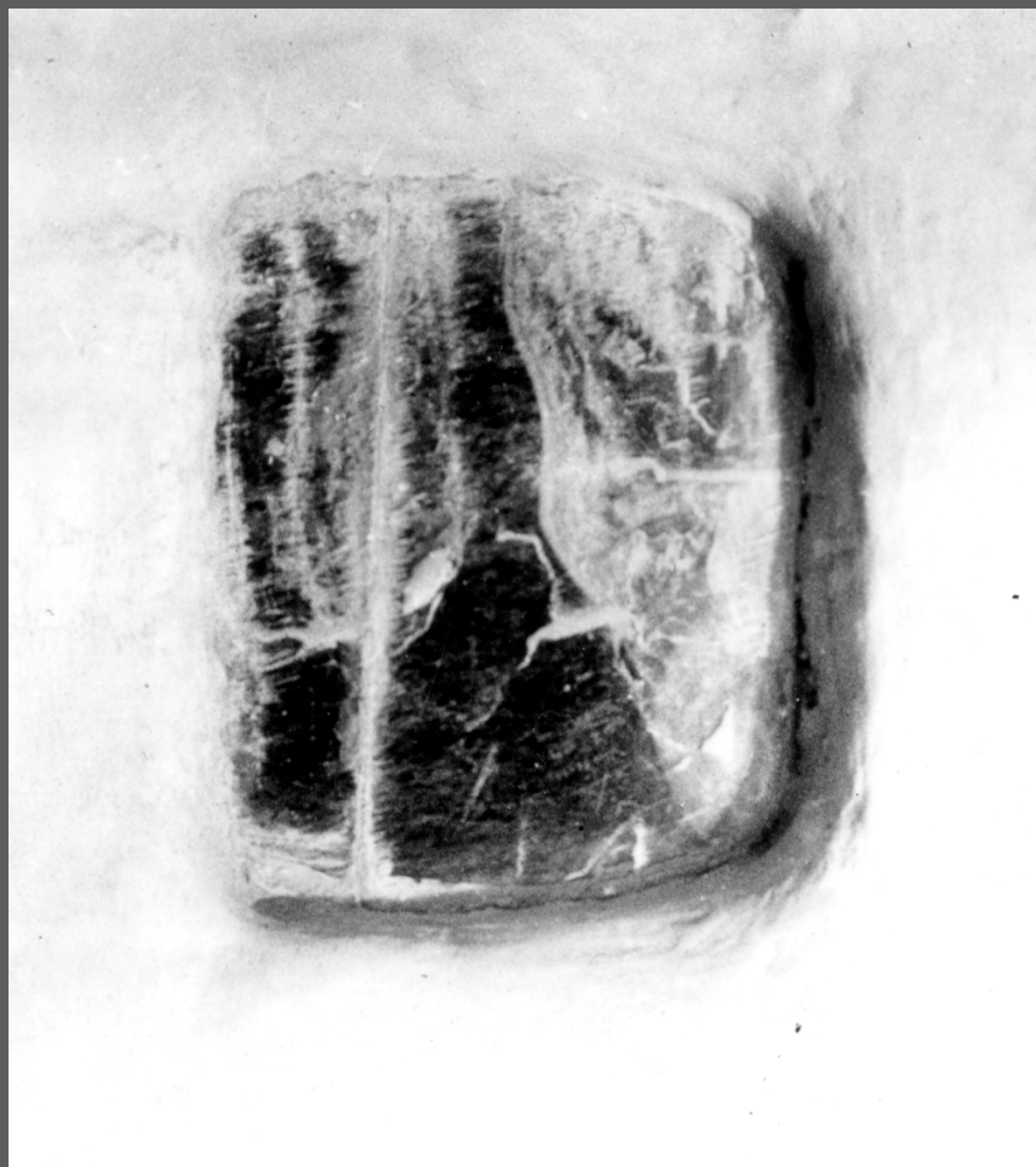
One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of a selenite window. It had once existed, and may perhaps still exist, in a pueblo house on top of Acoma mesa in New Mexico. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "This is the condition of photography." Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand (life consists of these stretches of solitude), I forgot about it. My interests in photography took a more cultural turn. I decided I liked photography *in opposition* to painting, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an "ontological" desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it has a "genius" of its own.

My §I.

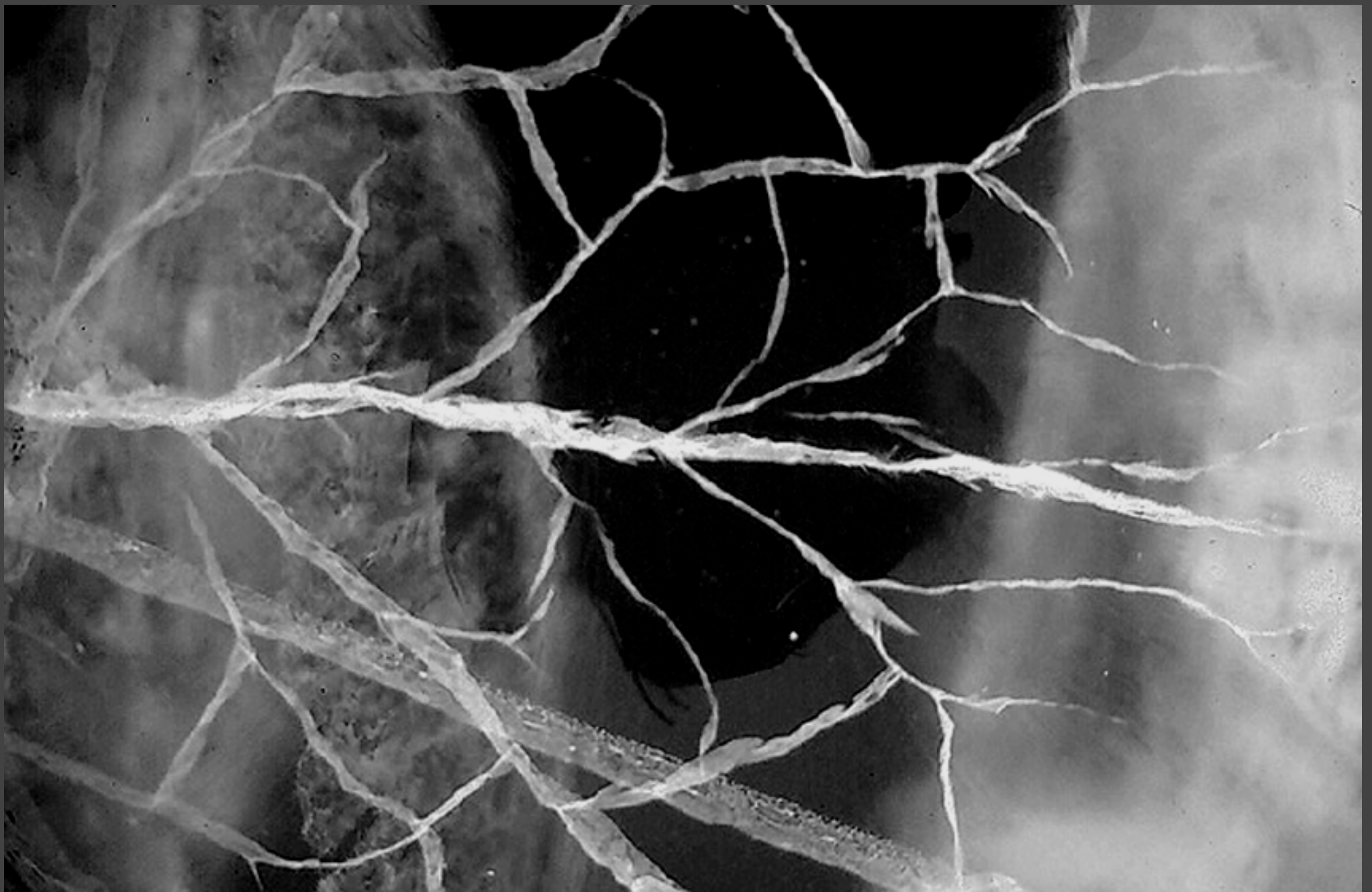


I. A photograph, from the Museum of Natural History, of a selenite (rock) window that was once in a pueblo on Acoma, New Mexico.

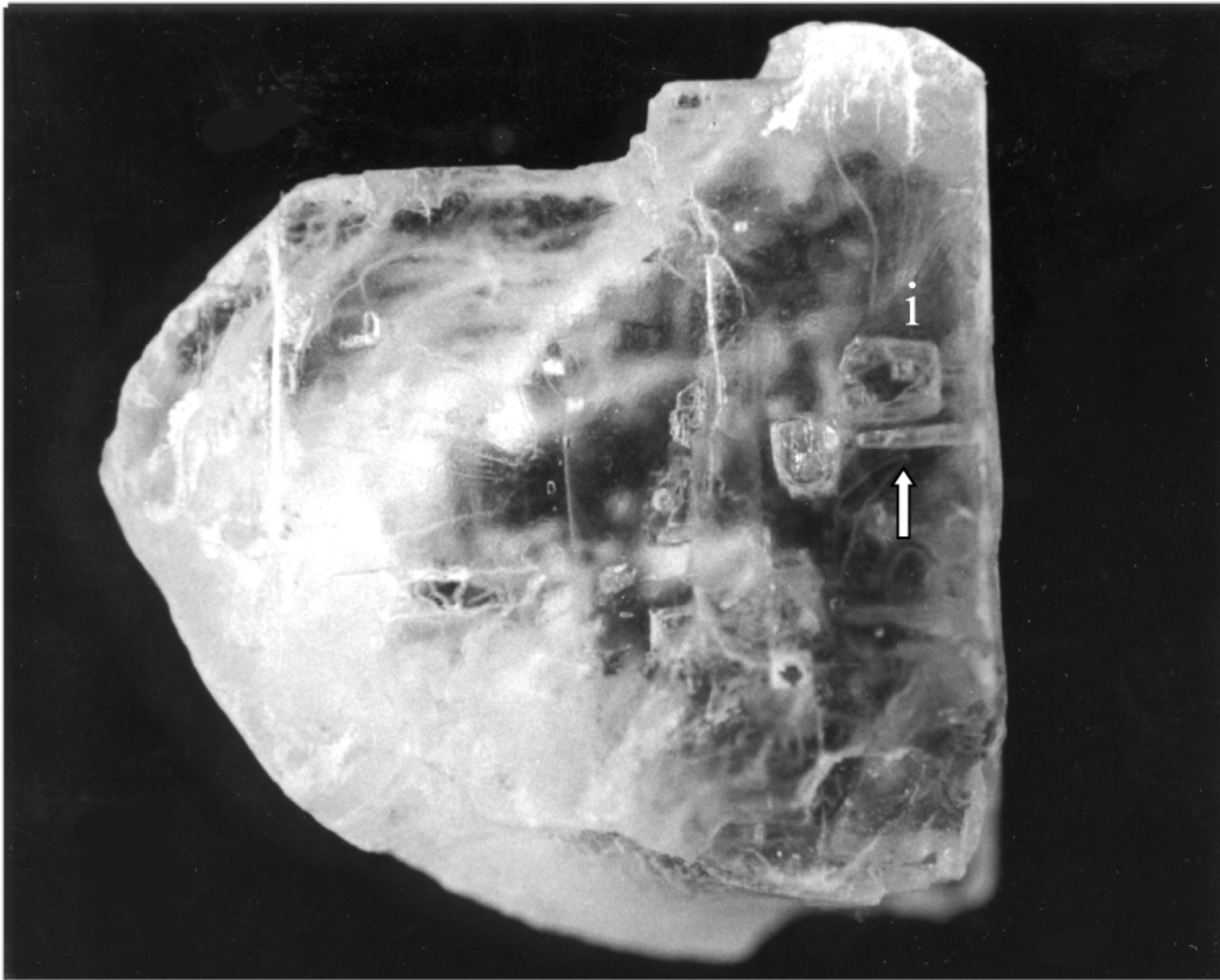








2. A photograph looking down at black lake ice.



3. A photograph of a small piece of rock salt.

These three models stress photography's *surface*,  
and its *inadequacy* as a form of naturalistic representation.

The main chapters in the book explore themes based on  
this new model:

1. Photography shows us the things *around* and *behind* the subjects we mean to photograph: the world *except for* people.

2. Photography shows us things that have no stories: textures, forms, parts of the world that don't have names.

3. Photography shows us things that are hard to pay attention to. ("Boring" things, things that have no immediate meaning or use).

4. Photography shows us *pain* more intensely than other media. (I will not argue this today.)

Examples of photographs in the book