

The Evolution of FOMO

From a lecture by Shai-Lee Horodi, presented at the Autonomous Art Biennale, Gymnasia Herzliya, Tel Aviv, April 6, 2023. Translated from Hebrew.



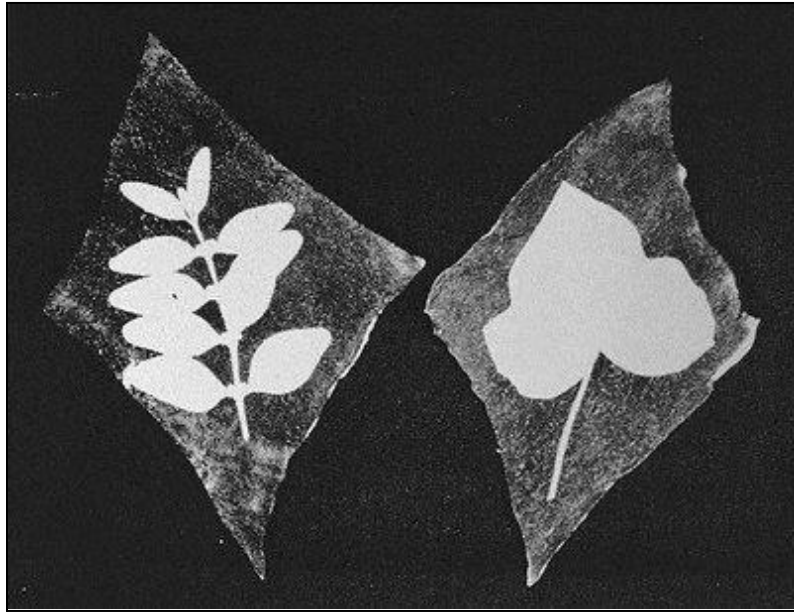
“What I will do today is examine the history of photography as it is reflected through the phenomenon known as FOMO – Fear of Missing Out. This term, born on the internet, describes the fear of missing out—an anxiety that might be better understood today as a deep psychological phenomenon. In other words, the word *fear*—rather than, say, *concern*—may be more fitting in our time, as we refer to the common emotions experienced when we are not "there," where something is happening without us.

The inspiration for this lecture comes from the works of photographer Carmi Dror. Her exhibition at MoMA PS1 led me to the thought that FOMO is a direct result of the evolution of photographic technology and the changing ways in which photographic images are disseminated.

Dror’s images are created through a process called photogrammetry—a technique used for various purposes, all of which involve capturing multiple photographic images to extract three-dimensional information about the subject. A collection of two-dimensional images enables the creation of a three-dimensional representation. The photographer circles the subject, capturing numerous images, while specialized software analyzes the relationships between them, identifying similarities to determine the relative distance of each point from the camera.

For example, if the software recognizes that a nose captured from one angle is the same nose seen from another, this data helps it infer the shape of the ear, which might appear as a hemisphere from one perspective but as an ellipse from another. But why are Dror's figures so fragmented? Perhaps because the software failed to recognize the nose as the same one across images—or perhaps because, in some way, it truly *isn't* the same nose. The features of these figures are unstable; they do not remain constant. The subject changes too much. But more on that later.

For now, I would like to return to the origins of photography—or what might be considered its origins.



A man named Thomas Wedgwood used light-sensitive materials to create such images, which he called "sun prints" at the time. Later, they became known as photograms. But how do they differ from photography as we know it today?

In this process, the photographer places an object on a light-sensitive surface—in this case, a leaf on a piece of paper soaked in silver nitrate—creating an image. The image is formed through direct contact; there is no distance between the capturing device and the photographed subject.

In its early days, photography clearly embodied the etymological and linguistic confusion between the words *shadow* (*tzel* לַצַּל) and *photographer* (*tzalam* צַלַּם). Initially, shadow was at the core of photography, and only later came the photographer.

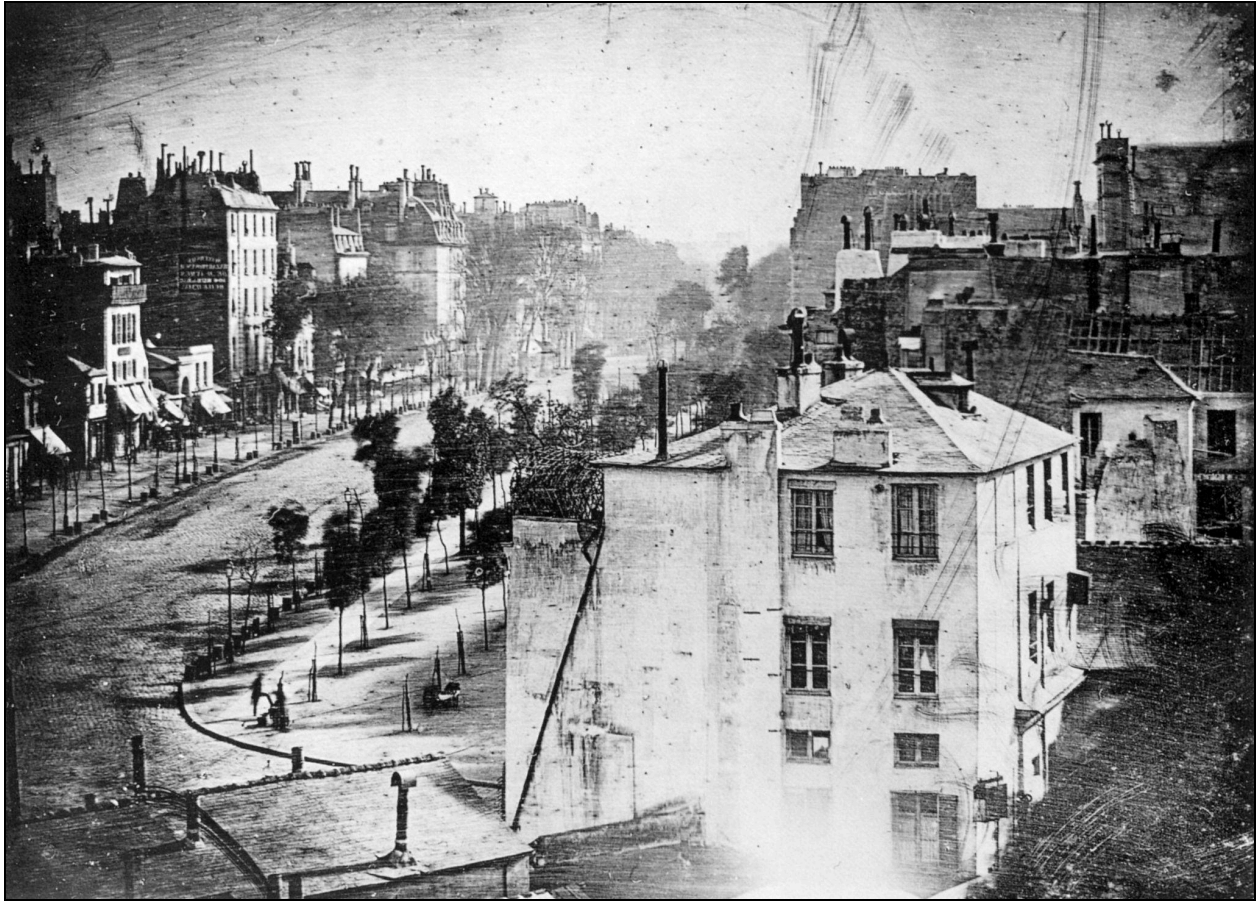
This image was created around 1800. Nearly thirty years later, a type of photograph much closer to what we recognize today emerged—the photograph as taken by a photographer. A photograph in which there is a distance between the camera and the subject.



Joseph Nicéphore Niépce used bitumen of Judea, a type of asphalt, to capture this image—the view from his window—in 1826. Since this asphalt was not particularly light-sensitive, the exposure time had to last eight hours.

These early examples of photography highlight the two main challenges the medium would face and evolve in response to. The first is space—the key difference between shadow prints (Wedgwood's contact prints) and the photographs we recognize today. The second is time—the defining contrast between Niépce's image, which required an eight-hour exposure, and modern photographs, typically captured at shutter speeds ranging from 1/50th to 1/8000th of a second.

A photograph like Niépce's, with its long exposure time, captures what endures, what remains unchanged. As more light-sensitive photographic materials were eventually developed, enabling shorter exposures, the focus of photography shifted—from capturing what persists to capturing what fleets and changes.



Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre developed a photographic method that allowed for shorter exposure times, around 10 to 30 minutes. The photographed Parisian street here is empty, except for a shoe shiner and his client. The reason for this is that no one else stayed still long enough to be captured in the photograph. Again, a long exposure documents what endures.

This photograph from 1838 demonstrates the important principle of photographic fiction. The photographic image has no other origin than reality, yet it is not reality itself, nor is it a direct, systematic reflection of reality. The fictional dimension of photography—the separation of the photographed world from our world—led us to develop photographic methods. We discovered the photogenic and we aspire to it.

What are the characteristics of the photogenic? The photogenic exists only in relation to the outer layer of the things depicted. It is completely detached from contact. Photogenic food, for example, looks delicious. This doesn't mean the photogenic lies. Even if the food isn't truly tasty, many of us place great importance on the fact that it appears delicious. Photogenicity is tied, as I mentioned, to the fictional dimension of photography, so we should treat it the way we treat beauty in works of fictional literature—just because it isn't really so, doesn't mean it lacks truth.

If we return for a moment to the works of Carmi Dror, you can see that the figures she creates are hollow. They have only an outer layer.

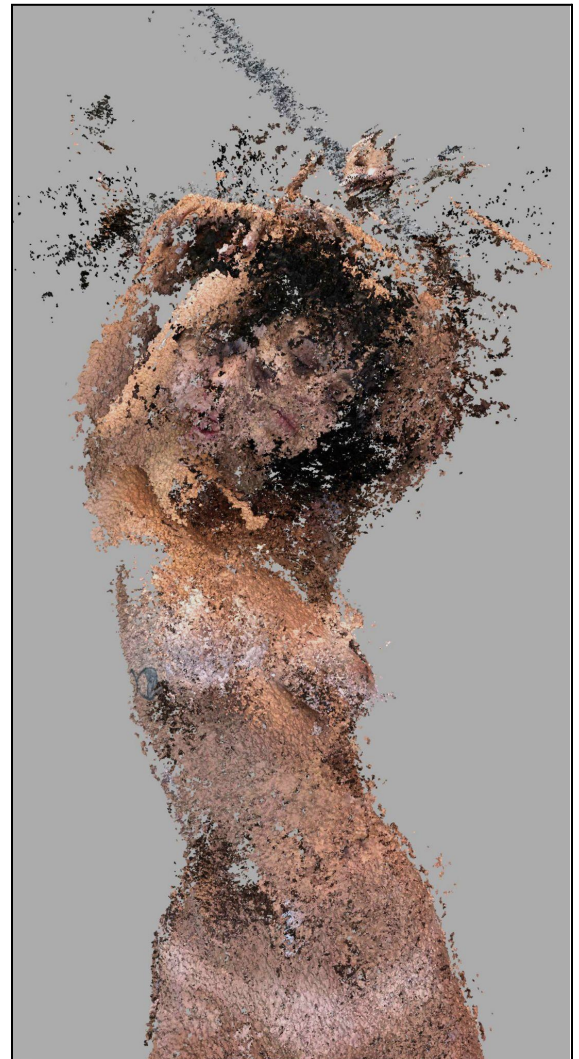


Daguerre's photographic method—the daguerreotype—is a positive process. This means that the image appears on the light-sensitive surface used for photography with the correct tonalities, rather than a negative—where the tones are reversed. This creates two problems: the first is that the image cannot be duplicated—since the surface used in the photography is the one that ultimately appears as the photograph. The second problem is that the image appears reversed. Light enters the camera through a hole and is flipped, from top to bottom and from right to left. There's no problem rotating the image top to bottom, but there's no way to flip it horizontally. One would think that such horizontally flipped images, from left to right, would become obsolete once photographic technology offered a solution to this issue, and indeed, this was the case from around 1850 for over 150 years. Perhaps someone here has noticed that this is no longer the case—horizontally flipped images are very common today. The selfie. The self-portrait. Images taken in selfies are stored on phones flipped, and we learn from this that the selfie is not just a photograph someone took of themselves, but in many ways, it is a photograph someone took for themselves.

Between 1837 and about 1880, most people encountered the photographic process as subjects of photographs. Photography required knowledge of chemistry, specialization, and was cumbersome, heavy, and expensive. Photography had two uses: one was creating portraits. Initially, portraits were rigid, with subjects held in place by various devices to prevent blurry images. As photographic materials improved, portraits became more varied and relaxed.

This use of portraits was linked to how the photographed image allowed us to move through time. We see how someone once appeared. Since photography was an incredibly expensive process, many people could only afford one photographed image in their entire lifetime. You can probably guess when it was taken. It was the post-mortem photograph, the photograph of the deceased. For the working class, photography was tied to death. If a family member died, a photograph, even though it was very expensive, could serve as a memento for the family. Photography's ability to turn back time brought the family back to a time when the person was still alive, before being buried or cremated. We can only imagine how valuable this single photograph was to the family, how much emotional weight that small piece of paper carried. Even today, we use photographs to remember our deceased loved ones, but we do so with multiple images, none of which carry the same weight as those few individual photographs once did. The image of the deceased spoke to the entirety of the subject, the summary of their life. This is not the case with the images we know today.

At this point, I would like to return briefly, just for a moment, to the work of Carmi Dror, which is made up of multiple photographs that do not coalesce into a complete, whole figure.



The second use of photography at that time—until about 1880—was the creation of landscape images. Photography allowed people to see places they had never been. As mentioned, photography had two functions: movement through time, as we discussed with portrait images, and movement through space, as practiced by various photographers who, for example, photographed the Holy Land at that time and sold their prints in Europe.



Each use tended more towards a different existential state. The landscape photograph was connected to the action of "seeing," while the portrait photograph was more connected to the action, if we can call it an action, of "being seen." It seems to me, if I understand history correctly, that the scale tipped in favor of being seen and against seeing.

In 1888, the first Kodak camera appeared, which was not just a camera, but also an excellent product. It was suitable for everyone—anyone could be a photographer—everyone is a potential photographer. The camera was relatively small and had a fixed exposure time of 1/25 second, meaning that with a bit of effort to maintain stability, a tripod was unnecessary. The subjects captured were more or less in focus as long as they were more than 2.5 meters away from the camera. Although you still couldn't take a selfie, those who were previously only photographed could now become photographers. The portability of the camera allowed the two uses of photography that I mentioned—the landscape and the portrait—to meet. Now, the portrait was merged with the landscape in the form of the family photograph, whose place of display was the photo album. Thus, space and time also meet. We were there, in that moment, in that place. The subjects are often photographed with their backs to the landscape.

Many cameras at the end of the 19th century featured a button and a mechanical exposure mechanism. Before that, exposures were made by removing and replacing the cover over the lens. This method worked for relatively long exposures, but an exposure time faster than 1/25 second couldn't be achieved this way. It might seem like an unimportant technical development, but it was precisely this innovation that made photography a pursuit closely tied to the act of hunting. The button and the trigger. Even cameras at that time resembled rifles in their shape. In the middle of the 20th century, photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term "the decisive moment," referring to that moment captured by the photographer when the world before them arranges itself in such a way that it will never be the same again.

If in its beginning, photography could capture what was persistent, what didn't move too much due to the long exposure times it required, then in its development, photography gradually began to focus more and more on the transient, what would not return. Initially, it was mostly in the form of those who had passed away, shortly after their death, and later, as it became cheap enough, the fleeting became the mirror of life itself, which appeared through photography as a long sequence of moments that would never return.

A final dialectical synthesis for this lecture is the merging of the photographer and the subject in the selfie. I previously discussed the horizontal reversal that a selfie creates when it shows the photographer their own reflection as they see it in the mirror. When we post a selfie, we are actually presenting to the world the image of ourselves as we see ourselves in the mirror. We force others to see us as we see ourselves. We chase the photogenic in us and publish many images of it to create the illusion that this fragmented part of us is everything. For a moment, we were beautiful, and we pretend that this is what persists.



FOMO became a widespread phenomenon the moment one of the two main functions of photography nearly disappeared. Photography continues to serve as a means of traveling through space, but it no longer serves as a means of traveling through time. We consume the photographed image almost at the moment it is taken. The digital photograph requires no development or printing. The internet allows for its immediate distribution. The image no longer tells us what was, but what is, what is now in a different place. The photographed image tells us where we are not. What we are missing.

This is an installation view from Carmi Dror's exhibition at PS1. It looks like an exhibition, but it is not really an exhibition. Dror published images, and her friends posted videos from an exhibition that never happened, far away in New York. The exhibition presents figures in gray spaces, nude figures, hollow figures that exist in one place but stretch and disintegrate in all directions. Dror takes multiple photographs of them, and every movement made by the subjects between one photo and the next—even a breath—causes a tear, a glitch, the disintegration of the figure. John Berger wrote that nudity in art always creates a certain departure from the time of creation, a connection to the eternal, since without their clothes, there is no clear distinction between a 16th-century person and a 21st-century person. Dror's nude figures are built from many moments, insignificant in themselves, that create a disjointed whole, where the eternity they present is that of the transient. Everything is always flowing. Everything is always the same. We are always missing out. See how these figures are washed away and become nothing but gray.”