David Levi Strauss: Photography and Belief • Jörg Colberg: Photography’s Neoliberal Realism

‘I love photographs.’ This declaration frames the closing pages of David Levi Strauss’s latest study of photography and its histories, *Photography and Belief*. Strauss’s declaration is personal and forthright – even honest. It is also a bit gleeful. ‘I still love photographs’ is how it reads, I love them despite the fact that they are no longer loved by the public. I am not naive, Strauss confirms; nor I am a dupe, seduced by ‘fakery’ or ‘propaganda’. I simply believe in photography – and so, he suggests, should you. This is a tall order, a seemingly unbelievable request; after all, weren’t claims for photography’s believability swept into the dustbin of history with the celebration of postmodern cynicism and its joyful embrace of doubt? Do they need to be rehabilitated?

A new addition to the ‘Ekphrasis’ series published by David Zwirner Books, *Photography and Belief* is a slim volume with a very large claim: believing in photography will be our salvation, if not the first act of the next revolution. ‘If we do not find a way to believe what we see in images,’ Strauss insists, ‘we will lose the ability to act socially.’ The stakes are high, and they have been, Strauss reminds us, for some time. Hannah Arendt diagnosed the malady in 1951, when she identified it as the origins of totalitarianism. Paraphrasing Arendt, Strauss explains: ‘[I]f you want to destroy people’s ability to resist control, you must destroy the distinction between truth and lies, because if you can’t believe anything, you can’t act.’

These days, Arendt’s warning has become all too familiar. Over the past few years, it has been invoked continuously as evidence that fascism has officially reappeared in the West. Fortunately, *Photography and Belief* does not read as another checklist for our proto-fascist times. Nestled in this book’s tally of the ways in which we are manipulated by ‘deepfake’ videos and fake news, an account can be found of the necessity to believe, especially in photography. This is not, Strauss argues, because photographs are true; rather, it is because they are social. It is because they still make up the culture in which – through which – we live. Here, Strauss is advancing the argument of his book’s key theorist: Vilém Flusser. Writing in the early 1980s about the emergence of our information age, Flusser insisted that the photographic camera was the first black box, the first apparatus of the digital revolution. Perhaps this is not – or is no longer – an earth-shattering revelation. For Strauss, however, it is everything. It also holds the key to understanding the stakes involved in his desire to believe. The problem framing this book is not the suspension of belief, it is the suspension of a history of photography in which the digital revolution signals not the death of the medium but its apotheosis. *Photography and Belief* resumes this history by rewriting the story of photography’s origin. What if, Strauss asks, the Shroud of Turin is the first photograph? Strauss is hardly the first historian of photography to propose this genesis, though for him the novelty of its claim is not that it locates the origin of photography in the 14th century. Instead, in *Photography and Belief*, Strauss rewrites the history of photography that was written through the Shroud in the 1980s, when, for example, on the pages of *October*, Georges Didi-Huberman used it to develop a theory of
photography’s indexicality. For Strauss, the Shroud is not a trace, a sign – it is magic. Like other supposedly acheiropoetic images (miraculous religious icons reputedly ‘made without hands’), it is something to be believed in.

*Photography and Belief* diacriticalizes photography from modernity in order to break its burden of truth: the promises of the Enlightenment as well as the promise to dismantle them. Along with the index, modernity and its ‘post’ lose their ground in these pages, despite the fact that Strauss establishes his new history of photography through an analysis of the writing of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Barthes, too, loved photographs, Strauss reminds us. He found immense pleasure in a photograph’s ‘prick’. The question remains: will love save us? Will it come to all, including the multitude of hands that transform - or produce - that magic? In calls for faith (as with allegiances to the index), mediation, the act of making, necessarily drops from the screen. When, it is worth asking, does belief slip into what Barthes called myth? When does it become ideology?

This question is posed by another short book attending to the morass of manipulated images making up contemporary culture: Jörg Colberg’s *Photography’s Neoliberal Realism*. The fourth volume in the ‘Discourse’ series published by Mack Books, *Photography’s Neoliberal Realism* also takes as its subject renewed obsessions with photography’s burden of truth. ‘[The] focus drop[s] at times excessive amount of post-production artifice’, Colberg writes with regard to work as varied as Annie Leibovitz’s *Vogue* covers and Andreas Gursky’s museum prints, ‘not only misses the point of what a photograph can be or look like, it also precludes discussing these photographs for what they really are, in particular the functions they serve and the messages they channel’. Evidence of fakery is something of a focus on the at times excessive amount of post-production artifice, Colberg’s critique shi...