

Reversing Dark for Light: Photographs, Negatives, and Methodologies of Absence

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The periphery of the canonical history of photography is laden with myths about what exactly a negative captures. This essay considers the fraught material nature of wet-collodion negatives through a case study of surgical photographs from the American Civil War (1861-65), specifically the negatives of Dr. Reed B. Bontecou. Collodion, not only a photographic tool, was used as a skin-mimicking bandage in army hospitals, and yet despite the photographic and scientific significance of Bontecou's work, the vast majority of his negatives have since been lost, broken, or thrown away. The fragility of glass negatives, and perhaps their unsettling material nature as skins, has contributed to their absence from the historical archive. This essay does not suggest that we accept the fabled status of negatives as fact, but instead searches for an alternative methodology in which we can consider negatives' uncomfortable contradictions, and perhaps find new ways to bring them into art historical discourse, despite their physical absence.

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