

**PHOTOGRAPHIC OBJECTIVITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE MEDICAL SUBJECT IN THE UNITED STATES**

Rachelle A. Dermer

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Major Professor: Caroline A. Jones, Associate Professor of Art History

ABSTRACT

Medicine and photography have intertwined histories that have yet to be adequately understood. This dissertation considers three historical applications of photography in medicine: the instantaneous, the composite and the x-ray; the study concludes with a look at the continued priority of medicine in applying meaning to the human body. Because of the seeming one-to-one indexical relationship photography maintains with its subject, the photograph became a central component in the pursuit of scientific objectivity by medicine. This dissertation argues that aesthetic decisions and fine art practices informed medical uses of photography, just as photography gained legitimacy through doctors' use of it for scientific purposes.

Particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, photography assumes an expansive role for physicians both because of medicine's desire for an objective view of the body and because of improvements in the speed and sensitivity of photographic processes. Medicine's attempts to define itself were centered largely on the aspiration to be seen as scientific. The privileged mode of viewing in science at the time was objectivity – principally, that kind of objectivity that

was “guaranteed” by machine forms of vision. Previously, medicine’s attempts at objectivity were confounded by the nature of its subject: the human body. The body, in order to function as a unit of meaning in medical discourse, needed to be “neutralized.” It needed to become unidentifiable as an individual, and instead completely identifiable as a medical object. Photography produced an object that seemed equivalent to a body without subjectivity, thus playing a crucial role in establishing medicine as a science.

Beginning with Eadweard Muybridge’s 1885 *Animal Locomotion*, the dissertation examines this extensive motion study, an example of instantaneous photography, as a formative collaboration between artists and doctors. Chapter two reviews the aesthetic and cultural biases of Dr. John Shaw Billings’s 1885 composite cranial photographs, and chapter three examines the overlap between scientific expertise and fine photography in Elizabeth Fleischmann’s turn-of-the-century x-ray photographs. Finally, I consider the collaboration of the physician and collector of historic medical photographs, Dr. Stanley Burns, with the artist, Joel-Peter Witkin, attempting to reveal the contemporary cultural currency of medical photography.