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OMG That's So Truuuuu.

Dismantling a photograph's claim to truth is a favorite pastime of photography theorists. Recently, broader conversations around truth and fact are everywhere. Leftist intellectuals, normally favoring Baudrillard's simulacrum to such pedestrian impulses as truth claiming, find themselves suddenly shouting the superiority of their facts to those claimed by the right. Indeed, normal knowledge systems are breaking down, and the photographic order has not been spared. Strangely, photography itself has played a crucial role in its own upending.

In spite of decades of fist-shaking at those who'd be so naïve as to conflate a thing with its image, to the broader public, the veracity of photography remains more or less intact. The *New York Times* associates the very word *photograph* with an implication of truth, designating images that have had any post-production as "photo-illustrations." This way, for an image deemed sufficiently believable as to be called an actual photograph, one can be sure of the basic facts, or at least those conveyable by optical means.

However, even the simplest of truths are contentious of late. Donald Trump's indifference to them is widely known. He brings new subjectivity to that which formerly felt like objective fact—that one number (the amount of people at his inauguration) is smaller than another number (the amount of people at Barack Obama's inauguration). These quantities were estimated by crowd scientists using aerial photographs. That there can be any disagreement, however misguided, on these images, which were shot from approximately the same position at the same time of day, points to the slipperiness of deriving definitive information from photographs. Oddly, Trump's refusal to believe these widely accepted conclusions make him an unlikely bedfellow for left-wing art theorists who dismiss the supremacy of photographic truth.

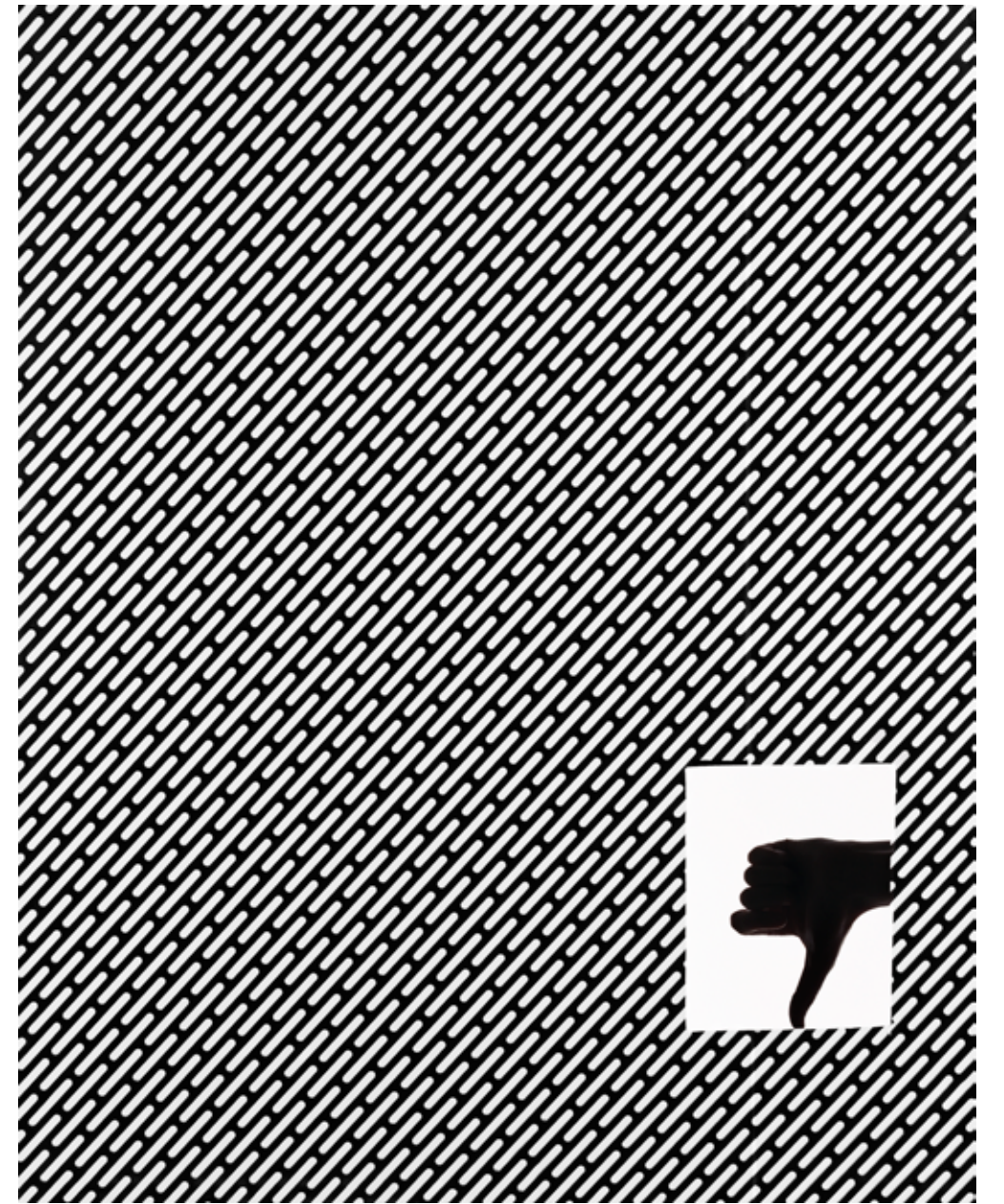
Speaking of supremacy, right-wing Internet trolls (or, in pre-digital parlance, assholes) routinely take this ambivalence about accuracy a step further by falsely linking various innocuous symbols with white supremacy. Rather than simply denying or ignoring basics truths, they gleefully, nefariously manipulate the public. Symbols that they've attempted to associate with white supremacy include milk, the polar bear emoji, the peace sign, and the rainbow flag. In February 2017, an anonymous poster to 4chan launched "Operation O-KKK" by urging, "We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy. Make fake accounts with basic white girl names and type shit like OMG that's so truuuuu." The poster goes on to add, "Bonus points if your profile pic is something related to feminism." (In addition to white supremacy, feminists—and how annoying they are—seem to be a fixation for 4chan tricksters. One suggests perpetrating the notion that clapping is "anti-feminist.") Essential to the success and insidiousness of these hoaxes is that they employ visual, and therefore photographable, signs. The manipulation of the meaning of these signs allows any image, even those with totally apolitical intent, to be weaponized. Radical fringe groups can appear to communicate wordless solidarity, even if they aren't actually doing so.

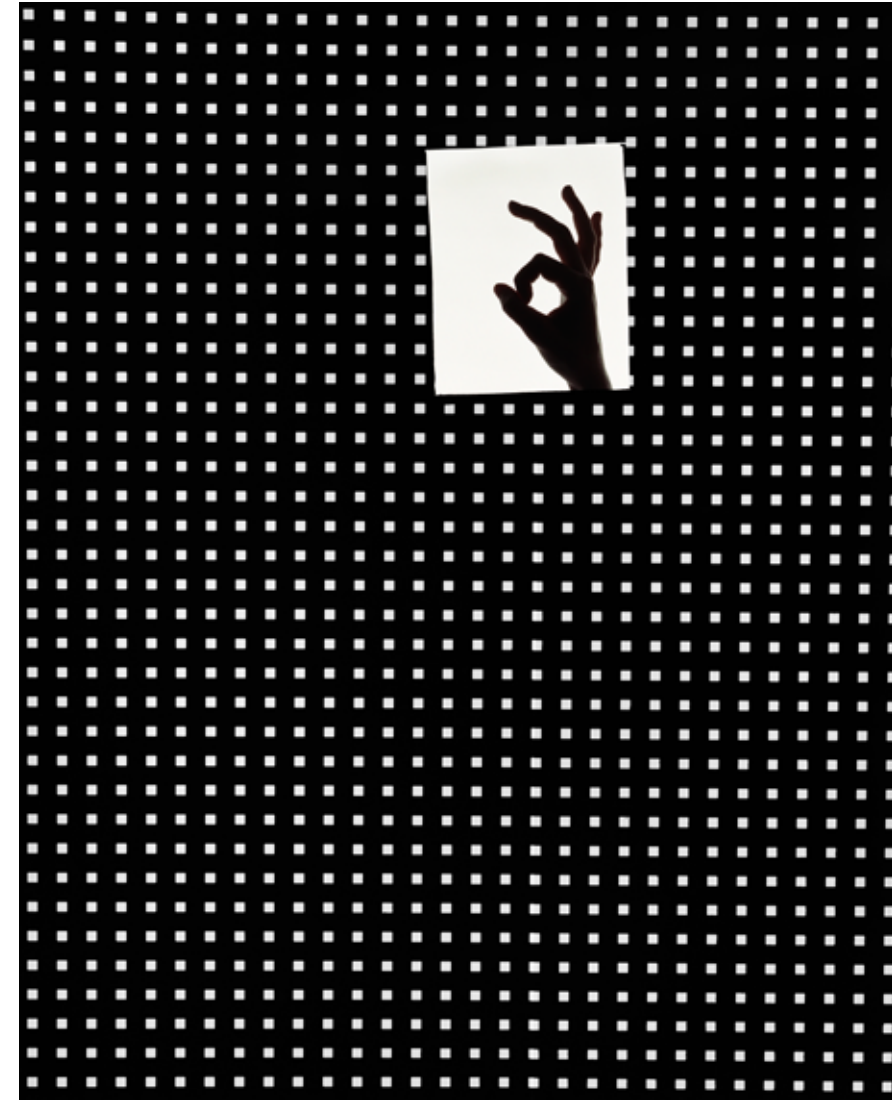
Photographers who have long internalized a suspicion of photographic veracity traffic much more comfortably in symbols. Non-literal content, like metaphor or affect, is understood to be reliant on subject position and thus is spared from problematic claims to universal truths. However, since it is culturally dependent, it can easily be misunderstood. In his essay *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*, Allan Sekula cites discourse as essential to even

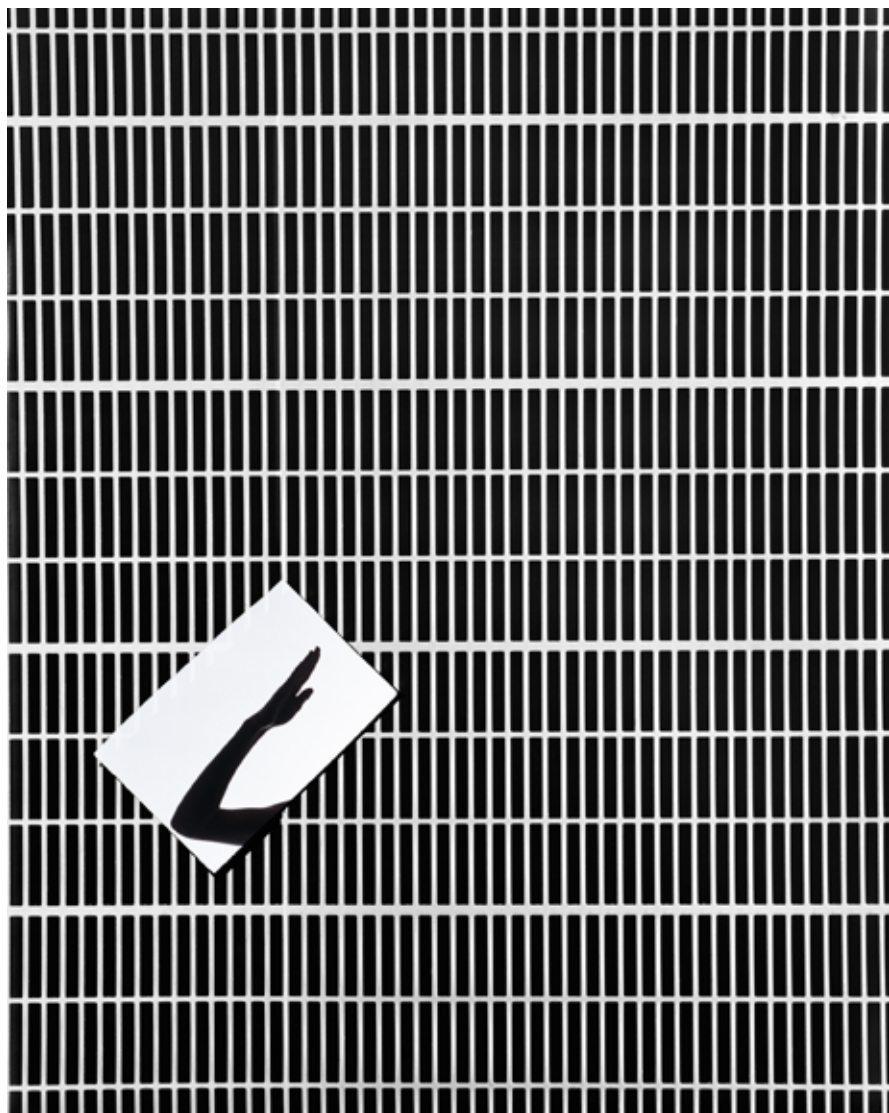
the possibility of meaning, which he defines as a "bounded area of shared expectations." The limitations that enclose this arena allow for understanding. For example, in Alfred Steiglitz' famous 1907 photograph, *The Steerage*, common knowledge about clothing indicates the presence of two distinct classes of people. This allows the photograph to stand in for something unphotographable, like an idea—in this case, economic inequality. But what to do when the arena comes unbounded? Or when expectations are not only no longer shared, but explicitly undermined? Or when misunderstanding becomes not simply a possibility, but an inevitability by design?

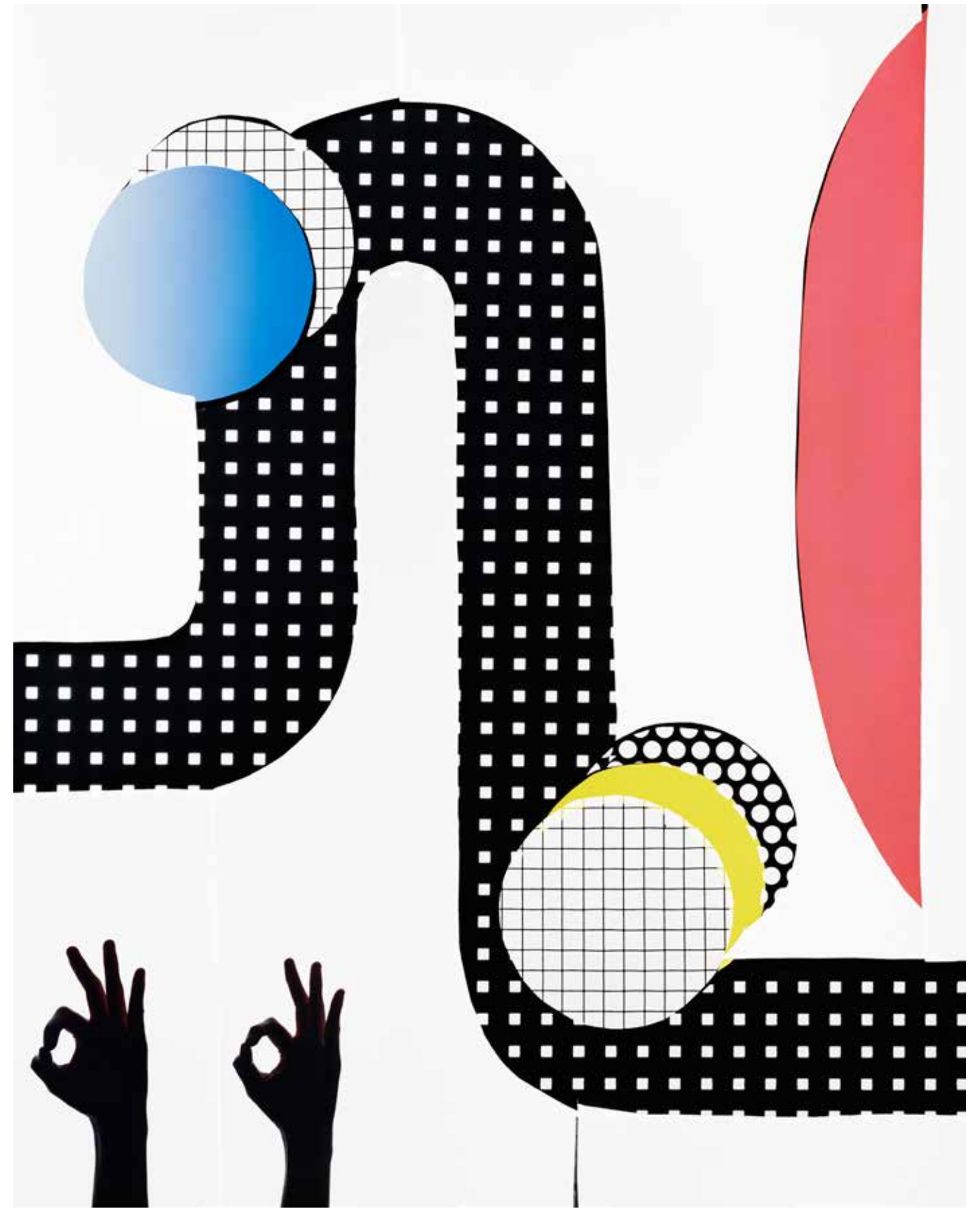
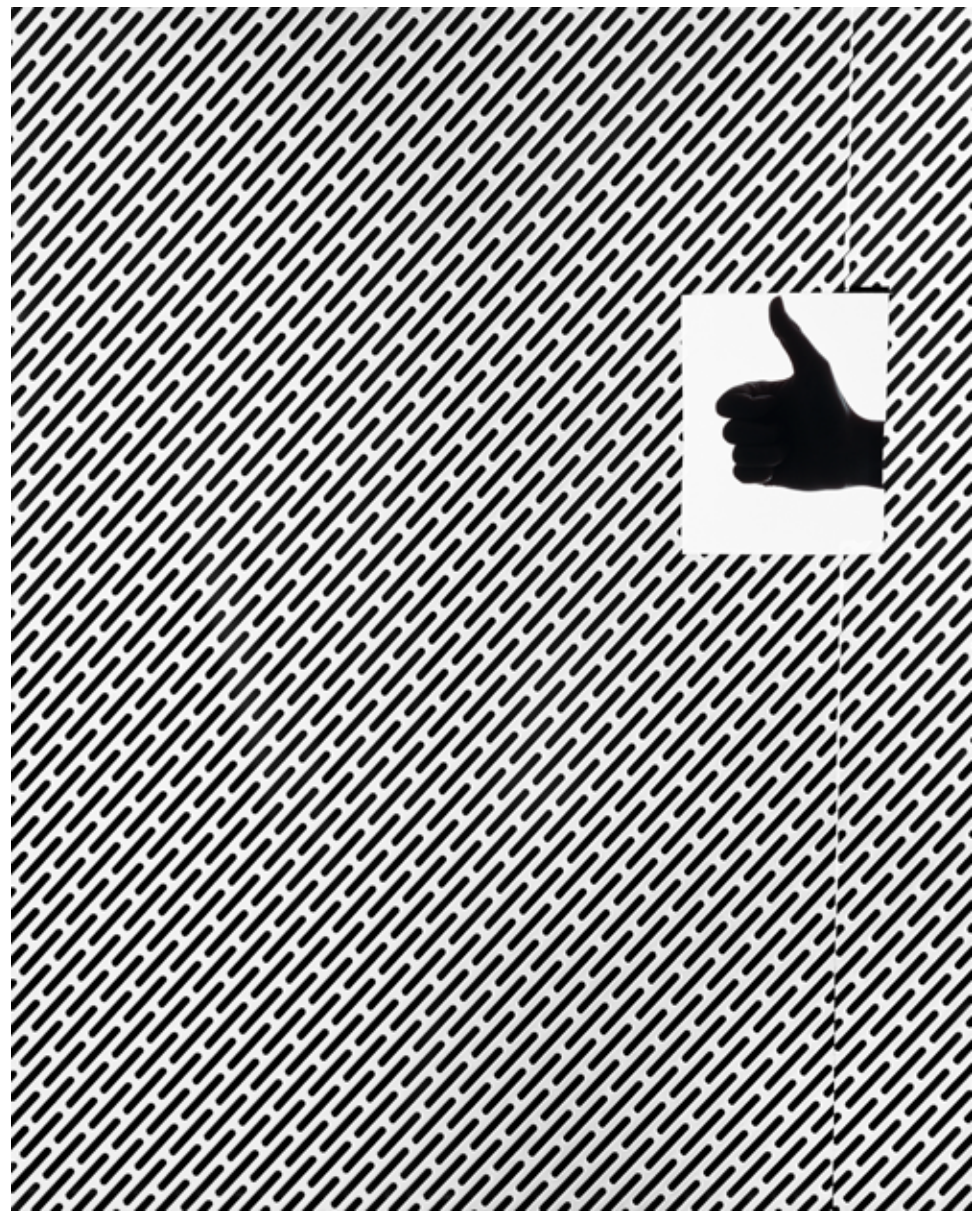
Those of us invested in the idea that photographs can have meaning must ask ourselves these questions. It seems the systems for understanding even the types of content that admit to subjective contingency are breaking down. Like a photograph's truth claim, its symbolic content is becoming tainted. Photographs are then not simply contingent on subjectivities that offer differing interpretations, they are becoming untethered from the structures that allow for meaning at all. They become utterly senseless, or aggressively meaningful, or both, or neither. Or perhaps meaning is simply quaint. For more understanding, we should all be directed to the Truth Claim (Photography)'s handy Wikipedia page, which features useful subsections entitled "Understanding of reality," "potential for manipulation," and "the continuing reality effect." Perhaps "reality" is being used here as it is in "reality television"—that is, to mean its opposite. Or if not its opposite, then whatever you want it to mean.

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