# Memory's Mirror:
# The Photographs of Jerry Spagnoli

**by A. D. Coleman**

Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre announced his invention of the daguerreotype process of photography on January 7, 1839. It had emerged from his collaboration with the recently deceased Russian-born inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, who in 1826 had produced the very first permanent photographic image, a view from the workroom in his country house in France. (The house still stands; it, and the workroom, have now been restored and opened to the public; and the image Niépce made, on a flat sheet of pewter, has survived, resting now in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.)

The process that Niépce originated, and that he and Daguerre then evolved further, generated one-of-a-kind objects produced by the action of light passing through a lens and etching images onto chemically sensitized metal plates. The version that Daguerre subsequently presented in Paris on August 19 of that year — the first public demonstration of any form of photography — replaced Niépce's pewter plate with a silver-coated one, highly polished and reflective; one had to look at it from a certain angle to see the image engraved into it by its exposure to light. These qualities led to the daguerreotype becoming known as "the mirror with a memory," a metaphor for photography that proved more durable than the process that gave it birth.

Mere weeks after Daguerre's initial announcement, on January 25, 1839, a Britisher, William Henry Fox Talbot, announced his invention of an alternative method that he called "photogenic drawing." Talbot had taken a very different approach; he captured his images on chemically sensitized sheets of paper that, waxed after development to make them transparent, he used as negatives from which to print positive versions of the image, which he called "calotypes."

For several decades these two technologies for the production of photographs coexisted and contended In Europe, in the Americas, and wherever the medium of

photography spread. Eventually, however, Talbot's process became preferred to Daguerre's, due not to aesthetic issues but to greater utility. Its creation of a negative enabled the production of multiple prints of any image, and also made possible the enlargement of the original image. Daguerreotypy became outmoded, then obsolescent, within 15 years of its public birth.

Not till the 1960s, in the U.S., did a revival of the process begin. Today it has reestablished itself as part of the vocabulary of contemporary practice. Jerry Spagnoli is one of the preeminent exponents of this form, and one of its most enthusiastic advocates and teachers. (I have witnessed him transmitting the Becquerel method of daguerreotypy, which — unlike the original technique Spagnoli himself uses — does not require dangerous chemicals and is in general much simpler to practice and to learn, to students who mastered it in a one-week intensive workshop.)

Because the daguerreotype's heyday came so early in the medium's evolution, and proved so fleeting, the vast majority of daguerreotypes describe people, places, and things from the period 1839-1870. Those of us familiar with the history of photography find it startling to encounter "dags," as they're commonly called, that address present-day subject matter, as Spagnoli's do. A sense of the anachronistic haunts and enlivens his daguerreotype imagery, whether it comes from the presence therein of familiar present-day buildings and clothing and hairstyles or his use of this form of photography to make a kind of imagery no 19th-century daguerreotypist attempted, such as close-up studies of people's eyes.

This element of time-displacement becomes greatly amplified when, as in Spagnoli's case, some of the events depicted in his images have great historic resonance: the inaguration of Barack Obama, most recently, and, most terribly, the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. Many photographs of both events got made, of course — but, so far as we know, no other daguerreotypes. That gives them a particular resonance and poignancy, positioning them immediately as irreplaceable artifacts within the medium's tradition.

Spagnoli has also addressed subjects other than these with his daguerreotypes; his body of work in that medium includes portraits, anatomical studies, and even a

group of "firecracker boxes" recording the explosions of fireworks.

One of the advantages that the daguerreotype has over Talbot's calotypes, and indeed over any form of photography that uses a negative, is its extraordinary detail. No photographic print can encode such minute data with such descriptive precision as a daguerreotype can achieve. Perhaps in reaction to that, Spagnoli produced another series, "Situations Seen from a Considerable Distance" (1994-97), which he describes as "photomicrography." For these images he isolated and vastly enlarged minute sections of negatives of black & white photographs showing people in social situations. A similarly sized segment of a daguerreotype of any of these situations, studied under a microscope, would show it in extraordinary detail. In the "Situations" images, we can see how the silver particles held in an emulsion on the photographic negative encode data transmitted through the lens, but also see how, in the gaps between those particles, the data breaks down. The mind and eye have to fill in those interstices, supplying the missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle — evidence of the extent to which all photographs interpret the world, and all response to photographs is interpretation.

Spagnoli has also worked with a pinhole camera, the very earliest form of camera, a lensless instrument in widespread use (under the Latin name *camera obscura*) prior to the invention of photography. The principle on which the camera obscura operates — that light passing through a small hole from a bright space into a darkened space will cast an inverted image on the back wall of the darkened space — was known centuries ago, to philosophers and scientists as distant from each other as Al-Hazen in Arabia and Mo Ti and Shen Kuo in China. In place of a lens through which light passes to reach the film, the pinhole camera, as its name implies, simply uses a small hole, uncovered and then covered again by the photographer to make the exposure.

Most recently, in his "Local Stories" series, Spagnoli employs an 8x10 view camera equipped with a 110-mm. lens to describe deep spaces, the majority of them urban and public but some of them rural and private. A negative this size can register a level of detail far exceeding the capacity of a small-format negative (such as that produced in a 35-mm. or 2-1/4 camera). For this project Spagnoli uses color film for his

negatives, which, in addition to its esthetic consequences, adds a layer of information to the result. And, as a connective thread between the images, he places the sun squarely in the center of each frame, so that we see each scene lit from behind. Thus the sun becomes the only constant in these photographs — the same sun, shining on separate moments and separate vistas all over the world.

Each of Spagnoli's three main projects (the scapes, the negative fragments, and the daguerreotypes) examines the act of photographic description and the way in which a given combination of tool, material, and process shapes the data embedded in a photographic image. Each yields dramatically different results. So, taken together, they constitute a demonstration of the inherent subjectivity of photography as a descriptive system, by revealing the biases built into the various versions of the technology. They also tell us that no means of production in any creative medium dies a necessary death. One or another may fall out of fashion, to lie dormant, but only awaiting the dedicated practitioner who grasps their potential, blows off the dust, and brings them back to active life.

[This is the complete text of a curatorial essay for the exhibition *Light Quartet: Themes & Variations — Kate Breakey, Connie Imboden, Jerry Spagnoli, Robert Stivers*,
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