INTRODUCTION

The name Napoleon Sarony is easy to remember once you have learned it. After you do, you realize how frequently it appears in connection with photographs and prints made in the United States during the late nineteenth century. I first encountered "Sarony" printed in florid cursive letters on the lower margin of a cabinet card in the archives of Culver Pictures in New York City. It was during a time in my life when I only dimly imagined writing a book or becoming an art historian, so I had no expectation that I would come to spend so much time thinking about the artist behind the name and all the reasons he had become unfamiliar.

Culver Pictures is a family-owned news photo service founded in the 1920s that once housed an exuberant jumble of nearly one million photographs and prints in an unassuming loft in Chelsea.[1] These were working pictures rather than fine art objects and were preserved for the purpose of being licensed as reproductions for publishers and documentary filmmakers. For this reason, materials were organized according to depicted subject matter rather than by artist, date, or medium, as they would be in a museum. It meant that one could find exquisite hand-pulled engravings or velvety platinum prints in filing folders alongside inexpensive picture postcards, newspaper scraps, and glossy press photos that still bore the marks of an editor's grease pencil. Such philosophical disregard for conventional filing systems extended from the cabinet contents to the space of the archive. Drawers labeled only "Coal," "Construction," or "Wigs" left much to the imagination in terms of what might be found

inside, and every vaguely level surface in the place was piled high with unsorted pictures. This state of disarray seemed less a matter of inertia than of the fact that so many of the historic images defied easy categorization, seeming to merit a form of cross-listing that their analogue form made impossible. Perhaps it was just that so many of the old photographs of grinning families, lonely city streets, dancing showgirls, and boatloads of soldiers waving goodbye to their sweethearts were too poignant and indescribably charming to be consigned indefinitely to the darkness of a closed drawer with an inadequate label. I imagined a well-meaning archivist regarding each image in turn and considering how to file it, before setting it back down and thinking, "Maybe not just yet."

My role at Culver was to act as an intermediary between the archive's need to adapt to the demands of the digital era and the recognition that there was something rare and irreplaceable in the unruly inclusivity of a collection of old pictures that took shape over a great many years. I was charged with selecting a few thousand of the best prints to be digitally preserved before their impending sale to a private collector. The thought, which at the time was shared by other great New York City stock photography collections, such as the Bettmann Archive, was that a digital copy could serve the purpose of reproduction as well as the original, and the sale would support the remaining collection while reducing the need to take up expensive city real estate.[2] My only working criterion was to limit my selection to photographs that were either artistically significant because of their creators or culturally significant because they illustrated the practical arcana of a previous generation's everyday life. The problem I quickly encountered, however, was that most photographs did not fit comfortably in either of these practical categories. Often the most compelling pictures were created by anonymous photographers or depicted subjects so unfamiliar that they were unlikely ever to be called out of obscurity by a future licensing request—usually both. During the years since, I have found myself haunted by the memory of images I admired, lingered over, and ultimately passed by because they did not fit my working definition of pictorial usefulness. These included publicity stills of a beautiful tightrope performer named Bird Millman, the horrifying spectacle of show horses high-diving from the steel piers of Atlantic City, interior views of smoking lounges on luxury steamships, and thousands upon thousands of cabinet card portraits. Sometimes there were simply too many images of an obviously significant subject to choose from, such as Sarah Bernhardt or suffrage marches, which left me with the agonizing task of deciding which pictures were the most characteristic and most deserving of long-term preservation. That it pained me, almost physically, to eliminate any photographs as insignificant helped solidify my vague ambition to pursue a career as an art historian. It also led me to consider how the rehearsal of historical narratives and canons built upon narrowly defined visions of artistic success result in lacunae in our understanding of the art and visual culture of the past. These lapses extend from

what archives and museums select for preservation to the questions researchers ask of these materials.

Culver Pictures was not the only archive to stockpile visual artifacts from the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, when a proliferation of new technologies and methods for circulating information caused the engines of mass media to whir into life. Its disorderly expansiveness made it a productive space in which to think about the connection between organization and cultural memory, or, as Carolyn Steedman has succinctly paraphrased Jacques Derrida, about the connection between archives as raw material and the formal academic histories that are "written out of them."[3] At Culver, the didactic categories that conventionally distinguish fine art from illustration, high from low, creative from commercial, were temporarily redrawn, reconfigured, or erased. Enduring narratives surrounding the history of photography and its canonical characters lost focus and familiarity. The work of familiar artists like Mathew Brady, Jacob Riis, Berenice Abbott, Man Ray, and Edward Steichen was scattered throughout the collection, but these well-remembered names were subsumed within a larger chaos of anonymous creative production: unsigned prints and photographs created on assignment or to suit obsolete market purposes. Resembling what James Elkins describes as the bland vastness of a "photographic surround," this mass of everyday *living pictures* preserved the practical conditions of the modern American picture industry like dust in amber—an archival manifestation of what Walter Benjamin calls the detritus or "refuse" of history, or, more appropriately in this case, the detritus of historical visual culture.[4]

The peculiar stylistic imagination of Napoleon Sarony's staged photography was among the most enduring souvenirs of my experience. His unforgettable name made him a conspicuous representative of the scores of anonymous artists populating Culver's files. But the visual qualities of Sarony's work distinguished it as well. I encountered his portraits frequently as I proceeded through the drawers of photographs, coming to recognize his name and his distinctive swirling calligraphic signature only when I realized that the same artist, yet again, was responsible for a picture that caused me to pause my frenetic pace, suspend judgment, and enjoy a second look. Most of his portrait subjects—Gilded Age celebrities such as Lotta Crabtree, Lester Wallack, Frank Bangs, Adelaide Ristori, Fanny Kemble, Kate Claxton, and Clara Morris, among many others—were unknown to me at the time, so it was not personal recognition that caught my attention. Instead, I found (and find) that Sarony's portraits make their long-dead subjects seem personable, animated, and engaged with the viewer in a way that is rare in the photography of the era. More typically, the subjects of nineteenth-century photographs wear a vaguely pained expression that communicates both physical discomfort and unpracticed anxiety in front of a camera—a state of technological insecurity that is difficult for media-savvy citizens of the present day to fathom. Sarony's photographs are different. Though subjects might be dressed

in an outlandish fashion and posed in an artificial environment, they usually appear comfortable, confident, and charismatic before the lens, making them relatable even when their faces are otherwise unfamiliar.

After coming to recognize Sarony's work, I was surprised to find how difficult it was to learn anything more about it. His name is mentioned frequently in histories of Gilded Age New York, especially in accounts of theater and cultural events, where he has a Zelig-like omnipresence, but apart from one short monograph written by Ben L. Bassham in 1978, Sarony has received little scholarly attention, despite the massive volume of his output and clear influence of his portrait style during the cabinet card era.[5] If anything, these two factors—Sarony's commercial success and carefully cultivated celebrity image—have reinforced his obsolescence. When he is mentioned in textbooks on photographic history, his colorful persona and late nineteenth-century market dominance receive more attention than the qualities of his work that helped him attain this position. In essence, Napoleon Sarony and his photographs were filed away long ago under the label of commercial popular art, and that narrow definition has prevented much further attention.

But this is hardly the entire story. In fact, the central argument of this book is that Sarony's success in managing the commercial stakes of public images—as a portrait maker, a businessman, and an artistic personality—is precisely what makes his work a powerful source of insight into the shifting media conditions and altered stakes of artistic authorship that emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this respect, his career was shaped by a problem of scale that was shared by his contemporaries in all branches of cultural production: how to retain an authoritative claim over intellectual property in the face of mass media's global expansion. To understand Sarony's work solely in commercial terms is to overlook the innovative balance he struck between industrial production and individual creative recognition. Much as Sarony appeared to be at once part of the unknowable masses and a memorable individual in the files at Culver, his ability to assert individual authorship over his creations while simultaneously exploiting the expanded audience of mass culture makes him an ideal historical subject for examining the art-world issues of his time, along with supplying an important precedent for the expansive scale of new media that continues to change how fine art is valued, consumed, and circulated in the global digital era.

At the same time, there is no doubt that Sarony's photography was crafted, unapologetically, to fit the demands of nineteenth-century consumer culture. His career in photography coincided with a period of economic prosperity in the northeastern United States following the Civil War and capitalized on the popular taste for lighthearted entertainment that arose in the wake of its violent divisiveness. This cultural climate boosted the fortunes of the American theater and fostered the expansive publication of periodicals and books focused on fashion, celebrity, and humor. Sarony's efforts as a portraitist dovetailed with these thriving adjacent industries. He was best

known for producing stylish photographs of the stars of contemporary theater, dramatically posed in his studio to emulate the fictional characters they portrayed onstage. Barbara McCandless has argued that Sarony's success rested in part on his introduction of a fundamentally new business model for US photography. Rather than expand into multiple studios or market photomechanical prints as expensive luxury objects, as his predecessor Mathew Brady had done, Sarony produced photographs at industrial scale and sold them at prices consumers could easily afford.[6] His appeal to the masses was facilitated by the introduction of new technologies for producing paper photographic formats, including the carte de visite and cabinet card in the 1850s and '60s. Sarony estimated that during his three-decade career as a photographer, he made a total of two hundred thousand portraits, and that at its peak in the 1880s his studio filled orders for more than one thousand cabinet cards a day.[7] Though he is best remembered for his celebrity portraits, only around forty thousand portraits in his total catalogue depicted famous personalities—actors, authors, artists, athletes, preachers, and politicians—and were available for sale nationwide in photographic galleries and printshops or from street peddlers and mail-order dealers. The majority depicted everyday people who, moved by the celebrity pictures they saw, went to Sarony's grand studio on Union Square in the hope of acquiring a similarly glamorous image of themselves.

Previous scholars have associated the commercial expansion of photographic portraiture with a diminishment of the form's serious purpose. McCandless concludes that Brady's aspiration to make portrait photographs that would "inspire and educate" was undermined by a Gilded Age picture industry that stoked consumer preference for pictures that represented "entertainment and recreation." By courting stars instead of political leaders, Sarony gave the public what they wanted rather than what was good for them, setting up a fundamental distinction between pre- and postwar photography in the United States based on character versus celebrity. "Brady's portraits showed the American public the noble expression to be emulated," says McCandless, while "Sarony's demonstrated that not only actors but anyone could imitate those noble and animated expressions."[8] Though McCandless is hardly alone in taking a dim view of Gilded Age consumer taste, the judgment distracts us from more significant cultural phenomena latent in the emergence of media celebrity.

Napoleon Sarony's Living Pictures proposes instead that the market changes surrounding photography in the late nineteenth century heralded a radical shift in the function of portraiture at the dawn of the mass media era, which introduced new models of photographic authorship and more expressive possibilities for subjects. Rather than make portraits as an accessory to a distinguished biography, Sarony's theatrical approach gleefully embraced the possibility that photography could reshape reality rather than merely reflect it. Antebellum portraits had been created for a visual culture steeped in phrenology and physiognomy, and their visual conventions supported

the belief that external appearances were an accurate register of internal character. By the late nineteenth century, modern notions of personality had begun to emerge, and in Sarony's studio, staged poses and settings were transformed into a set of expressive tools that suggested that it was not the quirks of physical fate and heredity that determined the limits of social renown, but how tastefully those innate characteristics could be displayed. This is not to say that Sarony's studio was significantly more enlightened or inclusive than those of his contemporaries; his clientele was predominantly white and relatively wealthy. Yet expanding the visual language of photographic portraiture allowed the conventional markers of identity to be assigned along a more open set of creative categories than previous portrait practices had permitted. For this reason, the late nineteenth-century studio era represents an important point of transition between the rigid professional formulas of the daguerreotype era and the popular access of the Kodak revolution, along with a growing conviction that natural appearances were not a rigid metric of internal personal character but could be improved upon through the application of artistic taste.[9]

Sarony had a passion and a gift for self-promotion, and he employed the same tactics used in his celebrity portraits to fashion an indelible artistic brand for himself. In the 1860s, he used photographic self-portraiture to reinvent his public and professional image, disguising his small stature and working-class immigrant background by picturing himself costumed as a fur-clad explorer or a Dutch Old Master in a ruff and velvet cap. Even at a time when it was common for artists to cultivate grand personae that appealed to the "media-made theater" of popular attention, as Sarah Burns described it, Sarony was unusually invested in projecting a spectacular public image.[10] He regularly appeared on the streets of New York City wearing a red-tasseled fez or dressed in a military uniform of his own design. Though this cartoonish flamboyance (like Sarony's commercial empire) later distracted attention from his weightier artistic accomplishments, it contributed significantly to growing popular acceptance of photography as an art form during the late nineteenth century. Sarony's larger-than-life persona aligned the social role of the photographer with contemporary notions of the bohemian artistic type. Moreover, it reinforced Sarony's individual creative participation in the photographic process at a time when the medium remained widely perceived as an autonomous form of mechanical reproduction. More than being a simple bid for fame, Sarony's insistence on personal recognition was a crucial strategy for seizing authorial control within a system of early mass visual culture that rendered many producers anonymous. His collaboration with famous subjects furthered this goal and was at times nakedly transactional. He was known to pay his celebrity sitters for the exclusive right to take their portraits, a fact that received considerable press coverage and directed further attention to the studio; he once paid Sarah Bernhardt $1,500 and Lillie Langtry $5,000, astronomical sums at the time.[11] These photographic monopolies were rarely honored for long,

but in addition to garnering publicity and profit, the brokered agreements served the purpose of clarifying copyright control over the portraits—a fact that was of crucial importance to the landmark 1884 US Supreme Court case *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company v. Sarony*, which established a precedent that gave photography legal recognition as a creative art. Being known, being famous, being visible in the context of mass culture was becoming an increasingly valuable commodity, and Sarony's aptitude for fashioning public images, or creating "living pictures," as he summed up his aesthetic ideal, was simultaneously good for business and a distinctive style of portraiture. This is why Sarony's commercialism and creativity cannot be understood in isolation from each other.

If modern scholars have had trouble reconciling these two poles of Sarony's career, his Gilded Age contemporaries did not. Napoleon Sarony was not only the most famous name in American photography during the last three decades of the nineteenth century; he was also revered for introducing a new level of artistic achievement to the field of photography. Many contemporary accounts of his work are so glowing as to seem hyperbolic. Fellow photographer C. C. Langill acknowledged this fact, admitting that it was "difficult to speak of Sarony without seeming to give way to undue praise," adding that this could scarcely be avoided, in that "he was at once the leading spirit of his profession and the personification of all that is summed up in the words Bohemian and artist." Sarony's unexpected death in 1896 prompted an outpouring of emotional superlatives that made clear that his contemporaries expected a different and more lasting legacy than he was actually to enjoy. He was described as the Victor Hugo of portraiture, the Bonaparte of photography, a giant among men, the life and soul of the photographic profession, and, repeatedly, as "the father of artistic photography in America." Sarony's close colleague Benjamin J. Falk wrote that, considering "the great amount of work he did, and the elevating and far-reaching effect it had on the entire profession all over the world . . . we may rest assured that his fame is secure."[12]

Yet this of course did not turn out to be the case, and among the praise and laments that characterized most obituary tributes, only the photographer's close friend the cartoonist Thomas Nast hinted that the process of forgetting Sarony had already begun. "Thousands of people admired the photographic and other work of Napoleon Sarony, and thought him one of the most artistic men of his time. Thousands had no taste for him at all, and considered his pictures . . . just so much artificiality and 'popular prettiness.' . . . To-day he is more in danger of getting less than his deserts for the reason that photographic portraiture has progressed by leaps and bounds. Where a plate would once have been discarded as too 'vague,' too 'misty,' it is now prized as representing the quintessence of photographic beauty."[13]

When Sarony began his career as a photographer in the 1860s, crisp focus demonstrated mastery of the notoriously finicky collodion processes then in use. By the close

of the nineteenth century, however, the methods of early studio photography were becoming obsolete, and a rising generation of pictorialist photographers increasingly favored platinum prints, soft detail, and atmospheric effects. Considering how rapidly changing tastes had redefined the art of photography, Nast cautioned that the most just approach when regarding his friend's accomplishments was "to steer between those two extremes, and to value Sarony for having done intelligent, clever work when other men were commonplace." My aim in the pages that follow is to adhere to Nast's suggestion, and to reconstruct the legacy of an individual artist not to heroize or condemn but as an interpretive key for understanding what lapses in scholarly memory teach us not only about the evolution of photography in the United States, but also about how we conventionally write and remember the history of art.

SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

Beyond reevaluating the career of a single artist, *Napoleon Sarony's Living Pictures* engages the paradigm of skeptical vision that is often used to characterize the visual culture of the United States during the long nineteenth century. Scholars across academic fields have described American viewers of this period as preoccupied with decoding and deconstructing everyday appearances in the world around them.[14] Many cultural forces encouraged this impulse: rapid population growth and immigration added an unfamiliar cast of characters to urban environments; economic turbulence created intermittent class instability; the expansion of mass media opened new channels of information for describing prominent or notorious individuals; and the introduction of visual technologies such as photography, motion pictures, and X-rays demonstrated that machines were capable of seeing things the unaided human eye could not. In an environment where appearances could not be trusted to reflect facts, Enlightenment-era faith in the reliability of the senses gradually eroded. The resulting cultural anxiety can be linked to an array of historical phenomena, from restrictive rules for fashion and public comportment, to pseudosciences like phrenology and physiognomy, to the graphic design of early advertisements, to enthusiasm for illusions, trompe l'oeil paintings, and all manner of visual humbug. Deceptive images exploited the tense relationship between surface and substance and provided audiences with tools for meeting the challenges of unreliable systems of perception with modern strategies of discernment. No longer satisfied with believing their eyes, nineteenth-century viewers came to regard the world through a mechanism that Neil Harris calls the "operational aesthetic," which associated the ability to decode deceptive representations with access to high-minded and elusive forms of truth.[15]

This visual state of affairs had significant implications for the creation and consumption of art in the United States, where it seemed to map neatly onto evolving notions of national character. Wendy Bellion has described how, during the early

national period, pictorial and optical illusions confronted American viewers in the statehouse, the market, and the street, fueling "a pronounced ideological equation between vision and patriotism." Painted examples of trompe l'oeil were engineered at once to fool the eye and to "undeceive" their viewers by encapsulating the conditions for their own detection. This process was thoroughly bound up with matters of self and subjectivity, since the very possibility of becoming undeceived demonstrated "hope of retaining agency in a world that seemed to be awash with forgers, counterfeiters, plagiarists, conspirators, imposters and demagogues."[16] Examining related visual phenomena in the late nineteenth century, Michael Leja has argued that navigating the treacheries of visual culture prepared American audiences for the formal challenges of modernism by encouraging a mode of art reception rooted in critical detachment. The hoaxes and deceptions that filled everyday experience, in the form of misleading advertisements, amusement park illusions, and even painted constructions of realism, required that audiences look beyond surface appearances and regard their environment with suspicion as the source of misleading (if sometimes entertaining) detail. Leja writes that accepting and internalizing this critical skepticism was "part of the process of becoming a modern subject able to function in the modern world. A modern self, knowing well the perils presented to modern vision, looked askance."[17] The ability to debunk illusion countered the seductions of clever visual effects with rational thought, a form of mastery that appeared fundamental to visual experience in the United States during the long nineteenth century.

At the same time, skeptical vision can be difficult to reconcile with the abundant modes of cultural production that unabashedly embraced the immersive pleasures of fantasy—dramatic spectacles, costume balls, *tableaux vivants*, anthropomorphic paintings, or, most relevant to this study, public role playing and theatrical portraiture, which paradoxically claimed to express truth despite having obvious roots in fiction. These cultural forms permeated the world of legitimate art making in the late nineteenth-century United States and were fundamental to the ways in which artists publicly positioned themselves as sophisticated, cosmopolitan tastemakers. Though these types of entertainment and dramatic play may also have functioned as opportunities for deductive reasoning, they represent a joyful abandonment of reality that is not fully explained by skepticism alone.

Rather than focus on how visual illusions were penetrated and debunked, this book explores the productive ways in which US artists and viewers inhabited and indulged them as *living pictures*, which provided strategic shelter and new ways of making meaning within the shifting proliferation of influences, consumer possibilities, and cultural hierarchies that emerged from global nineteenth-century experience. In the parlance of Sarony's time, living pictures connoted several vivid modes of representation, from dramatic staged portraiture to the performance of *tableaux vivants* and the early display of motion pictures, all of which exploited perceptual uncertainty

between representation and realism. I propose to extend the term further, to describe the mannered mode of self-performance characteristic of late nineteenth-century artists, their enthusiasm for constructing "artistic atmosphere" in studio interiors or on the dramatic stage, role playing in portraiture, and the eager acceptance of representational ambiguity that informed contemporary viewing practices. I argue that Gilded Age audiences, in addition to decoding, disassembling, and digesting unreliable visual experiences, genuinely relished the immersive pleasures that visual illusion made possible, and, moreover, that the higher truths that artists and viewers sought were not exclusively bound up in demystifying art but were also used to transcend or alter lived reality. What Sarony's theatrical portraiture makes clear is that in addition to training viewers to look askance, the artifice and illusion of nineteenth-century visual culture also provided powerful new strategies for self-transformation and personal expression. By embedding dramatic role play in the formal language of everyday public images, these photographic fantasies activated the flip side of visual skepticism, rewarding not only the critical identification of deception but also, and equally, the willing suspension of disbelief.

MEDIATED PERFORMANCE

Celebrity culture was another strategy for self-determination that was born of late nineteenth-century media expansion. As a consumer practice and representational strategy, it represented a point of contact between the individual and the mass, either by allowing virtual connection with a famous individual through a mass-produced image or by suggesting a framework through which to attain similar visibility. In both cases, celebrity culture confirmed the persistence of personal agency within the expansive field of mass culture as a means of communicating with and being known to a global audience. The medium of photography was uniquely suited to support this expanded scope of representation. Capable of industrial reproduction yet anchored by a single point of origin in time and social circumstance—what Derrida has called the "photographic event" and Ariella Azoulay, the "photographic encounter"—its characteristic dimensions are analogous to individual experience in the face of mass culture.[18] This made photography, and particularly photographic portraiture, a prime location for testing the changing boundaries of public visibility at the dawn of the information age, and for formulating new aesthetic strategies to meet the challenges this shift in scale posed for traditional modes of representation. Sarony had a manifold investment in the production of public images. In his work as a printmaker and photographer, he aimed for broad popular appeal and the largest possible audience. His mass-produced portraits fueled the fame of well-known subjects and helped make individuals like Oscar Wilde and Maud Branscombe, who were not well known before he photographed them, into stars. Sarony also deployed his own recognizable public image

as an artistic branding system, using its visibility to reinforce his status as the singular author of mass-reproduced work. For all these reasons, understanding the mechanisms of celebrity in the Gilded Age United States is crucial to appreciating both Sarony's individual creative decisions and the changing stakes of photographic portraiture for the subjects and consumers of his work.

Of course, portraiture and fame have a long shared history that stretches back far before the advent of photography. From the colossal statuary of Egyptian pharaohs to the imperial profiles on Greek and Roman coins, portrait images have served for millennia as powerful tools of personal propaganda and publicity, allowing individuals to reinforce their influence by making themselves "known" to populations unlikely ever to meet them in the flesh. Celebrity, however, though related to fame, is a modern phenomenon that is closely tied to the emergence of mass media and the commercial consumption of images and information. If fame is a system for expressing power, celebrity can be a means of acquiring it through the successful introduction of public images to a consumer marketplace.

The link between celebrity and mechanical reproduction has helped shape an enduring impression of celebrity as an autonomous force generated by commercial and capitalist forces.[19] Daniel Boorstin, for instance, attributes the emergence of celebrity to a revolution in nineteenth-century image reproduction that allowed for the large-scale dissemination of what he calls "pseudo-realities"—affordable printed portraits, books, caricatures, pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines—that created a public taste for news and entertainment by making famous individuals a source of conversation and speculation. Regarding such consumer appetites as frivolous, he has famously quipped that "a celebrity is a person known for his well-knownness," and that unlike the great heroes of the past, who were "self-made" by virtue of great deeds and accomplishments, "celebrities are made by the media."[20] Theodor Adorno and other critics similarly present celebrity as a taste imposed upon hapless consumers by the mechanisms of an autonomous "culture industry."[21]

This view of "the media" as a faceless star-maker is out of step with what digital social media has revealed about the genuine economic and cultural influence that individuals can exercise through public visibility. From a historical perspective, too, it overlooks the agency of media producers and consumers, and also the efforts of celebrities themselves to exert control over their media-made alter egos, sometimes at great professional cost.[22] Without denying the systemic inequalities inherent in the politics of visibility, particularly in the nineteenth-century United States, this book proposes that the consumer market for public images—including celebrity pictures and endorsements, as well as the flood of portraiture that accompanied the introduction of paper photographic formats such as cartes de visite and cabinet cards—created significant opportunities for reinventing the formulas through which identity was visualized, constructed, and consumed. Whereas fame, in its traditional historical

form, functioned as an expression of untouchable power, celebrity's symbiotic connection to the marketplace extended a share of partial ownership to consumers, who might buy into an individual's public image and, in the process, play a role in defining and amplifying its importance. Recent scholarship by Sharon Marcus supports this sense of consumer empowerment, noting that if celebrity were simply a media-made phenomenon, publicity would be all that was required to achieve it. Instead, Marcus reenvisions traditional models of celebrity as a tripartite system of power in which publics, media producers, and stars all compete and cooperate to assign value and meaning to famous subjects. Within this determinative structure, the division of responsibility is fluidly distributed, so that at varying times any one of the three groups might take a turn to "create, spread, and interpret artful representations of famous people and their followers."[23] What is significant about this model for Sarony's history is that it repositions mass media as a communication platform rather than an autonomous technological force, with celebrity being a status achieved through the successful public transmission across that platform of personal qualities perceived as desirable, attention-worthy, or both. Though such platforms might be steered by corporate interests in directions that defy public trust, they can similarly be harnessed as unofficial vehicles for collective cognition through which the meaning of publicly circulated images and information can be collaboratively defined. Rather than alienating consumers from the means of production, globalized communication systems such as online social media, or the products of the nineteenth-century picture industry, amplify the volume of transmission and open access for a wider swath of participants to employ the equipment of mass media as a personal megaphone.

Glimmers of this network dynamic are evident in the earliest descriptions of nineteenth-century viewers interacting with portraits in the galleries of photographic studios, demonstrating that the collective definition of public images may drive celebrity, but it does not function only on this scale. Photographic galleries sprang up in American cities during the 1840s and '50s, and early visitors were quickly enchanted by the possibility of comparative social spectatorship. In 1846, Walt Whitman described the uncanny sensation of confronting the likenesses of hundreds of his fellow Americans displayed in rows on the walls of the daguerreotypist John Plumbe's gallery. Transfixed by the idea that each picture captured a single moment in the unknowable life of a stranger, Whitman became preoccupied with imaginatively restoring these pieces of reality to a longer narrative thread. Spotting a young bride in her wedding gown, he speculated on the moments before and after the photograph was taken, wondering if her new husband had accompanied her to the studio and what had happened next—did the couple love each other still? "What tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech! How romance then, would be infinitely outdone by fact."[24] Seeing the portrait photograph sparked a desire to know more about its depicted subject, and though he recognized the factual incompleteness of the image (a quality Allan

Sekula might have described as the photograph's "contingent" sense of meaning), its inability to speak for itself invited a romantic form of speculative dialogue—a new way for the individual to be known as the subject of imaginative reinvention by an observer like Whitman, or any other visitor to the public realm of the portrait gallery.

The romance of portrait photography made studio galleries popular sources of urban spectacle for many nineteenth-century Americans. Drawn to the type of virtual social encounter Whitman describes, viewers learned how to "read" an individual's role in a larger social drama through pictorial cues like pose and costume. Alan Trachtenberg emphasized the inherent performativity of this experience when he wrote that antebellum photographic galleries functioned less as museums for passive spectatorship than as what he called a "theater of desire," where viewers could evaluate portraits of their contemporaries and imagine themselves assuming the roles they saw depicted. To Trachtenberg, this made the antebellum photographic studio "a new kind of city place devoted to performance: the making of oneself over into a social image."[25] This transformation flattened the complex realities of individual identity into easily legible coded markers based on period-specific perceptions of class, gender, and ethnic type. Andrea Volpe argues that photography reshaped the mechanisms of class formation in the early nineteenth-century United States by supplying a durable template for visualizing bodily propriety and respectability. By performing a photographic role before the camera, antebellum subjects cast themselves in molds of uniform social convention, resulting in self-images that simultaneously supplied "proof" of social position and "evidence of the cultural production of such claims."[26]

Building on the concept of the portrait studio as a "theater of desire," this book argues that photography came to supply individuals not only with strategies for fitting in but also with an increasingly acceptable platform for standing out. While the basic mechanisms of identity formation persisted into the late nineteenth century, the allowable cast of characters expanded radically as viewers gained experience being subjects and consumers of social images (stars and publics, in Marcus's model). Seeing in multiple, as Whitman did, across rows of similar portraits encouraged recognition of the poses, costumes, and settings used to construct conventional representations of identity. It also illustrated how easily these compositional elements could be appropriated and rearranged. They could be used to depict the niceties of middle-class convention, or they could be employed more dramatically to recast individual reality into something more artistic, glamorous, and refined than everyday appearances allowed. This was the animating dynamic of the Sarony studio, where photographic performance and celebrity were founding principles and the photographer's grand public image suggested that he could similarly enhance the mystique of even ordinary clientele.

One source of inspiration for the changing form of American portrait photography was the contemporary dramatic realism movement, which supplied a visual language and conceptual framework for envisioning public-facing social images.

Dramatic realism was a global phenomenon during the late nineteenth century, with diverse manifestations, but in the United States, it assumed a distinctly visual valence. Theater historian Brenda Murphy writes that European theaters pursued sociological or content-driven strategies for enhancing the perceived authenticity of staged productions—incorporating common speech dialogue and increasingly class-diverse characters. In the United States, by contrast, dramatic realism "focused chiefly on the *representation* of that subject matter, the creation of an illusion of reality in the text and on the stage by playwright, actors, director and producer."[27] For the first internationally renowned generation of US theatrical producers—Edward Harrigan, Augustin Daly, David Belasco, and Steele MacKaye—this took the form of technologically innovative stagecraft: constructing working sawmills, full-sized Pullman cars, and Roman amphitheaters onstage as the settings for dramatic spectaculars. These feats of engineering and invention were, in a sense, acts of reproduction that staged the real world inhabited by audiences within the fictive space of performance.[28] The construction of persuasively staged illusion yielded a synthesis of antithetical qualities—performance and truth, fabrication and authenticity—that were adapted into the studio methods and elaborately constructed settings used by Gilded Age portrait photographers.

Principles drawn from dramatic realism also supplied a framework for reading and representing a more idiosyncratic cast of character types, and a significant pre-psychological model for understanding social performance and personality. The question of how and under what conditions the art of acting represented expressive truth was the subject of lively debate in the 1880s. Producers and actors advocated for so-called natural acting techniques that would replace the rote gestures of classical melodrama with more personal, individualized performance styles. The central question was how a realistic mode of performance could be achieved. Denis Diderot had framed this problem as the essential paradox of acting, and in 1883 his *Paradoxe sur la comédien* (1830) was translated into English for the first time, introducing American and British audiences to his theory that an actor must efface his own feelings in order to approach the playwright's fictional characters as an intellectual exercise. Five years later, the British critic William Archer published *Masks or Faces? A Study in the Psychology of Acting* as a rebuttal of Diderot's *Paradoxe*. Drawing upon Charles Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Archer argued that because emotional expression is not subject to conscious control, a performance is realistic only when an actor erases the distance between himself and his character so that the emotions expressed onstage represent natural feeling—a model of emotion that was cited by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and later also contributed to Konstantin Stanislavski's system of method acting.[29]

Popular audiences absorbed ideas about contemporary performance in the theater and also through a series of heated open letters exchanged among actors Constant Coquelin, Sir Henry Irving, and Dion Boucicault that was followed by thousands of

readers in 1881–82 and became a touchstone for understanding expressive acts on and off the stage.[30] Weighing in on whether dynamic performance resided in the head or the heart, Sarah Bernhardt suggested that personal magnetism also had something to do with it. She noted that her aim when performing the roles of Phaedra, Cleopatra, or Camille, or any of the other characters she famously portrayed onstage, was to fuse herself with these fictional identities in such a way that audiences never forgot that it was the great actress Bernhardt playing a part. Describing her approach as the formation of a dramatic "personage," Bernhardt asserted that such exaggerated self-performance was the only appropriate scale for reproducing reality to suit the "theatrical optics" of a public stage, and the best way to ensure that the audience perceived it accurately.[31]

For Sarony and his contemporaries, this logic, and the debates surrounding dramatic realism, supplied significant conceptual models for constructing public images on the photographic stage. The connection between Gilded Age portrait studios and theatrical practice also allowed leniency in social decorum that was not permitted under other circumstances. Within the world of theater, and the contained context of staged performance, the strict codes that normally governed public comportment could be safely relaxed or ignored, and forms of social transgression, eccentric dress, and expressive behavior that were considered unacceptable elsewhere might temporarily be tolerated or even encouraged. Celebrity subjects and elaborate staging practices enhanced the resemblance between photography and the theater so that by the late nineteenth century, portrait studios operated similarly as spaces of exception from everyday behavior. Unlike its antebellum counterpart, the Gilded Age "theater of desire" was not limited to modest acts of social aspiration, nor did it operate precisely like legitimate theater. Mikhail Bakhtin conveys a related distinction in his notion of "footlights," which he considered the most important architectonic difference between drama and carnival, since they were present in spectated theatrical events but absent in participatory modes of performance, where distinctions between actor and audience were elided. In essence, the photographic studio of the late nineteenth century operated as a space for performance "without footlights." It had the effect of temporarily redrawing the boundaries between public and private space and the behaviors typically confined to each, allowing a carnivalesque portrait style that blended fact and fiction into "an ideal and at the same time real type of communication, impossible in ordinary life."[32] Through the pretense of playacting and costumed role-play, photographic subjects could assume unconventional characters and experiment with alternate modes of identity, allowing behaviors that were normally acceptable only in the context of private spaces or dramatic performance to creep into public visibility through the extended reach of the photographic stage.

The problems of negotiating new media that prompted Sarony and his peers to seek novel strategies of self-representation make this chapter of photographic history

a useful prequel to the flourishing of online public images today, and to the practices of performance and staging in the work of contemporary artists such as Samuel Fosso, Yasumasa Morimura, Cindy Sherman, Zanele Muholi, Rodney Graham, and Stephanie Syjuco (to name just a few). If anything, the vast platform of cyberspace makes social photography an even more important tool for testing the limits of representational reality through what Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls "parafictions," constructed visualizations of fantasy that keep one foot planted firmly "in the field of the real."[33] Harnessing photographic realism to picture circumstances and identities not yet realized or given regular visibility in the everyday world strengthens the medium's capacity to serve as a platform for individual expression and cultural critique. By opening this imaginative potential for broader public use, Sarony and his "living pictures" anticipated the use of photography as a tool for public performance, demonstrating that the tension between the medium's dueling capacities for illusion and truth weave a persistent thread through its history.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book began with a simple question raised by a chance encounter with a photographer in an archive: Who was Napoleon Sarony? Over time, however, I came to find the processes that contributed to Sarony's present-day obscurity just as interesting as those that made him a celebrity in his lifetime. By singling him out for recovery, I do not mean to assert that his professional experiences were unique, however. In fact, I believe the opposite to be true, and this is to some extent the point. Sarony, with his memorable name, provided me with a point of entry to a realm of nineteenth-century artistic experience that would be difficult to access without an individual guide—the world of early mass visual culture, which was populated by artists working in the "new media" of the day: lithography, photography, and mass-reproduced illustration. Their work comprises the popular and public images that crowd the margins of nineteenth-century art history and, like most of the materials I encountered at Culver Pictures, are often not distinguished by a famous author or timeless subject to give them obvious significance. With that in mind, I conceived of this book as an experimental variation on a traditional monograph, one that explores what the form can do as representative microhistory when divorced from obligatory triumphalism and opened to the reality that most artistic careers fail to achieve canonical status yet still carry genuine weight and meaning.[34] Sarony's individual example illuminates the broader experience of artists who did not make it to the top, either in their own day or posthumously, but instead struggled through the indignity of a career stuck in the middle. Their experiences and failures offer insight into the circumstances that elevated their more fortunate peers and built the foundation for the modern art world of the twentieth century.

Shortly before Sarony's death in 1896, the contents of the grand studio on Union Square that had been his professional home for twenty years were sold at auction, and his life's work of hundreds of thousands of negatives disappeared during the following decades. Much of my research involved recovering the scattered and lost pieces of his archive. This book draws together previously unexamined images, archival materials, and unpublished photographs to reveal a more complete picture of his contributions to photography than has ever previously been published. At the same time, my goal has been not simply to fill a Sarony-shaped hole in art history but rather to build a meaningful case for the broader significance of his experiences. Consequently, each chapter of the book places an aspect of the photographer's career in context, demonstrating the ways in which he engaged in and contributed to the history of American art and photography. My first chapter offers an introduction to Sarony's life and career through a self-portrait he made around 1875 that depicts him standing in a furious snowstorm that was staged inside his studio. Sarony used self-portraiture to reinvent himself personally and professionally during the 1860s, and similar portraits were common during the late nineteenth century, using painted canvas backdrops, courtly poses, and theatrical props. Though described as artistic by original observers, the stagey pretense of this style of portraiture makes it hard to evaluate today. By reinserting these works into the discursive framework of period debate surrounding photographic realism, I demonstrate the strategic importance of staged photography as an artistic gesture at a moment when photographers were breaking free from the legacy of mechanical autonomy that defined the earliest applications of the medium.

This discussion sets the stage for chapter 2, which explores how Sarony drew from contemporary theatrical practice to help his clients invent captivating public images of their own. Beginning with Sarony's first career-making portrait series—of the notorious actress Adah Isaacs Menken—I demonstrate how Sarony's approach to portraiture revolutionized photographic practice in the United States by transforming the studio into a stage for collaborative experimentation in the art of making public images. Rather than adhere to existing frameworks for representing mainstream middle-class identity and normative gender identities, Sarony drew upon staging conventions of period theater—pose, costume, studio settings, and props—to redefine portraiture for a mass consumer market. Through his directorial approach to photographic sessions, he encouraged his subjects, whether actors or not, to perform for the camera—documenting multifaceted public images that contributed to the mounting tide of consumer culture while at the same time modeling a novel form of mediated individuality.

Chapter 3 steps back in time to the early nineteenth century and explores how Sarony's early career as a producer of popular prints sparked his enduring concern with establishing and maintaining his artistic authority. Tracing Sarony's progress through the professional ranks of the US lithographic industry, I establish how this

commercial avenue of production was related to but separate from the fine arts in terms of the legal and honorific mechanisms that allowed artists to take credit for their work. Though few textual records have survived to illuminate the workings of this industry, the prints themselves can provide insight about their reception and perceived cultural use among their original viewers. Pursuing this logic, I propose that acts of copying and pictorial translation, or what I call "adaptive reuse," register the ideas communicated through a visual network, signaling that images created in one place were seen and appreciated in another. In this way, I suggest that the reproducibility of print constructed a discursive network through which like-minded professionals were able to communicate ideas and visual information about art.

Chapter 4 considers how Sarony used his famous signature logo to claim authorship of his photography and mobilize his artistic persona. This flourishing calligraphic logo not only marked the exterior of his Union Square studio in gilded letters one story high but was printed on the cardboard mount of every photograph he produced. In the late 1890s, Joseph Benson Gilder, editor of the magazine the *Critic*, wrote that among the many innovations of Sarony's career, "nothing, perhaps, was more striking than the way in which he wrote his name on his photographs. That signature (his trademark) . . . was imitated by half the photographers in the land."[35] I argue that the appeal of Sarony's signature came not simply from its originality as an artistic logo but also from its assertion of the artist's touch on a mass-produced photographic image, an act of pairing autograph and photograph that Derrida later described as restoring singularity and authenticity to the reproducible photographic event.[36] At once mass-produced and evocative of personal touch, Sarony's printed autograph was emblematic of a type of media celebrity new to the late nineteenth-century United States, and of a mounting association between public identity, personal mark making, and the legal authentication of intellectual property. During the 1870s and '80s, reproductions of handwritten testimonials by famous individuals were common features in printed advertisements. Photographic reproduction of handwriting was introduced as evidence in criminal proceedings, and handwriting analysis and autograph collecting emerged as faddish popular pastimes. In 1883, Samuel Clemens attempted unsuccessfully to trademark the autograph of his alter ego Mark Twain, a request that baffled contemporary legal experts since it was deemed impossible to assign personal rights to a fictional person—however celebrated he might be as an author.[37] For Sarony, the gesture took on lasting significance with the 1884 Supreme Court copyright case *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company v. Sarony*, which allowed him to assert intellectual property rights over his portraits of Oscar Wilde and created a legal precedent for the recognition of photography as a form of fine art.[38]

Chapter 5 situates these changes in the larger context of the American art world, exploring how the emergence of mass media and consumer culture aligned to reshape the material context for making and selling fine art in the United States during the

last decades of the nineteenth century. Like his close friend and fellow Tile Club member William Merritt Chase, Sarony lavishly ornamented his public studio with objects of fine art and with a proliferation of beautiful things that he collected obsessively from auction sales—arms and armament, statues of Buddha, a Russian sleigh, medieval footwear, Mesoamerican art, an Egyptian mummy, and, famously, a taxidermied crocodile that he suspended from the gallery's ceiling. These objects occasionally found their way into the portraits taken in his studio, where they complicated the representational fiction of his staged images in fascinating ways. A portrait subject might, for example, be photographed examining an oil painting by Eastman Johnson, Paul Marny, or Thomas Moran while posed against a canvas backdrop that was painted to resemble Sarony's studio. These pictures within pictures dramatized the act of art appreciation, demonstrating the mass appeal of cosmopolitanism in the wake of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition and presenting a clever visual argument for elevated consideration of photography. By demonstrating the capacity of his work to contain, consume, and compete with traditional fine art media, Sarony's "fortified" photographic compositions prompted viewers to exercise discernment in separating one scale of representational reality from another.[39] Deconstructing the surrounding spaces of Sarony's portraits also provides valuable historical insight into the adjacent industries that blossomed around the US photographic industry during the 1870s and '80s, including supporting figures such as Lafayette W. Seavey, a specialty scenic painter of immense ambition who described himself as the "power behind the throne" of many prominent US photographers.[40]

The book's final chapter provides a coda to Sarony's story, considering how new types of media literacy emerged alongside motion pictures and new, more sophisticated methods of photomechanical reproduction dramatically altered both the media landscape and his artistic legacy in the decade preceding his death. I begin by analyzing the ambitious but ill-fated art periodical *Sarony's Living Pictures*, which proved to be the final project of Sarony's career. Published in 1894–95, the magazine was a bound portfolio of color photogravures that reproduced heavily retouched tableau photographs. Although these densely layered, hybrid media artworks have conventionally been dismissed as kitsch, their publication was motivated in part by a desire to experiment with the modern, widely accessible new forms of hybrid media art produced by the Photochrome Engraving Company, a printing firm owned and operated by a young Alfred Stieglitz. Like Sarony, Stieglitz explored new methods of producing and circulating visual images through photomechanical technologies and color printing. Though Stieglitz, of course, moved on to more successful strategies for achieving his goals, the brief interaction of these two fathers of American artistic photography demonstrate the medium's messy, intermedial origins and the overlooked figures who contributed to its modern form.