Museum exhibitions are asking about the direction of photography in an era when cameras and lenses are optional.

By PHILIP GEFTER

At first glance, viewers of "What Is a Photograph?" opening Friday at the International Center of Photography, will not even recognize the work on the wall as photographic. There is no easily identifiable subject, no clear representational form.

"The show does not answer the question," said Carol Squiers, the show's curator. "It poses the question. It is an open question, and that's why I find this period in photography so exciting."

Ms. Squiers pointed to Traves Smalley, who cuts shapes from magazine pages and colored paper and composes them into photo collages directly on a scanner. He considers the scan the negative for the print. "He doesn't necessarily call the result a 'photograph,'" she said, but she wasn't ready to define exactly what it was.

Photography is vastly different in these early years of the 21st century, no longer the result of light exposed to film, nor necessarily lens based. As digital technology has all but replaced the chemical process, photography is now an increasingly shape-shifting medium: The iPhone, the scanner and Photoshop are yielding a daunting range of imagery, and artists mining these new technologies are making documentation of the actual world seem virtually obsolete.

"Practices have changed," said Quentin Bajac, the Museum of Modern Art's new chief curator of photography, one of four curators at major institutions who spoke of the opportunities and obstacles of their jobs at this pivotal moment — photography's identity crisis.

The shift of focus from fact to fiction, and all the gradations in between, is perhaps the largest issue in the current soul-searching underway in photography circles. Questions swirl: Can the "captured" image (taken on the street — think of the documentary work of Henri Cartier-Bresson) maintain equal footing with the "constructed" image (made in the studio or on the computer, often with ideological intention)?

Museums, for their part, are debating whether photography should remain an

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33
The Next Big Picture

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48

intelligent medium or be interpreted into a visual feast like the cinema in cer.

Art. And photography centers, too, are quickening the pace and viability of

the field by combining the high-tech tools of digital media with the

adventures of virtual reality.

"The big picture problem facing everyone who uses digital media," Mr. Krug

said, "is the shape of images.

Mr. Krug, the founder of the DePauw

University Art Museum, said the group is working on a project called "the

window," which involves creating a virtual reality environment where

people can experience art in a new way.

"We're working on a history of photography, which will benefi-

t by adding digital elements to the gallery spaces," he said.

"We're trying to use the history of photography to help people understand

how it works and how it's used," Mr. Krug said.

"We're trying to use the digital elements to make the museum experience

more engaging and fun," he added.

Mr. Krug also said the project will include a "missions" component, where

visitors can create their own photography projects.

"It's not just about seeing the art, but also about creating it," Mr. Krug

said. "We want people to be able to participate in the process of creating art.

"The Next Big Picture

"At least 90% of the images will be created by visitors," he said.

Mr. Krug said the project will be launched in early 2004 and will run for

three years.

"We're excited about the possibilities," he said."