Photographic Evidence

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According to popular accounts, Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) began his pioneering work in photography to settle a bet. Muybridge was already an established photographer of panoramas and landscapes when former California governor and race horse owner Leland Stanford hired him to prove whether all of a horse’s legs left the ground while galloping. Can photography definitively prove something too fast to see?

Muybridge’s initial image of Stanford’s horse with all four feet in the air was rejected by a California newspaper because the negative had been retouched, so the experiment was then repeated in front of a live audience. On June 11, 1878, Muybridge arranged 12 cameras along a path parallel to a race track in Palo Alto, California. The cameras were placed 21 inches apart and went off in succession. The shutters were controlled by trip wires, which were triggered by the horse’s hooves. Muybridge developed the film on site to convince the press of the authenticity of the photographs.