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# Qualifying Photography as Art, or, Is Photography All It Can Be?

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With medium specificity a passé historical concern confined chiefly to the pages of art history, it may seem prosaic and anachronistic to question the position and relative validity of a single medium—photography—within the world of contemporary art. In addition, the same question may seem patently irrelevant to those who might justifiably point out that many of the most eminent, critically lauded, and well-collected artists of the twentieth century—Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Cindy Sherman, and Andreas Gursky, to name a few—all use the camera as their primary instrument. Furthermore, the status of photography as art is rarely drawn into question, and the market currency of the medium is beyond dispute. But does it necessarily follow that the fundamental ontology of photography as a practice has been fully interrogated, understood, and integrated into the discourse of contemporary art, assuming its rightful place alongside traditional media like painting, sculpture, and drawing, as well as new media such as installation and video? In other words, does photography exist as photography in art history and criticism today? And if not, why not? Is photography—and by derivation photography criticism—all it can be?

Not surprisingly, one of the most astute theorizations of this quandary was offered—albeit obliquely—by Michael Fried in a wide-ranging essay on Thomas Demand published in 2005. Discussing Demand’s by now familiar technique of fabricating and photographing sculptural models of judiciously chosen, historically charged sites, Fried summarizes the results of the artist’s exacting enterprise as follows: “Simply put, he aims above all to replace the original scene of evidentiary traces and marks of human use—the human world in all its layeredness and compositeness—with images of sheer authorial intention, as though the very bizarreness of the fact that the scenes and objects in the photographs, despite their initial appearance of quotidian ‘reality,’ have all been constructed by the artist throws into conceptual relief the determining force (also the inscrutability, one might almost say opacity) of the intention behind it.” While seizing on a timely vernacular to capture and critique the ineffable

heterogeneity of the world has been and will likely remain the fundamental charge of the most ambitious painters and sculptors, that same world arrives in the hands of the competent photographer—assuming he or she possesses the requisite instinct for detail, composition, and topicality—as a readymade of sorts. The camera provides the language, and the world at large is a rich well of potential subjects. Fried seems keenly aware of this rather problematic dialectic, and equally keen to establish photography’s currency as a more determined, intention-laden industry than is commonly presumed.

Throughout his generally laudatory account of Demand’s achievement, Fried argues that the artist’s critical value issues directly from his resistance to the observational, documentary impulse. Demand’s concomitant embrace of a harder-won, multi-faceted process, Fried suggests, operates in arch, critical relation to the assumption that a photograph is an indexical cohort with reality. Demand’s working method interrupts this neat indexical relation, forcing the viewer to think explicitly about the intention of the maker and conjurer with an additional layer of interpretive difficulty. Fried notes that photography per se is not important to Demand, just the conclusion brought to bear on the artist’s process. Demand’s photographic practice does not direct our attention to the subject captured or the technical aspects of photography, but to the artist’s tyrannical control of his process, which ultimately brings order and conceptual coherence to the project. The ultimate referent is, therefore, not the form or content of his images, but the authorial concept. This being the case, the onus on Fried to develop a sophisticated understanding of the relationship of form to content, and of facture to ultimate effect in the photographs themselves, is somewhat mitigated, since purpose and meaning have been located so convincingly elsewhere.

In the context of the present essay it is important to cite Michael Fried, who, for many contemporary art curators, has offered a convincing and select entry point into the vast and diverse terrain of photography. Fried’s emphasis rests upon intention. For although we as an art critical community no longer use artistic intention—the most outmoded of methodologies—as the infra-logic for interpretation, we do place an implicit premium on intentionality, and we take it for granted that an object arrives in a gallery or museum saddled with some degree of authorial purpose, even if that intention does not figure vitally in the meaning of the work as enumerated by the viewer, critic, or scholar. Demand’s work is thick with explicit indices

of intention, intellectual reflection, and considered action, all of which—in a sense—mimic the minute decisions and adjustments that take place during the execution of a painting, for example; every detail, therefore, may be understood as intentional and vigorously interpreted as such. This, of course, leads to a rich critical record, but Fried's emphasis on Demand's pre-photographic processes also leads the reader further and further away from the specific objecthood of the photograph.

So what is lost in this interpretive account? Fried's essay is characteristically suggestive and fertile, but it rests on issues removed from a close analysis of photography as a specific technical practice that mediates and directs understanding. How Demand's photographic methods actually operate in the context of his conceptual scheme gets distinctly short shrift. Instead, the currency of his practice is defined by the various stages of production that precede the execution of the photographic image. In effect, it is these discrete, mappable phases that make Demand's photographs intelligible and critically potent; there is no need to look carefully at the image itself. Demand's photographs, then, achieve legibility and encourage art critical exegesis principally as a result of their non-photographic features. Demand is just one example of an artist/photographer—other obvious examples include Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall—who has achieved prominence and whose work generates interest because process and concept can be located in the work that precedes the moment a photograph is taken. The photograph is simply the incidental conclusion, the polished index of a more complex backstory to be researched and unpacked by the viewer/critic. In this sense, the photograph is not independently productive of meaning but is rather the document that records and implies the extended process behind the image.

Fried's account of Demand's work is an unusually sophisticated and provocative example of art critical writing on photography. More often, what passes for photography criticism in major art magazines discounts issues of facture and ontology entirely in favor of a descriptive mode that slyly ignores questions raised by medium. Generally speaking, the nuances of the photographic process are poorly understood in the art critical community—the present author included—and this shortfall radically limits the discourse. The effects of this situation can be measured through brief reference to the discourse surrounding painting in the twentieth century.

Through the 1960s, Clement Greenberg's Kantian understanding of the central imperatives of modernist painting remained the yardstick against which contemporary abstraction was measured. According to Greenberg, the essence of modernist painting "lay in the use of the characteristic methods of [the] disciple to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." As a result of Greenberg's position, critics and artists were compelled to evaluate the fundamental ontology of painting, a compulsion which resulted in a hermetic, highly self-reflexive discourse that bore down ruthlessly on the relationship between a given canvas and Greenberg's maxims. This contention framed the discourse around painting for at least two decades and set the stage for the Minimalists, whose principal goal was to subvert the logic of Greenberg's system through objects that relied not on the relationship between their constituent parts, but on the interaction between object and viewer. Though medium specificity is no longer a salient issue in contemporary art practice, the discourse of Greenbergian modernism, and the various dissenting positions that emerged in its wake, have provided today's critics with the language and critical tools to describe and evaluate an artist's use of media, and to apply this understanding when interpreting the way a given object makes meaning. In this sense, the inheritance of Greenbergian discourse is both obsolete and invaluable.

Unfortunately, no such model exists for evaluating photography as a specific medium in art critical circles, and so the majority of art critics writing today lack the requisite descriptive vocabulary and technical understanding to account for and evaluate the appearance of a photograph, and to relate those observations to the critical rhetoric of the image. This deficit in understanding is readily explicable, deriving in part from the simple fact that the technical aspects of advanced photographic practice are elusive to all but those who consistently operate a camera and produce pictures. More importantly, perhaps, the relative opacity of facture in photography—the absence of the artist's hand—means that the much-vaunted consonance (or dissonance) of subject and form, so often the lynchpin of successful painting and sculpture, is much harder to bear down on and evaluate in the case of a photograph. While there is room for improvisational descriptive language and speculation in characterizing the way a painting was executed, no such possibility exists when describing, for example, a photograph by German-born Florian Maier-Aichen, whose large-format photographs are obviously manipulated, but utterly opaque to

the lay viewer. As a result, the meaning of a given work is often located in what can be easily discerned simply by looking, leading all too frequently to facile observational descriptions that do not account for the ways in which the conditions of production inflect how we interpret content. The elusiveness of photography as a medium and the relative invisibility of process, therefore, have resulted in a radically impoverished mode of criticism.

Photographers who have been greeted with the most emphatic critical endorsements—Jeff Wall and Thomas Demand, for example—have, generally speaking, achieved notoriety by folding into their photographic programs additional processes that mitigate the necessity to evaluate their photographs alone. Photographers who instrumentalize photography as one component of a broader practice have therefore accrued far more critical and commercial traction than photographers who hue more closely to the essentialist, “observe and record” model of photography, simply because their work is more accessible and intelligible to art critics. The latter process of seeing, electing, and shooting is too connoisseurial, too ineffable, and too intuitive to qualify as an intelligent and intelligible conceptual strategy according to the imperatives of the contemporary art world, where a premium is placed on conceptual sophistication. As Maurice Berger has noted, such work is assumed to be “weak in intentionality.”

However, the presumption that this essentialist model of photographic production relies on intuitive knowing rather than on rigorous thinking can only undermine the credibility of so-called “traditional” or documentary photographers in the context of art criticism because no adequate framework exists by which to measure the achievements of these photographers. And no commonly acknowledged measure exists because the ontological understanding of photography and its methods among art critics is far less sophisticated than is the case for painting, sculpture, and performance art. Demand’s work, for example, is uniquely conducive to the logic of narrative exegesis and seems to presuppose its own theorization; rather predictably, therefore, his photographs have spawned a vast literature. Standard photographic practice, on the other hand, is not so easily parsed and theorized; its ontology is comparatively elusive. The key, then, is to enumerate even the most prosaic aspects of conventional photography (the physiognomy of an individual photographer’s practice, the ebb and flow of intentionality through the process from choice

of film or digital back through to print type and size); to claim these considerations and procedures as the basic ontological condition of photographic work; and to re-theorize the ways in which these factors shape the image, direct the viewer’s attention, and contribute to the production of meaning: in effect, to remake the technical and conceptual discourse around traditional photography within art criticism. Such a process would not only throw into high relief the fundamental nature and limits of the medium, as well as the achievement of photographers’ photographers such as James Welling, Christopher Williams, Jean-Marc Bustamante, and Thomas Struth, but it would also radically enhance—and perhaps recast—our understanding of photographers already entrenched firmly in the canon of art history.

Ultimately, there is only one effective, long-term remedy for the instrumentalization of photography in the broader context of art production, and that remedy begins with the production of advanced criticism that addresses photographs with a deep awareness of both the technical conditions of photographic production, and the concomitant conceptual implications of these technical processes. If photography is to be understood as a medium always and deliberately productive of meaning in the same sense as painting, this will require a rich and thorough understanding of the myriad decisions that precede the production of a photographic image, ranging from the conceptual and obtuse to the mundane and pragmatic. Such technical awareness is the necessary precondition for the production of art critical writing that operates with a full ontological awareness of photography as a unique medium. Only then will an advanced and, dare I say, medium-specific discourse emerge that mines the rich territory between fact and facture, process and product, form and content, sign and signified. The development of such a self-aware critical discourse will signal photography’s equal passage into the world of contemporary art, and only then will the problems and questions posed in this essay be truly anachronistic.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES

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