

Is Photography Art?

Is Photography a Form of Lens-Based Art?

In the ongoing debate about whether photography should be seen as a type of lens-based fine art, some critics consider that a photograph is produced by the application of a scientific technique rather than by genuinely creative camera work. After all, they claim, a very unartistic amateur photographer, armed with a good camera, is capable of producing perfectly acceptable images. By contrast, a person who had no idea how to paint, sculpt or carve, would have far greater difficulty creating an acceptable painting or statue. Because of this, they state that photography cannot compare with the creative quality of painting, or sculpture.

Other critics disagree. They say that it is precisely because photography is so different from painting and sculpture that different aesthetics apply. Furthermore, they challenge any painter to paint a picture that is as compelling as a well-composed photograph. A snap of King Charles I addressing the crowd from the scaffold, for instance, would have far greater impact than a painting of the same scene. And because cameras capture reality, impact is an important ingredient of camera art. Lastly, even if an untrained camera operator manages to take an acceptable picture, it is unlikely to match the creativity of a picture taken by a professional photographer. As a result of all this, they say, photography may not only be one of the newest types of art, it may even be "the" form of modern art - a direct reflection of the modern scientific age.

These issues have been confronted and discussed by artists and art critics throughout both the 19th and 20th centuries. By way of illustration, here is an extended extract from the Introduction to Thames and Hudson's wonderful new publication *Photography: The Whole Story* (2012) - an essential book for anyone interested in lens-based art. Its selection of photographs and their analysis, for instance, is exceptional.

Photographic Images: Part-Real, Part-Imagination

Why are photographic images so compelling? The fact that many of us now take pictures on a weekly, even daily, basis has not served to diminish the magic either of personal snapshots or the works to be found in the gallery, museum or book. The pictures placed in an album or posted on social networking sites can make us laugh out loud. When we encounter stunning images from the history of photography, such as the early 20th-century photographs of Antarctica by Herbert Ponting (1870-1935), we are captivated. Ponting's images from the British Antarctic Expedition of 1910 to 1913 make the remote past thrillingly present. Yet these images are not simply historical documents: it is clear that even in such forbidding conditions the photographer was determined to sacrifice nothing of aesthetic effect. Photography belongs both to the realms of reality and imagination: although it sometimes favours one over the other, it never quite relinquishes its hold on either.

Photographic Processes: Daguerreotypy, Photogenic Drawing

When it was announced to the world in January 1839 that it was possible to capture the image seen in a camera obscura (an aid to drawing that projected what the artist saw on to a surface from which he or she could copy their subject), it seemed that there were no limits to human ingenuity. Daguerreotypy - developed in France by Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre (1787-1851) - resulted in a highly detailed image on a small metal plate, as if a small mirror had been held up to nature. The January announcement of the daguerreotype was promptly followed by news of another photographic process developed in England by Henry Fox Talbot (1800-77). Talbot's process, which he called "photogenic drawing", resulted in a negative image on paper that had the warmth and burr of graphic art. Whereas a daguerreotype was a unique object (there was no negative), a photogenic drawing could be used to make multiple positive prints. Ever since these beginnings, photography has oscillated between uniqueness and multiplicity. Today a unique or limited edition photographic print by a celebrated artist can sell for more than a million dollars and, at the same time, digital photography - with its seemingly endless replication - plays a fundamental role in global communication.

Art Photographs

There are many thousands of important art photographs in public and private collections worldwide and yet the majority were not made with the art exhibition in mind. Some were intended as demonstrations of what the new medium could do; others began life as documents, records or illustrations; only later were they seen as art objects. Some photographs, such as the study by Eugene Atget (1852-1927) of Parisians viewing an eclipse, find the surreal in the real. Others, including *Self-portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840) by Hippolyte Bayard (1807-77), play with photography's ability to make fiction appear as fact. As the majority of great photographic images have been accepted as art objects retrospectively, their story cannot be told by reference to movements, schools and coteries.

From the invention of photography in 1839, the question of the medium's identity and status was debated not by reference to its technological origins but by its relationship to visual art. Few denied that photography was an ingenious invention of the modern age but many saw it as a threat to the traditional values associated with art. In a society symbolically divided between 'gentlemen' (those who exercised their intellect and imagination) and 'operators' (manual workers who did unthinking, mechanical work), a machine that made pictures was a challenge to the existing social order.

Photography on Paper

In the 1850s, daguerreotypy and calotypy (the name that Talbot gave to his process after important refinements in 1841) both gave way to wet-collodion photography, a process based on the use of glass negatives for the production of paper images. The resulting images were generally printed on paper coated with albumen (egg white) and are characterized by crisp detail, a chocolate-brown tonality and a shiny surface. The practice of photography, both amateur and commercial, experienced a massive boom in the mid 1850s, and 19th-century photographers took full advantage. The practice of photography on paper had been freed from licencing restrictions and two new formats were about to become very popular. The stereograph (two images of the same subject taken slightly apart and pasted side by side on a piece of card) presents a three-dimensional image when looked at in a special viewer; subjects were sometimes educational, but often were designed simply for visual effect, or even titillation. The *carte de visite*, also known as the album or card portrait, was a full-length portrait the size of a calling (business) card, and emphasized the dress rather than the features of the sitter.

Opposition to Photography as an Art

The popularization of photography in the mid 19th century led to a shift in attitudes towards the medium. The practice of calotypy in the 1840s and 1850s in Britain and France had seen an extraordinarily high degree of technical and aesthetic experimentation and achievement. In the face of the rapid commercialization and popularization of photography in the 1850s and 1860s, the idea that photography could be art - and that photographers (drawn from the lower social ranks) could be artists - appeared preposterous to some. In 1857 the art critic and historian Elizabeth Eastlake expressed the view that photography should be celebrated, but only if it did not evince pretensions beyond dealing with "facts". A few years later the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire denounced commercial photography as art's "most mortal enemy". The influential art critic John Ruskin, who had marvelled at the fidelity to nature of daguerreotypy when using it as a visual aid in Venice in the mid 1840s, later said of photography that it "has nothing to do with art and will never supersede it". (Note: Photography gave new impetus to landscape painting, and was about to replace portrait art almost entirely as a means of creating personal portraiture, but was not yet accepted as an independent form of expression.)

In the 1860s the majority of commercial photographers considered technical qualities, such as sharpness of visual information and immaculate print quality, as the means to demonstrate the superiority of their photographic images. This technical conception of excellence meant that, for the would-be professional photographer,

photography was an art of the real. A few notable individuals rejected this orthodoxy and regarded photography as a means to create complex weavings of ideality and reality. The most well-known of these amateurs was a woman: Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79). Cameron took up photography in her late forties and throughout the next decade created a large body of work solely for aesthetic reasons. She used differential focus, costume box clothes and occasional props to create soft-edged, warm-toned portraits and figure studies, the latter inspired by biblical, literary or allegorical subjects. Cameron's belief that it was she who was making an art of photography was so audacious, and her idiosyncratic practice such an affront to the modest aspirations of the works shown at photographic society exhibitions, that she was characterized by the photographic community as a hapless female eccentric who could not use her equipment properly.

Pictorialism

It was not until the end of the 19th century, however, that subjectivity in photography gained a broader cultural legitimacy. Central to the international movement known as 'Pictorialism', the exponents of which promoted photography as an expressive medium, were photographers who had 'succeeded' from established photographic societies and the technical accomplishments they valued. Pictorialist photography is characterized by techniques and effects borrowed from the graphic arts. Although a Pictorialist image generally came from a sharply defined negative image, the often extensive darkroom manipulations involved in transforming the image away from this hard-edged reality meant that each print could be claimed as unique. The resultant images, often printed in a vibrant hue and appearing soft, hazy and dreamlike, were meant to provoke aesthetic rather than literal responses. Many Pictorialist compositions invoked the high art seriousness of contemporary Symbolism, as seen in the photograph *The Wind Harp* (1912) by Anne Brigman (1869-1950).

Straight Photography

The figure most closely associated with the promotion of art photography at this time was Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), a New Yorker with close connections to Europe. (Note: Stieglitz's wife Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) and his younger contemporary Edward Steichen (1879-1973) were also active champions of lens-based fine art, and helped to introduce the medium into museum collections.) Having turned his back on the Camera Club of New York and founded the Photo-Secession, Stieglitz went on to preside over the journal *Camera Work*, a showcase for the best photographic art then being made internationally, including his own. Stieglitz and *Camera Work* played an important role in the move away from Pictorialism as they had done in its promotion. As early as 1904 the critic Sadakichi Hartmann, writing in *Camera Work*, used the phrase "straight photography" as a foil to the soft-edged aesthetic of Pictorialism. Stieglitz's *The Steerage* (1907), which appeared in *Camera Work* in 1911, is often hailed as the first modern photograph. It was not until the final issue of the journal appeared in 1917, however, that a straight aesthetic for photography was fully realized. The issue was dedicated to works by Paul Strand (1890-1976) and included his now iconic *Wall Street* (1915), which fused bold pictorial geometry with a modern life subject.

The idea that photography could have an aesthetic of its own and that it was grounded in qualities singular to the medium was hugely compelling for US art photographers, many of whom renounced Pictorialism. Edward Weston (1886-1958) came to espouse the idea that the creative work of photography was no longer to be conducted in the darkroom but in the photographer's 'pre-visualization' of the subject and in its composition before exposing the negative in the camera. In 1932 a group dedicated to the promotion of straight photography, known as Group f/64, was formed in California with Weston and Ansel Adams (1902-84) among its members. Weston, with his near-abstract still lifes and nudes, and Adams, with his lyrical landscape documentary photography, went on to dominate photographic art-making in the United States for decades.

Avant-Garde Art

In Europe, World War I had a profound effect on the making of art. Disaffected artists sought to develop modes of pictorial expression that could express the crisis of faith in traditional values that had been brought about by the conflict. The first non-figurative photographs, invoking time, space and other abstract concepts, were made during the war and this spirit of radical innovation informed the making of avant-garde art in the 1920s and beyond. As a modern technology with demotic connotations, photography was perfectly placed to take a central role in the avant-garde art scene. The medium - now generally taking the form of silver-based prints with a 'black-and-white' appearance - was used by Dada in Germany for works of biting social critique - see, for instance, Dada photomontages by Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971), Hanna Hoch (1889-1978) and John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld) (1891-1968) - by Constructivism in the Soviet Union to forge new pictorial modes for a new society; by surrealist artists like Man Ray (1890-76) in Paris, in their visual jests and explorations of the subconscious; and internationally by modernists to celebrate new forms of art and design. Photography lent itself to these widely different aesthetic agendas because of its hold on actuality. As a modern technology, photography celebrated the modern and the material. As a mechanistic recording device, photography lent the imaginative or irrational the weight of objective fact. In countries as ideologically opposed as Soviet Russia and the United States, a small but influential number of avant-garde practitioners came to see photography as the ideal visual medium for the modern era.

Does Commerciality Undermine Art?

Photography may have been widely used by avant-garde artists but this does not mean that they always recognized its equality with the other arts. This was in part because of its commercialization in the form of celebrity portraiture, advertising and fashion. This anxiety over photography's status was shared by biographers, art historians and curators who glossed over the commercial elements of photographers' careers in order to secure their recognition as artists. Today it is well-known that the major photographers among the Parisian avant-garde of the 1920s - Man Ray, Andre Kertesz (1894-1985) and Brassai (1899-1984) - all worked on commission. Man Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitzky in Philadelphia, moved to Paris in 1921 and distinguished himself as an iconoclastic innovator in painting, sculpture, film and photography. (Note: Nor was Edward Steichen compromised in 1911 by his famous collection of photos of Paul Poiret's fashion gowns for the magazine *Art et Decoration*.) Nowadays, we do not regard his creativity as compromised by his editorial or fashion shoots. Sometimes, as in the case of his celebrated image *Black and White*, the commission acted as a spur to the creativity. (See, in particular, the photographs by Charles Sheeler of Ford's River Rouge Car Factory.) Even some of the war photography of cameramen like Robert Capa (1913-54), Larry Burrows (1926-71), Don McCullin (b.1935) and Steve McCurry (born 1950) has a profoundly artistic quality. The leading American commercial fashion photographers of the 1950s and 60s, such as Irving Penn (1917-2009) and Richard Avedon (1923-2004) made huge contributions to modern art, despite the commercial nature of their fashion photography, and developed several new photographic techniques in the process.

Humanist Photography

Another important development that had its roots in France during the interwar years is humanist photography. Closely linked to the rise of popular journals such as *Life* magazine, this type of photography pictured subjects of human interest. The best-known photographers working in a humanist vein were the artists Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) and Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), whose street photography and photo-reportage images from around the world were also published in a series of influential photobooks. Executed in a realist idiom, Cartier-Bresson's oeuvre owed as much to Surrealism as to straight photography but this was obscured in the later 20th century by photography's place within the modernist orthodoxy. See also the deadpan photography in the photo-book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) by Ed Ruscha (b.1937).

Acceptance of Photography as an Art Form

One of the world's best galleries of contemporary art, the famous New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was the ideological home of modernism - the dominant avant-garde aesthetic of the mid century that embraced art, design and architecture. MoMA held an important survey of photography in 1937 and eventually opened its department of photography in 1940, yet photography's status as an art form was still not secure. It was John Szarkowski (1925-2007), who became curator of photographs at MoMA in 1962, who was most effective in assimilating photography to modernism. According to Szarkowski, legitimate photography was 'straight', democratic in its subject matter and had a strong formal component. Photographs were not works of the imagination but fragments of actuality pictorially organized to reflect a strong personal vision.

According to the scholar Douglas Crimp, if photography was invented in 1839, it was only discovered in the 1960s and 1970s - photography, that is, as an essence, photography itself. Crimp, and others in his circle, critiqued the loss of understanding that was being effected by the transfer of photographs from the drawers of the archive to the walls of the art museum. Inevitably, this critical interest in photography, together with texts such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Un art moyen* (1965), Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1979), served to further elevate photography in terms of its cultural status. Barthes's text - a highly poignant account of his search for a 'true' image of his mother - is perhaps the most influential example of the attempt to define photography in essentialist terms. In his book, Barthes formulated the idea of the 'punctum', the detail within a photograph that pricks the viewer with a woundlike sensation. Like modernist accounts of photography, *Camera Lucida* suggested that photography had a unique nature that made it distinct from all other visual media. [Note: A number of 1960s art movements and new artforms made photography an integral element of their approach. Movements included Fluxus (1960s) and Pop Art (c.1955-70), as well as Arte Povera (c.1966-71), while new artforms using photographs included installation art and performance art. One of the most important modern artists to rely on photography in the creation of his images, was Andy Warhol (1928-87); see for instance his screenprints of photos of filmstars, like Elvis and Elizabeth Taylor. A number of contemporary artists including Gilbert & George (b.1943 & 1942) also depend heavily on the use of photography.] Interestingly, Warhol's own photographic portrait, taken in 1987 by Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-89), and auctioned at Christie's in 2006 for \$643,200, remains one of the most expensive photos of the period.

Postmodernist Photography

A competing conceptualization of photography claims that it has no innate characteristics. Its identity is, it is argued, dependent upon the roles and applications ascribed to it. This theorization of photography belongs to the contemporary critique of modernism that is known as postmodernism. (Note: see also: *Postmodernist Art and Postmodernist Artists*.) The desire to once again see art as socially and politically engaged, rather than belonging to a realm of creative purity, led scholars back to the writings of Walter Benjamin, the critic and philosopher who was associated with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. In claiming that a photographic copy destroyed the 'aura' of an original work of art, and that it was possible for the masses to enjoy art through this simulacrum, photography symbolized for Benjamin the possibility of a divestment of cultural, and ultimately political, power from the National Socialists. In the 1980s, left-wing theorists began to reconceptualize the medium's history in terms of how photography has been implicated in the exercise of power. (For power and nudity, see the work of Helmut Newton (1920-2004); for gender issues, see the work of Nan Goldin (b.1953).) The notion of photographic objectivity was further undermined by the writings of those scholars and intellectuals, most notably Jean Baudrillard, who challenged the idea of a pre-existent reality that is merely captured or reflected by visual media. According to Baudrillard, imagery is the reality through which we come to know the world.

Up to the 1970s, photographic art was identified with iconic images from the 19th century and the early 20th century. Today it is identified with works made in the last thirty-five or so years. At the time of writing, the world record for a photograph sold at auction is \$4.3 million for *The Rhine II* (1999) by Andreas Gursky (b.1955). A mere twelve years ago, when we entered the 21st century, the world record was \$860,000 - for *The Great Wave, Sete* by Gustave Le Gray (1820-84). The massive increase in the value of photographs is often cited as proof that photography has finally been accepted as art. (Note: see also *Most Expensive Paintings: Top 20*.) This is not the

first time, however, that photography has been identified as an art form. What does distinguish the present day from the past is that information, in whatever form, is now rarely conveyed without still or moving pictures: photography, in its digital form, is as much a modern wonder as was the daguerreotype in 1839. (Note: see also Animation Art and Video Art.)

Conclusion: Photography is Art

Cutting through some of the intellectual sagebrush, the present consensus appears to be that photographs capture a contrived or deliberate moment of reality, and it is this deliberateness that contains the artistic kernel. [See, for instance, the "staged" photographs of Jeff Wall (b.1946), the manipulated landscapes of Andreas Gursky (b.1955), or the surreal self-portraits of Cindy Sherman (b.1954)]. Put another way, a photographer's art is his ability to capture a moment of reality and turn it into viewable image of interest and/or beauty. It is immaterial that the photo can be replicated a thousand times, thus depriving the 'original' of its unique status. It is sufficient that no two photographers are likely to create an identical image. The artistic quality of a "pictorialist" image which is "created" in the dark room, so to speak, is even more assured. The process of judging whether photography is art, reminds us that neither painting nor sculpture is as pure an art form as is sometimes supposed. Bronze sculpture can be cast and recast in a large number of copies; and our knowledge of Greek sculpture comes not from original Greek statues but from Roman copies. Furthermore, it has been estimated that as many as 1 in 10 paintings that hang in the best art museums, are copies not originals. At the end of the day, a camera along with a dark room and its processing chemicals, is not so very different from a painter's brushes and paints. It remains no more than a set of tools with which a photographer tries to create an image: an image to stir our soul, in the way that images do.

Today, fine art photographs can be seen in many museums around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, (Stieglitz, Steichen, Walker Evans, and Ford Motor Company collections); Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), NYC (collections assembled by Edward Steichen, John Szarkowski and Peter Galassi); Guggenheim Museum New York, (Robert Mapplethorpe Collection); Art Institute of Chicago (Alfred Stieglitz Collection); Detroit Institute of Arts (Albert/Peggy de Salle Gallery); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Wallis Annenberg Photography Dept); Philadelphia Museum of Art (30,000 photos by photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand); and Victoria & Albert Museum, London (500,000 images from 1839-present).

REFERENCES

We gratefully acknowledge the use of material from the compelling work *Photography: The Whole Story* (Thames & Hudson 2012): an essential reference work for any student of photography.

<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/photography-art.htm>