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Since the invention of the photographic image in the 1830s, its status as an artform has been hotly debated. John Stathatos traces the complex history of photography and argues for its acceptance as a creative medium

Positively art

Two quotations, exactly 130 years apart, neatly define the parameters of a still unresolved debate about the territory occupied by photography. In 1859, Charles Baudelaire wrote: "It is time for [photography] to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts – but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which has neither created nor supplemented literature." In 1989, his compatriot Régis Durand declared that in his view, "the most important development in the photography of the 1980s [had been] the triumph of a kind of photographic art by artists who firmly refuse to be called photographers".

Neither of these statements, emblematic of a multitude of practical no less than theoretical assumptions, is in any way untypical of their period. Baudelaire's famous outburst branding photography "the refuge of every would-be painter, every painter too ill-endowed or too lazy to complete his studies" had been preceded a couple of years earlier from this side of the Channel by Lady Eastlake's insistence that photography's task should be limited to "only that which it was both a misappropriation and a deterioration of Art to do".

A more invidious attack on photographic aspirations was delivered by Peter Henry Emerson, who in 1891 published a recantation which ended: "I have, I regret it deeply, compared photographs to great works of art and photographers to great artists. I was rash and thoughtless and my punishment is having to acknowledge it now." Coming from Emerson, one-time fugleman of photography's claims to artistic status, this was rather as if Lenin were suddenly to accept a position on the board of US Steel.

Régis Durand's comment was one of several solicited by *European Photography* magazine on the cusp of the 1990s in response to the question "What are the important characteristics of and developments in the photography of the 1980s, and what do you foresee for the 1990s?" Published over two issues, the answers, though wide-ranging, show in retrospect a surprising degree of unanimity: "... the final emancipation of photography as a form of artistic expression" (Wolfgang Kil); "photography substantially increased its role as an art medium in this decade" (Mark Haworth-Booth); "... the type of

photography that interests me, that is, photography as used by artists" (Michel Nuridsany).

Between them, these positions encapsulate a confusion over photography's status which has dogged it since its earliest years. More than a century and a half after its invention, it remains the most protean and unclassifiable of media; like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, whenever we think we have successfully defined its parameters, it proceeds to fade away silently with a mocking grin. Critical etymologists from Charles Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin and from Susan Sontag to Douglas Crimp are constantly trapping the elusive medium in their butterfly nets, screwing it down into killing bottles, and then spreading out the apparently fixed specimen to best advantage in a display case – only to see it suddenly shake its wings and fly away, leaving behind a scattering of iridescent scales. It would be possible to paper a room with definitive pronouncements regarding the purpose and nature of photography, and indeed, whether by way of irony or despair, Sontag ended her magisterial *On Photography* with just such an anthology of quotations.

The problem, clearly enough, can be ascribed to photography's polymorphous perversity. The fact that the medium is implicated in such a wide variety of activities is problematic enough; what makes things worse is the refusal of photographic images to remain passively in the status to which they were born. Photographs, it seems, are uninhibited social climbers: photojournalism aspires to historical record, documentary images aspire to social history, and all aspire to the transubstantiating condition of art. This dynamic, which is largely independent of the wishes and desires of photographers, is also unique to the medium. While vernacular and functional styles have been co-opted by painting and sculpture since at least the early days of Pop Art, there is an important distinction: it was Warhol's Brillo boxes which acquired the value-added status of art, not Brillo boxes themselves, and it was Lichtenstein's version of comic-strips which broke into the academy, not the authentic back pages of American newspapers.

Within photography, on the other hand, it is the object itself which undermines the apparently

unshakeable Duchampian doctrine of intentionality, according to which art is anything defined as such by an artist – including not only silver-gelatine images but also urinals, old rope, graffiti and tinned excrement. The problem with this apparently all-inclusive prescription remains that extensive and awkward category of photographic images whose creators never claimed the status of art for their productions – a category exemplified by Eugene Atget, the humble journeyman who made "documents for artists" and whose entire style and technique was by the last years of his working life decades out of date. Nor is Atget's case unique; leaving to one side the vast field of powerful but anonymous photographic imagery, including photographs taken by machines such as surveillance and satellite cameras, E.J. Bellocq's Storyville portraits, Alphonse Bertillon's scene-of-the-crime photographs from the 1890s and the portraits of the American Disfarmer, the Peruvian Martin Chambi and the Malian Seydou Keita must all somehow be accounted for.

If intentionality proves incapable of addressing such contingencies, how can we define the difference between functional photography and photography which aspires to the realm of art? André Rouillé has pointed out that it is only when a photograph has, in the course of time, lost all traces of its original function that it becomes free to enter the realm of art, but this is an observation rather than an explanation. Incidentally, the debate is further complicated by the deficiencies of the English language, which lacks a value-free term similar to the French *photographie plastique* and its equivalents in other European languages; the terms "creative", "artistic" and "fine art" photography have all been tried and rejected as excessively pretentious, leaving critics with clumsy circumlocutions along the lines of "photography in the visual arts".

After a disastrous early attempt at borrowed respectability through the use of mimetic pictorialism – the more or less blatant adoption of the pictorial codes of nineteenth-century academic painting – photography found a theoretical basis in modernism and Clement Greenberg's clarion call for an art purged of all superfluous accretions. Classic modernist photography, exemplified by John



Far left: Gabriella Sancisi, 'Bummaree no.1', 1995.
Left: Joan Fontcuberta, 'The Asteroid Roxos from Soyuz-2', 1996



Susan Trangmar, detail from the projection installation 'Exposures', 1996



Rineke Dijkstra, 'Brighton, England', 1992

Szarkowski's reign as curator of photography at the New York Museum of Modern Art, stressed, above all, the rather nebulous qualities of medium specificity and purity. "Pure photography," wrote Szarkowski in 1973, "is a system of picture-making that describes more or less faithfully what might be seen through a rectangular frame from a particular vantage point at a given moment." If early photography found its purpose in the representation of the world, photographic modernism was essentially concerned with the interpretation of the world through the medium of the photographer's private vision; Szarkowski, and with him the majority of photographers and critics of his generation, believed photography to be "the best method so far devised for the precise description of the most complex, specific, private and ephemeral matters of visual experience".

Nevertheless, despite an emphasis on the transfiguring and quite literally magical nature of personal vision, photographic modernism remained bound to the wheel of representation. For Joan Fontcuberta, in his 1996 essay "The Kiss of Judas", "photography... has lived under the tyranny of its subject matter: the object has exercised an almost total domination... This is why one should not be surprised by the fact that a curator and theoretician like John Szarkowski believes that 'the history of photography is the history of the photographable' – which is equivalent to saying that the creative development of photography is predicated on an unceasing search for new subject matter, and that it is the characteristics of this visual world which determine the aesthetics of photographic representation".

The other pillar of modernism was, as it had been for centuries, the commitment to truth – truth, that is, to the essential natures of both subject and

medium, striven for in a way which at times begins to sound almost metaphysical. Though sophisticated observers realised early on that the medium's supposed ability to produce truthful documents was, even in the best of circumstances, riddled with caveats and reservations, popular belief in the camera's infallibility remained unshaken until the spread of computerised image manipulation. While necessarily conceding a grudging defeat over the issue of objective truth, modernism fell back on to the vaguer notion of essential as opposed to merely superficial truth. Even in the most rough and ready amateur snapshots, Szarkowski discerned elements which reinforced both photography's unique position and the ideal – almost pre-Raphaelite when articulated in these terms – of purity and truth: "[these snapshots] were, however, pure and unadulterated photographs, and sometimes they hinted at the existence of visual truths that had escaped all other systems of detection".

Though many of its presuppositions had been routinely challenged by photographers dealing in staged and manipulated imagery, the modernist paradigm was only seriously shaken towards the mid-1970s by the appearance of a growing number of artists who used photographic imagery without reference to the prescriptions of modernism. Emerging mostly from an educational and professional background in the fine arts, often with experience of working with and across a variety of media including such recent arrivals as video, they acknowledged no intellectual or emotional debt to the medium and its structures.

Disengaging the term from its by now rather dated structuralist associations, one could legitimately call their work post-modern, since the one thing they had in common was a complete indifference to any kind of "visual truth"; as Jeffrey

Deitch pointed out in 1990: "It may be that the end of modernism not only coincides with the end of nature, but with the end of truth."

While avoiding the latter term himself, last year André Rouillé made an interesting distinction between modernist and post-modernist approaches to photography; in the first case the medium is a tool, in the second it becomes inchoate raw material: "The transition from the condition of tool to that of raw material marks a decisive break with the documentary tradition, with the art of photographers, and in general with the expressive stance... Above all, however, photography as raw material (*photographie-matériau*) diverges from all those photographic strategies whose ambition it is to represent the world." The transition in question, Rouillé implies, frees the medium from the heavy burden of its history and ideology, allowing it to colonise new territories unencumbered by the past.

Far from remaining committed to mirroring the world, some artists have knowingly and deliberately subverted photography's traditional relationship with representation. Notable among these has been Fontcuberta, who insists: "Every photograph is a fiction with pretensions to truth. Despite everything that we have been inculcated, all that we believe, photography always lies; it lies instinctively, lies because its nature does not allow it to do anything else." His work has included imaginary herbariums and the records of a fraudulent zoological expedition complete with documents, specimens and images of hitherto unknown fauna, as well as a recent imaginative foray into the history of the Soviet space programme. The Soviet Union was perhaps the first state to practise wholesale historical revisionism through the physical manipulation of photographic testimony, and it seems appropriate that Fontcuberta's technically faultless digital



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Olivier Richon,
'A Real Allegory
(with Parrot)', 1997

interventions in Sputnik should have drawn formal protests from Russia's foreign ministry.

When formulated in abstract terms, the cleavage between modernist and post-modernist practices seems total, but it is probably more useful to regard these positions as a spectrum rather than as mutually exclusive polar opposites. If there are signs of an at times bitter division between practitioners – if, for instance, there are in Durand's words "artists who firmly refuse to be called photographers" – the dispute often proves to be more a matter of curatorial and commercial positioning than of genuine aesthetic differences. The issue is nicely exemplified by two complementary quotations from the early 1980s. The first, by Alan Bowness, last but not one director of the Tate Gallery, in an interview with *Creative Camera* in 1982, is by now notorious: "You have to be an artist and not only a photographer to have your work in the Tate." The second, by New York dealer Robert Friedus two years later, is refreshingly cynical: "If calling it art will sell it, good dealers will call it art. I actually had a client say that

if someone was an artist making photographs she could buy what I was selling, but if he was a photographer making photographs, she couldn't. So I said, Okay, he's an artist."

Positioning depends as much on such superficial elements as choice of title, presentation and method of hanging as it does upon weightier factors such as the critical language adopted by the catalogue; exhibited in one venue, a particular body of work will attract the attention of photography critics, while precisely the same work shown in a different venue may be discussed by art critics whose knowledge of photography might be quite superficial, but who will attempt to place it within the context of the contemporary visual arts. In other words, a surprisingly large part of the argument can be reduced to context: different ways of presenting, studying, analysing, promoting and marketing determine whether a photograph is regarded as part of the photographic or of the artistic discourse.

The question, *pace* Baudelaire and Lady Eastlake, is no longer whether photography may be admitted

within the pantheon; it has already pushed its way in, courtesy of Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, Anselm Kiefer and Robert Rauschenberg, Christian Boltanski and John Baldessari, to take only a few of the most prominent examples. The dominance of post-modernist photography appears almost total, as witness the recently launched Citibank Photography Prize. Attempting to rival the Turner Prize, it claims to "draw no distinctions between photojournalists or artists who use photographic images", yet both shortlists to date have been drawn exclusively from the latter category. The real question is whether photography, reduced or promoted to the rank of raw material and thereby completely absorbed into the insatiable maw of contemporary art, retains an independent identity beyond its purely functional roles – does it, as it were, still preserve any specific and particular qualities?

The answer must, I think, be that it does. While the end of photography's ghettoisation, itself the inevitable consequence of developing a history distinct from that of the other visual arts, is probably no bad thing, Szarkowski's instinctive belief in the uniqueness of photography was essentially correct – if only because of the profoundly anarchic character of the photographic image. There is one other quality specific to the medium: its unique relationship with reality, a relationship which has little to do with "truth", visual or otherwise, but everything to do with the emotional charge generated by the photograph's operation as a memory trace.

Both these characteristics, powerful and unpredictable as they are, are sufficient to guarantee that however much certain aspects of photography may have been co-opted into the wider field of the visual arts, photography will remain a vital and fascinating discourse in its own right.



Erieta Attali, from
'First and Last
Landscapes', 1996