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## Photographs as Art Objects

*On the Mechanisms of Photographic  
Art*

2008

*More often than before, pictures on the wall today are of photographic origin. Photographic images can be classified as images which have mainly been created for a rational reason, as well as images which have been created for an artistic reason. The former enrich us through their informative content on things, people or memories. The artistically motivated images affect us through their connection with thoughts, feelings and states of being, thus through the intellectual and mental echo which they evoke in us. In the essay at hand, we will concentrate only on this latter group. Creating images for the wall is something different than creating them for a newspaper or for a publishing house. They define a room and its specific culture more than all other elements in it. The images are to give off their energy into this environment for years; often, they are also meant to be icons. At the same time, they are to give testimony of the intellectual and emotional quality of their owner.*

## Does photographic art exist?

Photography has become the cornerstone of the range of images available in our time. It is distinguishable from painting or drawing mainly due to its alleged claim of truth. Only photography can be a natural representation because it produces the desired image within a split second. It is a momentary impression and a reflection of the present at the same time. But the photographic image can be "forged". With modern methods of image processing, photos can be turned into images which not only resemble reality, but at the same time the fantasy of the photographer – although they seem to reflect reality. It is exactly here that photography has one of its great opportunities to be more than just a representation. Especially through the combination of camera and computer, it is possible for photographers today to develop and realise their own visual ideas.

Photography is a technical process for storing images of the visible world with the aid of a technical device. Within the process of storing, one or two conversion steps occur which are of great importance for photography, if one wants to classify it as art:

- A - the conversion of three-dimensional perception into a two-dimensional image and – possibly
- B - the conversion of a coloured image into a grey-scale image.

Because a photographic image is in this way different from the pure representation of nature, a measure of artificiality is reached which is one of the foundations of art. Thus, already the monochrome image of nature can be viewed as a preliminary product of artistic expression. The photographer has a range of possibilities at hand to change the image according to his or her intention. Fundamental for the design of the picture

is the selection of the view to be captured in the frame from the photographer's surrounding world. As further technical means of expression, the photographer can select the shutter speed, the light filter and the exposure setting.

Similar to a painter, the skilled photographer has a perception of the finished picture to be created before the shutter is released, distinguishing him from the "snap shooter". Reality and perception form the intellectual pillars of each representation of nature. But there are several possibilities to bring reality and perception into compliance in the sense of a photographic art work.

Four examples are given below.

*1 - The random concurrence of reality and perception*

Example: On the afternoon of the 31st of October 1941, Ansel Adams is on his way home from Chama Valley to Santa Fe. He suddenly sees the small village Hernandez. The moon is rising over it, and the setting sun is illuminating a long string of clouds with its streak of light. In the foreground, a cemetery, a church and a few buildings can be seen. In the background, there are a few mountain tops. At the last moment, Adams positions his 8 x 10 inch camera and, at exactly 4:03 pm, shoots the photo which is to become his most famous one. In this example, reality and perception are completely consistent with each other. Adams only needed to press the shutter-release to create an unforgettable photographic work. This ideal case is rather unusual in practice. For instance, in order to bring reality and perception into accord, the nature photographer often has to search painstakingly for reality (the landscape) until a place is found which complies with his or her idea. The photographer then has to wait for the lighting conditions, people, animals, clouds etc. which are desired as visual content.

*2 - The precipitated concurrence of reality and imagination*

Examples: The photographer Jeff Wall works out scenes from daily life in the manner of a screenplay. These scenes are performed with actors and photographed during their performance. This way, he creates a reality on the basis of his imagination. The same can be said of the photographer Andreas Gursky, who changes the real content of his photographs on the computer, adding or removing elements and creating realities which have been altered according to his imagination. On the other hand, the model maker and photographer Thomas Demand accurately reconstructs places well-known through the media with paper and cardboard. These models are then photographed. Thus, he gives them a new identity in order to create a new reality according to his imagination.

*3 - The extended reality in the sense of a concept of time*

Examples: On the 21st of December 1970, the photographer

Jan Dibbets photographed the same view from a window at "Galerie Konrad Fischer" in Düsseldorf of a street, maintaining intervals of six minutes for a total of 80 times. The series of photographs began in the darkness of morning and ended in the darkness of the evening. The 80 pictures were arranged as a series in ten columns and eight rows and then copied onto a photo wall with the measurements 175 x 180 cm. The photographer Monika Baumgartl first photographed the brightly illuminated moon in Greece in 1968 with a shutter speed of one second. Through multiple exposures and the same camera position, the same negative was exposed repeatedly. Thus a time-intervalled depiction of the moon's orbit around the earth was created.

#### *4- Reality, integrated in an artistic concept*

Example: During a period of approximately 30 years, the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher have photographed structures of German industrial history threatened by demolition, such as water towers, furnaces, gasometers or half-timbered houses of the Siegerland. The documentary work is consolidated in panels of six, nine or twelve parts of one typology. Unlike the above-mentioned example, no extension of time is achieved here, but a series of typologically similar objects threatened by demolition are shown. The concept shows a reality which has already been transformed into history at the time of its publishing.

Art and photography have been discussed for 150 years. In this context, the notion that photography is not art is equally as absurd as the notion that painting is art. After all, both are technical performances in order to bring a picture onto a surface. Photography can be the greatest imaginable kitsch, while painting can be the worst scribble. For both means of creating an image, the artistic quality originates from the height of creativity, and this creativity is perceived differently. The fact that a photographer generally needs less time for the creation of an artistically powerful image than a painter is rather an argument in favour of photography. One cannot fail to acknowledge an impressive picture only with the argument that it took less time to create than a painting. In principle, it is not relevant how an image which impresses us has been created. The important issue is what of its content reaches the viewer.

One of the arguments against photography as an artistic discipline that is often mentioned is the claim of photography's insufficient originality. According to this argument, photography is only reproductive art, if anything – on the other hand, paintings are solitary products of artistic creation. However, it is sometimes forgotten that while van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Crows* or Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* only exist once as originals, these paintings have been reproduced millions of times as posters or book illustrations – not to mention Dietz

replicas and the products of modern Chinese painting factories. Most oil paintings, watercolours and drawings are not available to us as originals, but we know them from books, and the same applies to the works of photography. Thus, there is hardly any difference between both disciplines, at least in receptive practice. It also seems that this way of distribution of art is fully accepted. But when a photographer does not limit the edition or declares an edition of more than 25, gallery owners and collectors often look down on this, as the term art signifies a certain concept of value. However, as is known, lasting value in art results from demand for a limited supply. It is only when the work of art is desired by a certain number of potential buyers that it gains an identifiable value for everyone. For example, this conclusion is seen commercially in the limitation of editions of prints and photographs while advertising for them at the same time. At this point, it becomes evident that not only the artistic achievement makes a picture into a work of art, but also the aura with which it is surrounded – not to mention marketed.

This aura is promoted and maintained by the “image-makers”, by the gallery owners and also by the museums. They are the ones who determine which artist to invest in or not, and they in themselves constitute the essential selection criteria and mechanisms for steering what is “in” in art.

The photographic wall picture is not unchallenged. On the one hand, it has to face competition from paintings, drawings and graphic design, and on the other hand, it has to compete with posters. Soon, a further competitor will enter the field: the flat screen mounted on the wall. With it, it will be possible to present an electronic image in the most beautiful fluorescent colours or pastels in a living room or even a museum, showing – if desired – a different image each hour or even every minute. However, today tradition-minded people still see a higher value for the status of their home in a painting. It is different for the generation of 30- to 40-year-olds. They have grown up with photography – then still in a “pre-art state”, and for them, the successful photographic art of today is the kept promise of their youth.

In the end, however, art in general and photographic art in particular are nothing else than what a majority of viewers associate with this term. Because of this, it is pointless to enter a rating discussion – alone due to the fact that majorities change during the course of time. Only remember, for instance, that van Gogh's works were not even viewed as art during his lifetime. Accordingly, the following question arises: in the context of photography, must one speak of art? The answer of course is no. One of the most famous photographers, Henri Cartier-Bresson, saw himself as a craftsman throughout his lifetime and consequently abstained from limiting his editions. Then in whose interest is it to ennoble photography to art? First and foremost, it is in the interest

of those who earn money with photographic prints: in other words, the gallery owners, auctioneers and museum professionals. In addition, the artists themselves feel affirmed and elevated by their new identities that have been given to them by the art trade and by the museums. How can we determine whether a picture has an artistic presence? Is there an indicator for art in a picture? One can assume that the majority of viewers remember significant pictures for a longer time than less important ones, even after having looked at them once. A useful "art indicator" can be whether the picture evokes an intellectual or spiritual experience and how long this is remembered. Does photographic art exist? The answer has to be yes – but only if a majority decides in favour of it and, in this case in particular, where all possibilities that computer technology offers for influencing the composition are used.

### More pictures than time

Today, modern digital photography has opened up for mankind what Joseph Beuys was referring to when he said that "everything is art, and everyone is an artist". With a digital camera, a computer, an ink jet printer and Internet access, it has become possible for billions of people to explore their graphic potential, to compare it and to display it. In photography, the equality of billions has been achieved for the first time in a branch of the arts, worldwide. Poor and rich people, the educated and the uneducated, the old and the young take pictures of whatever they deem worthy of depicting, in any minute, at any place. Thus a daily increase of a half a billion to a billion photographic images occurs, mostly in digital storage media. The person taking the photo does not even need an aesthetic visual ability in order to shoot a presentable photograph. Modern digital cameras already have an automatic face recognition function.

Since an anti-aesthetic attitude has established itself in museum art since the mid-20th century, often the trivial image is enough in order to become a work of art merely by being framed. There are consequences for photography arising from this, but also for all of fine arts: while Walter Benjamin declared the 20th century to be the age of the technical reproducibility of art, we currently experience the 21st century as the age of art's unselectability. This is the result of the steadily growing tidal wave of images. It is very likely that the individual image is no longer seen by the relevant viewers, and thus it is no longer selected, no longer shown, bought or collected. Even if only one in ten thousand pictures would meet an artistic standard and if we only would allot two seconds for viewing one picture, one single viewer would still need a maximum of 28 hours each day in order to see all of these works of photographic art being created every day. Huge numbers of brilliant graphic images thus disappear in the stream of digital graphic garbage. Do we need them? The answer is no, because we can no longer sift through even the bulk of archived pictures. Generally speaking, pictures today

are no longer a cultural value worth saving, but a product to be consumed, characterised by their inherent disappearance. The original equality of opportunity – égalité – ends with the levelling and in the end the unrecognisability of any quality whatsoever. Who wants to find the lone diamonds in a gigantic mountain of small rocks? An apocalyptic perspective – not only for photography. Since it is no longer possible to view the totality of today's photographic production of images, even using modern information technology like the Internet and the DVD – and this also applies to the other fine arts in the broadest sense – we are dependent on institutions to do the selecting. These are the museums, the art professors, the gallery owners, the publishing houses and magazines that are gaining an ever more important role in the distribution of fine arts. However, the essential disadvantage of this development is that now, selection criteria far removed from art itself are also deciding over the selection of artists, such as economic or political considerations, party interests, and proportional representation considerations. Consequently, art is turned into a chimera.

## A look at the elite

Given all of these limiting market parameters, one could assume that there is only a kind of artistic photography which is wasting away, whereas in fact, the prices for the works of a small group of photographers are rising into the million-dollar realm – while on the other hand, millions of pictures are disappearing into the no man's land of digital image memory. How can this very different parallel development of seemingly similar entities be explained? The answer cannot be given in a single sentence. First, one ought to try to list the important assessment criteria for the works of high-quality photographic art:

*Ability to connect on an emotional and intellectual level – plausible underlying artistic concept – graphic level in form and presentation – name recognition of the photographer – ability to visually attribute the work to the complete works – quality and size of the photographic print – limitation of the number of prints, authenticity of the print and not least, anticipation of value enhancement*

Time and again, there are individual buyers, groups of collectors and museums who are interested in exceptional works that are rich in ideas, and who also have the money to pay for them – not least, they also speculate in value enhancement. The emphasis of the above-mentioned criteria may differ from viewer to viewer and from buyer to buyer, but in some way or other, they apply to all.

## Auction revenues of selected photo artists in 2006 (in million €)

1 - Andreas Gursk	10.1	Total revenue	2.20
(highest single price)			
2 - Hiroshi Sugimoto	5.9		0.61
3 - Irving Penn	5.3		0.30
4 - Brassai#	5.0		0.11
5 - Alfred Stieglitz#	4.6		1.30
6 - Edward Steichen#	3.8		2.60
7 - Richard Prince	3.0		0.65
8 - Ansel Adams#	3.0		0.53
9 - Cindy Sherman	2.8		0.58
10 - Robert Mapplethorpe#	2.6		0.56

(Source: www-artprice.com, # = deceased)

The essential part of important photographic art is the concept that it constitutes – besides everything demanded from outstanding works, as mentioned above. The best examples for this are the works by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Demand, William Eggleston, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Stephen Shore, Thomas Struth and Jeff Wall, to name only a few. Below, we will have a closer look at the primary concepts of these photographers:

## The artistic concept of selected prominent photographers

### • Bernd and Hilla Becher

Bernd 1931-2007, Hilla \*1934 – famous German photographer couple. University teachers in Düsseldorf of outstanding importance. Students: Gursky, Höfer, Hütte, Ruff, Sasse, Struth et al.

*Concept:* photographic depiction of structures of German industrial history threatened by demolition, such as water towers, furnaces, gasometers, but also half-timbered houses of the Siegerland. The work, which is combined in tableaux of six, nine or twelve parts was considered conceptual art early on and was met by worldwide interest. Reprints mostly measuring 50 x 60 cm, are blown up and developed conventionally.

### • Thomas Demand

\*1964, model maker and photographer. He gained international publicity as one of the most innovative contemporary photographers through a solo exhibition at MoMA in New York.

*Concept:* Demand builds paper models of spectacular places, often within the context of political or other mass media events. He photographs them and later destroys the paper models. Thus, he removes the image from reality in multiple ways. The site which is unspectacular without the media event is elevated into the artificial realm through Demand's conversion. Analogous to the fading memory, it receives a reduced significance, until it has developed back into the originally experienced semantic level.

*Examples:* Bathroom (the site of Uwe Barschel's death), Stasi headquarters after the storm, tunnel (site of Lady Diana's death) or Jackson Pollock's studio.

C-prints in oversized formats of approx. 2 x 3 m, very limited editions.

- **William Eggleston**

\*1939, American photographer, gained his international reputation through his pioneer work in the context of the emerging colour photography of the 1960s. Eggleston influenced the following generation of photo artists, such as Wall, Sherman, Tillmanns and also some Becher students.

*Concept:* Psychologisation of colour. Attempts to elevate objects of everyday life to magical objects and everyday routines to magical sequences which take place outside the regularity of expectations. Eggleston's photographic prints are often dye transfers and are available in sizes of e.g. 9 x 13 cm to 30 x 40 cm. Very limited to limited editions.

- **Andreas Gursky**

\*1955, Becher student, most successful internationally acclaimed German photographer.

*Concept:* Shoots large crowds in modern life and structures of a globalised world. The photographs are scanned and altered in the computer until they resemble Gursky's notion of the idealised image. C-prints in oversized formats of more than 5 meters in width, very limited editions.

Most expensive contemporary photographer. Solo exhibition at MoMA in 1998, extensive retrospective at Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2007.

- **Thomas Ruff**

\*1958, well-known German photographer, Becher student from 1977 to 1985, professor in Düsseldorf from 2000 to 2006 as Becher's successor.

*Series:* Interiors of German living spaces, over-sized portraits, views of buildings, photographs of the star-lit sky, photographs made with night vision gear, images of newspaper clippings without title, alienated porn pictures, abstract computer-generated colour tones, photographs of machines.

*Concept:* the opus is very extensive, and a comprehensive concept across the different series cannot be distinguished, except for a standardised photographic technique. However, the different series viewed individually follow various conceptual ideas.

- **Stephen Shore**

\*1947, internationally acclaimed US photographer, one of the early protagonists of colour photography besides Eggleston and Haas.

*Concept:* Photographs of banal American urban objects, such as residential areas, petrol stations and intersections. These are meant to become documents of contemporary history through the act of photography.

Shore's pictures are contact prints from the slides of his 8 x 10 inch camera and measure 20 x 25 cm. No limit of prints in the past; today: editions of eight prints.

- **Thomas Struth**

\*1954, well-known German photographer. Student of Gerhard Richter 1973-1976 (painting) and Becher 1976-1980 (photography). Professor für Photography in Karlsruhe 1993-1996.

*Concept:* Diversified, extensive opus on the topic of selected surroundings of humans, essentially consisting of street architecture, people indoors, museum interiors and forest scenes referred to as "paradise pictures".

C-prints in formats up to a width of 2.5 m, very limited editions.

- **Jeff Wall**

\*1946, internationally acclaimed Canadian photographer

*Concept:* Wall's often narrative contents are everyday scenes which have been replicated from reality, in part with the help of actors. The pictures are solitary, without being embedded in groups of works or series. The closeness to painting is sought through the presentation of his photographic works, using large-scale light boxes. Intellectually, he is close to Eggleston and Ruff. Reference of the content to well-known sculptures, paintings or novels.

## A broader view

It has not been until relatively recently that photography has aimed to align with the established fine arts such as graphics, painting and sculpture, and with an average share of 15 percent of all images at large art fairs, it is by no means established in the long run yet – despite all affirmations. This is also due to the fact that the evaluation of art has become more difficult in our era of minimal art and concept art: in our expectations from art, we are increasingly moving away from the iconographic image.

Urs Stahel, who is the curator at the photography museum in Winterthur, has answered the question of how an extraordinary photographic work is identified as follows:

*"By using this kind of quality description, we are missing a central aspect of contemporary art. This description concen-*

*trates on the individual work of art and only seeks to find quality in the work of art lying or hanging in front of us. It implies the "masterpiece" and does not see that since the 1960s, the quality of an artistic intervention has significantly moved away from the individual work and manifests itself differently: in a sequence, in a series of works, in an attitude, in form and content, in a commentary, in a visual statement. In this context, quality is no longer measured on the "work of art" in the traditional sense, no longer just on the hardware, but also on the software, the intervention which the artist, the photographer conducts in our mind, in the network of communications. What I am holding in my hands is often only a small part of a complex activity which has been carried out and which must be assessed as a whole. By saying this I also want to express that our point of view has begun to move; often, quality can no longer be found where we expect to find it. And we will only find it if we move, if we do not stand in front of pictures with the connoisseur's security, calmly and sacrosanct, making judgments."*

Once again, this answer makes it clear that the reception of art today is in the process of a fundamental change. In the future, the individual work of art alone is no longer decisive for the experience of art and thus for a possible purchase decision, but the embedding of the individual work into an intellectually superordinate system: in other words, a concept and its hierarchical position within the entire architecture of the opus. Compared to the past, this consequently requires a deepened knowledge of the ideas underlying the works. The photographer must do everything in order to make the ideas underlying his or her opus available to the viewers.

## Conclusion

Through the combination of photography and computer, it has become possible to create virtual realities which allow the photographer to create images to a far greater extent than before. However, reality and imagination remain the cornerstones of photographic art work. In art, guidelines in the sense of a dominating style of an era have lost their relevance. Art – and thus photographic art, as well – is what the majority of viewers see as such. Different styles co-exist peacefully. This liberal attitude of the art market has enabled photography to carefully align with the established branches of art. In photography, the equality of billions of people has been achieved in an artistic technique for the first time – as Joseph Beuys said, "everyone is an artist". Until now, photography is the only mass movement on which Beuys' postulate could be proven. But the result is an immense amount of images. The singular photographic image has become impossible to select, and thus the institutions making this selection are gaining greater importance: the museums, the art scholars and the art dealers. A look at the elite of photographers shows that the work of today's successful artists has an underlying concept which is plausible to the art viewer and which ties the entire

opus of an artist (and not so much a single work of art) to the viewer in an intellectual and spiritual way. Does the art of photography exist? It does, but only if the majority decides in favour of it. The protagonists have made their decision a long time ago. However, the large market of buyers will take its time. In the long run, the number of exhibits of photographic art at the large art fairs is a good indicator for how much photographic art the market absorbs, and for how long.

Translation: Carol Oberschmidt