Replacing Modernist Art Photography in the 1960s and 70s.

Photography as a medium was realised within Clement Greenberg’s formula during the 1960s and 1970s. The refocusing of criteria for the use of photography by Conceptual artists discussed in Jeff Wall’s essay “Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as Conceptual Art.” Wall presents a thorough account of the redefining history of photography. Most importantly he states two important directions photography takes in order to transcend the pictorial: pictorial and the deskilling of photography respectively. The work of Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson and Edward Ruscha will be referred to as examples. Traces of Conceptual art upon contemporary approaches will be discussed using Joachim Schmid’s work.

Photography had adapted the traditions of modernist painting and sculpture since the 1920s with Stieglitz and the Successionists. Elevating photography to a fine art was seen only viable by mimicking painting and sculpture.

Abandoning Pictorialism in the 20s, and influenced by the growth of mass communications, the avant-garde experiments led to an imitation of photojournalism. “Photojournalism… elaborated a new kind of picture, utilitarian in its determination by editorial assignment and novel in its seizure of the instantaneous, of the “news event” as it happened.” (1) The notion of the unique, unspoiled integrity of photography is evident in the work of Paul Strand, Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. This mimicry of reportage and alignment with new culture industries, enabled photography to abandon the sensuous picture surface and continued composition in favour of what Cartier-Bresson coined as, “the decisive moment.”

Jeff Wall states, “The art concept of photojournalism began to force photography into what appears to be a modernist dialectic. By divesting itself of the encumbrances and advantages inherited from older art forms, reportage pushed toward a discovery of qualities apparently intrinsic to the medium, qualities that must necessarily distinguish the medium from others, and through the self-examination of which it can emerge as a modernist art on a plane with the others.” (2)

During the 1940s and 1950s, photography receded back into the language of Modernist Pictorialism. Artists such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, were elevated to a heroic position. Adams trekked into the mountains, lugging large format cameras, risking life and limb in order to get the quintessential shot. the photographer this becomes revered as a genius for revealing the truths in the world. These photographers carefully considered compositions and the textural sensuousness of the picture surface.
Painting and sculpture, through Abstract art had abandoned depiction, and Minimalism was reafocusing issues regarding the validity of the art object. “In the process of developing alternative proposals for art “beyond” depiction, art had to reply to the suspicion that, without their depictive or representational function, art objects were art in name only, not in body, form, or function.” (3)

Finding other possibilities for photography was difficult compared with painting and sculpture. “It is in the physical nature of the medium to depict things.” (4) Conceptual art’s pursuit to transcend photography’s unmitigated picture making qualities sought to reconnect the medium to the real world.

Jeff Wall examines two important directions which emerged from this process; “The first involves the rethinking and “refunctioning” of reportage, the dominant types of photography as it existed at the beginning of the 1960s.” (5) “The second is related to the first, and to a certain extent emerges from it. This is the issue of the de-skilling and re-skilling of the artist in a context defined by the culture industry, and made controversial by aspects of Pop art.” (6)

In the sixties, younger artists bored with the traditions adopted by photography from painting and sculpture agitated the medium by returning to the fundamental “auto-critique” of art associated with the tradition of the avant-garde. (7)

The experimental work of Robert Smithson, Bruce Nauman and Richard Long did not derive as an antithesis of the aesthetic work of their precursors such as Adams and Weston, but rather stems from the concept of reportage as art-photography from the avant-garde of the 1920s. The criteria for art was refocused by the photo conceptualists. As Jeff Wall writes, firstly, it was legitimised by having transcended the boundaries of art, and secondly, the works produced are compelling in their superiority and yet invariably “… they seem to dissolve, abandon, or negate it.” (8)

The idiosyncrasies of reportage were altered with photo conceptualism. Reportage is directed inward and ridiculed by the artist. “The gesture of reportage is withdrawn from the social field and attached to a putative theatrical event.” (9) This was demonstrated in two ways according to Jeff Wall. Firstly, by using Long and Nauman as examples, the staged picture becomes affiliated with the new concepts of performance. Secondly, photojournalism and the photojournalist are ridiculed in the work of Smithson.

Long’s A 1/2 Mile Walk Sculpture, 1969, is an artistic gesture made specifically to be photographed. Long walks traces into the grass leaving a trace. The artist inverts the traditions of pictorial landscapes by positioning the walked track as the foreground motif. (10) The performance does not have meaning unless it is documented, thus the photograph becomes a substitute, a record for the event.

Nauman photographs in the studio which in itself contradicts the Pictorialists. Failing to Levitate in the Studio, 1966 and Self-Portrait as Fountain, 1965-67/70 are examples of Nauman’s experimental art which changed the conditions of reportage from a documented event to a staged and theatrical kind of praxis which was becoming known as Performance art. Studio photography and reportage are this deconstructed. The studio literally becomes the place of truth and reality when it is reinvented during this times becomes many things including a theatre, gallery and meeting place. (11) The studio is also ridiculed as a place where the performative artist as genius creates. Undoubtedly Nauman is referencing the high seriousness of the film documentary of Jackson Pollock, where the artist can be seen in deep concentration making paintings. Self-Portrait as Fountain, is Nauman’s homage to Marcel Duchamp’s fountain. Failing to Levitate in the Studio, parodies Cartier-Bresson’s “the decisive moment,” that split second that photography is known for. This work also questions the notion that photographs are “true.”
‘This integration or fusion of reportage and performance, its manneristic introversion, can be seen as an implicitly parodic critique of the concepts of art-photography.’ (12) Photojournalism combines photography with writing. Smithson’s ‘Mock-travologue’ (13) A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey, 1967, describes the journey he took from the Port Authority in New York to Passaic County. His tour of the monuments in New Jersey begins at a bridge over the Passaic River. When he photographed it in the midday sun, he described it like, ‘photographing a photograph… The sun became a monstrous light bulb that projected a detached series of “still”… When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph…’ (14) The narrative is quite entertaining in its parody of photojournalism. The work’s duality derives from the narrative which describes the making of the photographs, ‘one never knew which side of the mirror one was on.’ (15)


Photography was unable to abandon depiction entirely and thus could not reconcile to Greenberg’s reductivism. ‘Depiction is the only possible result of the camera system, and the kind of image formed by a lens is the only image possible in photography.’ (16) With an influx of students and younger artists adopting the medium, the reduction in photography occurred with the elimination of pictorial and technical skill. By rejecting historical pictorial conventions adapted from painting, photography was now free to demonstrate Greenberg’s formula of ‘the effects [in each art] exclusive to itself.’ (17) Joseph Beuys’s catch phrase, “every man is an artist,” (18) could now circulate within photo conceptual rhetoric with the advancement and democratisation of photographic equipment like the Kodak Brownie.

“It became a subversive creative act for a talented and skilled artist to imitate a person of limited abilities. It was a new experience, one which ran counter to all accepted ideas and standards of art, and was one of the last gestures which could produce avant-gardist shock.” (19) In Some Los Angeles Apartments, 1965, Edward Ruscha’s performance as an ordinary person photographing the apartments in a banal way combines the, "brutalism of Pop art with the low-contrast monochromaticism of the most utilitarian and perfunctory photographs.” (20) Ruscha has treated each image in a straightforward, deliberately artless manner and ignored the… artful effects of lighting, cropping, composition, or print quality.” (21) Depiction is this finally eliminated by reducing art to an intellectual concept.

Many traces of Conceptual art are located in the work of contemporary artists such as Joachim Schmid. Since 1982, Schmid has collected over two hundred and fifty photographs discarded at photo booths and found on his travels. His Pictures from the Streets, are first, "visual artefacts and human documents," (22) and secondly, the pictures, "aren't really art at all and were never intended by their makers to be seen in a public exhibition." (23) Schmid intervenes in the stories and life of the images he has found, they were created somewhere else by parties unknown. By not editing the selection according to aesthetic conventions Schmid, "instead provides an apparently unbiased, sociological sample of imagery lost or thrown away by its owners." (24) Pictures from the Street, ultimately raises questions over Schmid's artistic authorship. The work operates on many levels, it comments on the fetishisation of photography and visually the photographs are fascinating in regard to the mystery they possess and questions they pose in the mind of the viewer.

By dismissing Stieglitz in the post-Pictorialist phase, a shift in style from the painterly to photography's inherent directness and immediacy positions the medium within mass culture. The validity of reportage was precisely the kind of art concept photography sought to revolutionise the picture. After a mild lapse in the 1940s and 50s, Conceptual artists turned towards reviving photography's inherent qualities according to Greenberg's theories, photography turned to reportage. Unable to deny itself its mechanical nature based on the lens, depiction is transcended by reduction of photography to an intellectual concept.

References

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 247.
5. Ibid., p. 248.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 247.
8. Ibid., p. 252.
10. Ibid., p. 254.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 255.
People believe photographs. (1) Photographs are credible in a way that sculptures, etchings and oil paintings are not. Coleman writes this interrupting or peering in on the subject’s private life. The seated man with his hunched back produces empathy in the viewer. Coleman writes, level of reality and truth because of its documentary and archival qualities. The viewer is tantalized by the precise placement of objects that creates Initially, the viewer may presume that the photograph of the man in this curious setting is actually homeless. Photography is imbued with a certain “near documentary.” His picture making process intersects the realm between documentary photography and cinematography, and is an example of the way directorial photography functions today.

Jeff Wall’s image is not an accurate transcription of reality, it is a deliberately constructed realm. He aptly calls the type of photography he practices as “near documentary.” His picture making process intersects the realm between documentary photography and cinematography, and is an example of the way directorial photography functions today.

Images


Jeff Wall – Painting and Cinematography Collide in “Near Documentary” Photography.


Jeff Wall’s *After ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue 1999-2000.* Photographs are a remarkable photograph and a fine example of Wall’s intelligent considerations on picture making. Two major energies that are of great influence to the artist are the grand traditions of Western painting and cinematography.

Wall's image is not an accurate transcription of reality, it is a deliberately constructed realm. He aptly calls the type of photography he practices as “near documentary.” His picture making process intersects the realm between documentary photography and cinematography, and is an example of the way directorial photography functions today. After ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue 1999-2000, recreates a scene from Ralph Ellison’s renowned 1952 novel, “Invisible Man.” The level of detail in the photograph is astounding. Wall meticulously recreated the scene in his studio: 1,369 light bulbs, the blankets covering the walls and doorways, the furniture, papers and hundreds of small items.

Wall’s image is meant to confuse the viewer, the viewer may presume that the photograph of the man in this curious setting is actually homeless. Photography is imbued with a certain level of reality and truth because of its documentary and archival qualities. The viewer is tantalized by the precise placement of objects that creates depth within the pictorial space of the image. By placing the man in the back of the room, Wall creates a feeling in the viewer that they are interrupting or peering in on the subject’s private life. The seated man with his hunched back produces empathy in the viewer. Coleman writes, “People believe photographs.” (1) Photographs are creditable in a way that sculptures, etchings and oil paintings are not. Coleman writes this
believability is based on photography's ability to regulate Renaissance perspective and represent a particular moment of reality, even though it sits
flat on a piece of paper. (2)

Wall is interested in creating "hermetic worlds of fantasy and strangeness." (3) A deep sense of desperation and psychological tension prevails in
Wall's depiction of a solitary man in an airless and claustrophobic interior. By directing and making images and simply not just taking photographs,
Wall engages with the notion of photography as truth. Wall achieved this natural quality by photographing the man for a long period of time. This
encouraged his subject to become comfortable in the scene. Wall developed this process from studying filmmaking. Wall waits with his camera,
until the things he's waiting for, even though he doesn't quite know what it is occurs. (4) Interestingly, in many ways, Wall is also waiting, like Henri
Cartier-Bresson, for his "decisive moment."

Diego Velazquez, Los Meninas (The Maids of Honour), 1656.

From an early age, Wall was interested in painting and drawing. Unable to denounce his love for the Western traditions of 19th century painting,
Wall began to realize that photography could be more than what the medium was inherently rooted and understood to be. Photographs were
usually viewed in books or albums and were small compared to the grand paintings of the Western tradition. During a trip to Europe in the 1970s,
Wall recognized that a lot of important paintings were done near life size. In the following passage, Wall recounts his experience of viewing
paintings by Francisco Goya and Diego Velazquez:

A painting is a certain sized image related to your body that looks and makes you feel something when you stand in front of it in a room... It's large
enough and has amplitude that makes you feel like you are still in the same place and yet there is another place that is presenting itself to you...
That's painting. (5)

Coleman states that within the history of photography there is a tradition of directorial images and cites the staged tableau's and narrative scenes of
stereographic images from the 1850s as examples. Oliver Wendall Holmes writes of his experience of viewing a stereograph, "... so heightened as
to produce an appearance of reality which cheats the senses with its seeming truth." (6) The all-encompassing scale of Wall's photograph with its
amazing detail is likened to a film still, but a connection can also be drawn to the stereograph. The film reference is obviously informed by the
luminosity of the picture's display method. The large-scale transparency is housed in a backlit light box and because of the proportion the viewer's
experience is likened to being in a cinema viewing a single frame of film.

References
1. A D Coleman, 'The Directorial Mode: Notes towards a definition,' in Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present, ed. Vicki Goldberg,
2. ibid.

Images
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Henri Cartier-Bresson (French: [kaʁtje bʁɛsɔ̃]; August 22, 1908 – August 3, 2004) was a French humanist photographer considered a master of candid photography, and an early user of 35 mm film. He pioneered the genre of street photography, and viewed photography as capturing a decisive moment. Cartier-Bresson was one of the founding members of Magnum Photos in 1947. In the 1970s he took up drawing—he had studied painting in the 1930s. Est. in 2003 by Henri Cartier-Bresson, his wife Martine Franck and their daughter the Foundation is one of the major photographic institutions in Paris. During his long career Henri Cartier-Bresson realised many hundreds of portraits, of personalities as well as... Rencontres. [SOLD OUT] Meeting with Sophie Calle led by Éric Reinhardt. For the publication of the book Sans lui by Atelier EXB, meeting with the artist Sophie Calle, led by the novelist Éric Reinhardt. The meeting is only held in French and free upon prior reservation (sold out) Meeting followed by a... Visit Us. FAQ. Find the latest shows, biography, and artworks for sale by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Upon picking up a Leica camera in the early 1930s, Henri Cartier-Bresson fell in love with the spontaneity of photography and went on to pioneer photojournalism. MoMA credits his "uncanny ability to capture life on the run" with... creative potential of modern photography and lauds him as "the keenest observer of the global theater of human affairs." Henri Cartier-Bresson – Strozzina di Firenze, Firenze, Italy 1952 Photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson – Institute of... London, UK 1947 The Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson – The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA 1935 Fotografias: Cartier-Bresson, Alvarez Bravo – Palacio de Bellas Artes de Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico 1935 Documentary & Anti-Graphic Photography – Photographs by Cartier-Bresson Walker Evans & Manuel Alvarez. [PEARLS FROM THE ARCHIVES] During the lockdown, the Fondation HCB offers to rediscover its Pearls from the Archives... Open tweet. @fondationhcb 2 days ago. [PERLES DES ARCHIVES] Pendant la période de confinement, la Fondation HCB propose la redécouverte de ses Perles des... Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use. To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: Cookie Policy.