Photography, Reality, and Representation.

Photography as Representational Art.

An influential philosophical view, albeit expressed 30 years ago, was that photography is incapable of representing anything.¹ And as recently as 2006 it was said that UK art institutions had a significant problem with photography.² Nevertheless, the attention paid to the medium by art historians and art critics in recent years, together with many exhibitions of work by photographers in major art galleries, emphasise the importance of photography as an art form and signal its liberation from the photographic ghetto. But is photography an art form just like any other? The inherent features of photography: the perception of a physical connection with an object photographed, mass reproducibility of its products, and the insistent semiotics of content question photography’s kinship with other forms of art. A conundrum which remains unresolved is that of “transference of reality from the thing (photographed) to its reproduction”³.

We do not live in reality but in our perceptions and constructions of it. Photography is a medium delivering imagery that the human mind interprets as most consistent with this unknowable external world. But the reassurance, comfort, and certainty to be had from photographs are as illusory as the photograph itself. The properties of the photograph and how images are perceived and processed are determinants still needing understanding even 150 years or more after the invention of photography.
The Imprint of the Real.

Because light emanating from an object can be physically traced as waves of electrons (at least for analogue photography), an “imprint of the real” can be physically linked at the quantum level to that object. This could support the idea that the object and its photographic image share common matter. This is a view that has been argued by many including Bazin and Metz, and remains vexatious. Bazin has said that “the photographic image is the object itself freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it”. This conflation of object and image robs the photograph of aesthetics in that it becomes only mimetic and loses the ability of representation. These mimetic properties of photographs while raising doubts about their status, also endow them with an appeal to human psychology unlike that of other forms of visual art including painting. It is not by mistake that the look of work of some contemporary portrait painters has become realistic to the point of being difficult to distinguish from photographs.

If there is any material connection between an object and image, it is not confined to photography alone. However realistically or not the subject in a painting is represented it too has an imprint of the real; that is, paintings are accomplished by means of quantum events initiated by light passing from the subject to the artist’s eye, followed by molecular and biochemical events in the retina, brain, and subsequently nerves and muscles which result in the application of paint to a canvas. It could be argued that the molecular pathways of the human body that enable painting might be more complex than those producing photographs. Nevertheless these events must exist for all visual arts: if they did not, artwork would have to appear by means of some incorporeal mechanism.
If this idea is sustainable it has implications for an understanding of representation. Because the trace of the object imprints directly by chemical means Krauss says that photographs are indexical and not iconic.\(^{10}\) Thanks to this, Krauss defines photographs as “\textit{independent of imaginative manipulation}” and associates them taxonomically with the readymade, thus reinforcing arguments about the conflation of photographic image and object.\(^{11}\) These interpretations depend for validity on a type of photograph which is mimetic and produced without recourse to manipulation of the image at the time of taking the image (or later). It simplistically discounts any intention of the photographer. It has always been possible to manipulate the photograph by simple technical means of exposure, shutter speed, and so on, and by doing this modify the indexicality of the image even at its inception. This is one of the problems with photography theory: there are obvious photographic genres, but the extent of differences among individual photographs even within one type is enormous. Some will be mimetic, but many others will not, and these differences are often ignored for the purposes of theoretical analysis. Either that, or authors select what they call an ideal type.\(^{12}\)

Magritte said that his paintings: “\textit{show nothing except what I have thought}”.\(^{13}\) This is where paintings and photographs seemingly are capable of substantive differentiation. But the perceptions that enable paintings to be representations are derived from thoughts and memories and hence, often, from things that have previously been seen; although in the case of some artists, for example Magritte the images are highly imaginative juxtapositions of fragments of things seen. (Figure 1).
Arguing against the indexicality of photographs, David Bate says that realism in the majority of photographs is iconic: “visual memesis is a form of iconic logic caught up in a play of resemblance within the field of perspectival vision more than it is indexical”.

Commodity Fetish.
On the 11th of November 2011 a limited edition print of Andreas Gursky’s photograph Rhein II sold at auction for £2.7 million, the highest amount ever paid for a photograph. (Figure 2). Because of the taxonomical nature of art analysis and history, photography’s enigma is part of its allure as well as of its vulnerability. A need to fully understand an artistic medium reflects a need to demonstrate power within an elite establishment. In classifying work of any kind as art, there are many considerations including aesthetics, and one is commodity fetish, a major determinant of the price of sale of a work of art. Photographs almost from the outset have been mass produced, mitigating against their fetishisation as commodities. Mass production and commodity fetish are
in opposition, and reproducibility of art is a challenge to an acquisitive
elite. At one and the same time photography has the potential to be a most
democratic and an elitist form of art. This is reflected in autopoietic
subsystems: artistic photography as opposed to the abundance of
photographs characteristic of so-called snapshots.17,18

Despite Gursky’s acclaim and the rich catalogue of artistic photography
which has many contemporary as well as historical entries the photograph
remains enigmatic, and some in the art establishment remain suspicious
of it. This implies that there is something peculiar about the means of
making photographs or the status of the photographer as artist. One
reason for this may be the mechanicalism of photography; this is one
of its imponderables, despite decades of investigation through photography
theory. While optimistic about the place of photography in art, saying that
the photograph is displacing painting as the singular object of art, some
authors are dismayed by the lack of theoretical discourse concerning
contemporary photography and “complete lack of any significant
development in photography theory” (in the decade to 2006).19

Figure 2.
Sarah James says that photography “still occupies a strange temporality in relation to the present”.\(^{20}\) This is because a photograph from the instant after its creation is a record of an historic event. Because of the psychological effects of photographs, history and the photograph have a special relationship which is problematic. Emotive feelings for the dead, for example, are very readily evoked by photographs, whereas a painting does not have precisely the same effect.

**The Digital Image.**
The vast majority of photographs are now captured with digital cameras and are intended to be mementos. This is a valuable cultural practice, but it is not a form of art. (Although in the billions of digital images produced annually there must be many with a semblance of art). What may not be readily accepted by those who produce these images is that (as with any photograph), their images are not depictions of reality. Barthes wrote: “Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes. I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image”.\(^{21}\) Later Sontag wrote: “There is something on people’s faces when they don’t know they are being photographed that never appears when they do”.\(^{22}\) Theatricality apart, the depiction of events in a photograph despite the imprint of the real, does not represent reality. That they are unquestioningly regarded in this way makes the photograph a dangerous object.

**What the Mind and Memory Make of Photographs.**
A photograph, like any image, has the capacity to become a component of the memory of those who have seen it. And a photograph can be experienced again and again to refresh and perhaps to modify the memory. If the memory of an event is derived by real-life experience and
then later, sometimes much later, by seeing a photograph of that event, which of these memories is the more cogent? The danger is that the perceived reality in a photograph confuses the distinction between object and image, signified and signifier. The nature of photographs and the way in which the mind perceives and interprets them are complex and elusive. An understanding of these issues does not at this time seem to be entirely within our grasp, and it may be that a much better understanding of the psychology of human perception and other aspects of neuroscience are needed before photography can be fully understood.

The memory of an event which exists in the mind is (if it can be reified) is a fragile entity, prone to distortion and misconception, and an awareness of this is needed to guard against the falsehood of the photograph, or rather its faulty interpretation. Original memory is in danger of being supplanted by the memory of the transformed photographic self. The photograph refreshes the original memory, but at the cost of its alteration. The photograph can also create an entirely false memory where there is no experience or no recall of a past event. This is analogous to the way in which our perceptions of paintings are altered when they are reproduced in photographs. In photographs of paintings we are in danger of losing the original colours and textures. The poster and the colour plate replace the original painting, sometimes to its detriment and sometimes to its enhancement. Exploiting work by Rineke Dijkstra, Nan Goldin, and Jo Spence some authors more optimistically suggests that photographic technologies can be construed as extensions of the physical body and be instrumental in constructing identity and a narrative of self.

Language was at one time thought to be the agency which sustains human reality. The photograph is as strong a contender for that function
as is language, and equally poor in the role. The manipulation of time in the act of creating a photographic image and the ability of the photograph to modify the mind can be regarded as surreal or uncanny events. Perhaps every photograph is surreal.\textsuperscript{30} Capturing the uncanny, and in so doing revealing the strangeness and complexity of the world and its inhabitants, sentient or not, is a valuable role for photography.

\textit{Craft Skills.}

The processes of photography, especially analogue media, require considerable craft skills and technical expertise, but they do not usually leave their visible mark on the image in the same way as manipulation of materials does in other media. Indeed, when they do leave a tangible imprint this is taken as evidence of a lack of technical competence by the uninformed. This is something that contemporary photographers must work to overcome to avoid a sanitisation of their medium. This is not only a problem for photography. Some portrait painters have begun to produce work which closely resembles photographs (in reproduction these paintings are almost indistinguishable from photographs).\textsuperscript{31} (Figure 3). There seems to be a convergence of media here: some photographers are making images which have the features of paintings; landscape photographers like Beate Gutschow produce composite images based on classical structures of 18\textsuperscript{th} century landscape paintings.\textsuperscript{32} (Figure 4). In creating paintings, Gerhard Richter makes extensive use of photographs to \textit{“draw out something which takes the place of representation”}.\textsuperscript{33} (Figure 5).
Figure 3.

Figure 4.
Figure 5.

**Thinkers and Artists.**

Historically there has been a societal divide between those people who are artists and those who are scientists. In a formal introduction for Roger Sperry, Nobel Prize winner in Medicine in 1981 for his work on brain function, David Ottoson recalled the suggestion from Pavlov, the eminent Russian physiologist that “mankind can be divided into thinkers and artists”. To endorse Pavlov’s gratuitous comments Ottoson cited Sperry’s work which was at the time interpreted as showing that the left hemisphere of the brain is cool and logical in its thinking while the right hemisphere is the imaginative and artistically creative half of the brain. This neat cerebral dichotomy is a metaphor for a cultural divide between science and art. Today we know that Sperry’s research does not provide a complete solution, and that the brain’s hemispheres are highly interactive and necessary for a huge range of different human functions and activities.
There is a need for artists to be aware of recent findings in neuroscience.
Writing in *Visual Literacy*, on the role of sensory knowledge in the age of
the self-organizing brain, Stafford makes a case for the need to know about
the physical interiority of the human self. 37 This is akin to the much earlier
ideas of the Surrealists who, enabled by Freudian theories, attempted to use
the power of the subconscious to produce significant art and literature. 38

**Photographic Art, Science, Surrealism.**

James Elkins has proposed that contemporary photography should be
positioned not only with reference to art but also to diverse scientific,
technological, and utilitarian activities. 39 He argues for experimentation
with photography’s basic materials. The collaborations between scientists
and artists and the incorporation of science and scientific artefacts in the
work of artists like Christine Borland and Helen Chadwick dispel any
science and art divide. 40,41 (Interestingly, the scientist Sperry’s activities
outwith brain research included sculpture, ceramics and figure
drawing). 42 Chadwick was an exemplary figure with regard to using the
interiority of the self to produce art. Some of Chadwick’s images are of
human eggs or early embryos, blood cells in environmental landscape
photomontages, human organs, and mutant and deformed animals and
human foetuses; they are often microscopic, sometimes pseudo-medical,
usually poignant, and almost always surreal (Figures 6 & 7). This is what
was said of her for an exhibition of some of her work in 1996: “*She spent
the short time she was allowed to pass through this world in examining in
every way she could how consciousness translates into matter and can be
made visible*”. 43
Figure 6

Figure 7.
Surrealism offers the antidote to perceived realism of the photograph by picturing the uncanny, and an alternative reality. In surrealist photography the mimetic functions of photographs are manipulated by the mind of the photographer to produce a representation of the world which is uncanny (Figure 8). In doing this the human mind is made capable of glimpsing the nature of the real world.

Figure 8.

**Coda.**

The photograph in modifying consciousness has the potential to reshape the external world, and the nature and quality of the perceived information is important in this process. There is a danger to a wider society in the lack of understanding of how we as individuals subsume photographs when so many are of our own making. This is a long-standing problem acknowledged by Walter Benjamin: ‘‘*It is not the person who cannot read or write but the person who cannot interpret a photograph (someone has said) who will be the illiterate of the future.*’’
However, surely equally illiterate is the photographer who cannot read his own images”.

Sadly even now the nature of photographs and the way in which the mind perceives them and might be materially affected by them are areas requiring much better understanding both for art and for society.
Notes.


11. Ibid.

12. Roger Scruton.


20. Ibid.


31. Sarah Dunant.


33. Gerhard Richter, 100 Pictures, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002), 152 pp.


35. Ibid.


42. [http://www.rogersperry.info/](http://www.rogersperry.info/)

43. Helen Chadwick.


Bibliography.


List of Figures.

4. Beate Gutschow. *LS#3*
5. Gerhard Richter. *Lesende*.
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Reification of language.

Every discourse responding to an artwork is an object in itself. In this way many new existential works are created, although different one from another and from the original. Like their progenitors, some of these reifications of language are more beautiful than others.

This is an essay produced during the first year of a Master of Fine Art degree at Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh University, and remade as an art object on 20 November 2012. With no pretensions of beauty.

This essay is part of the required publication project: pdf available on keithguy.wordpress.com