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photography, phantasy & fine-print encounters

an exploration of making and viewing

mark wheeler
2004

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"Writing about photography is like talking about music – i.e. it can be done but one doesn't really advise it"

Ralph Gibson (1981, p238)

"The photograph is now, with art and nature, a permanent source of art. But through the irrepressible machinery of reproduction, its images soon lose the magic of newness and become commonplace."

Scharf (1968, p252)

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak."

the opening lines of ***Ways of Seeing,*** John Berger (1972, p7)

"the plastic reality of our external perceptions is directly related to the wealth of unconscious phantasy."

Ehrenzweig (2001 p11)

"Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy."

Susan Sontag (1977 p23)

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Abstract & Preface

Edward Weston wrote
"Whenever I can feel a Bach Fugue in my work I know that I have arrived."
Quoted by Upton (1975) p48

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to explore the unique qualities of photographs and their relationship with other "art" activity and our psychological responses to making and viewing photographs. It is motivated by my lifelong drive to make and view photographs, which has provided me with new insights and enabled me to construct particular realities through my camera. As a child I noticed people didn't react to photographs in such a knowing way as drawings or paintings. They seemed to be caught off guard. Photographs conjure phenomenology and phenomenalism that invites tense relationships with viewers' other perceptions of the world around them.

The psychological dimensions of sculpture, drawing and painting were investigated in the second half of the twentieth century (although Freud and Jung began this earlier). Jo Spence, Rosy Martin and Judy Weiser et al have explored aspects of domestic photography since 1980, but studies of the impact of art forms on the psychology of their creators and their consumers rarely consider photography, apart from those by photographers themselves. This dissertation will consider photographs created for viewing in a gallery context; it questions whether 'fine art' photographic prints contain or mediate an emotional or psychological process and how this differs from that of domestic and commercial photographs or that of paintings.

The democratisation of photography, including the popular Eastman "Kodak" camera, and the rapid cost reduction and hence expanded use of photo-reproduction coincide approximately with the development of psychoanalysis and other modern psychological theories. The *reality-trap,* or perhaps *reality-gap* is for me one of the great strengths of photography as an expressive medium. The photograph's illusion of near perfect gestalts appeals to the conscious intellect, perhaps seducing the viewer into an open-minded state.

Traditional photography is reaching the end of its natural life as the main inexpensive mass reproducible, reproductive, illustrative, or mimetic process, replaced by digital storage. The dissertation will confine itself to the traditional wet-process sensitised-chemical form of photography.

The photographic writings of Beaumont Newhall, Aaron Scharf, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Walter Benjamen, Victor Burgin, etc are acknowledged, and ideas on perception and art drawn from R L Gregory, Carl Jung and James Hillman etc. Some writers like Ernst Gombrich *(Art & Illusion)*, Anton Ehrenzweig *(The Hidden Order of Art)* and most recently David Maclagan *(Psychological Aesthetics)* offer ideas on painting and drawing that I argue are also applicable to photography.

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One of the major problems of any analysis of this sort is that in attempting to describe experience in words, inevitably the sense of the whole is lost. The subject is one of multi-layered multi-dimensional process. That is why we desire to make and experience art. The case studies would be predominantly image based to reinforce the arguments made in the text.

Preface

As a child I began to make photographs with a Kodak Instamatic25 camera given to me for my tenth birthday. I took great care over how I composed the elements in the square viewfinder. I soon became aware of how they would look in the final photograph, for example how the frame edges would cut through objects in my visual field. I was disappointed with enprints, which seemed lifeless, and so I tried slide film. Even through a little battery operated slide-viewer these seemed to have particular qualities which engaged me. I was hooked. I made only slides for the next eight years and felt the effort made to view them was important. It was part of the ritual consumption of these pictures and invited a different kind of attention from little prints.

My interest in photography as a child had much to do with my poor eyesight. At eight years old my depth of reasonable focus ranged from about 20cm to 2m. My mental picture of the road I grew up in is unpopulated but detailed, like long exposure photographs. I would interpolate my remembered close-up views of the world onto the blurred outlines that I could actually see. Anything that moved was vague, as though almost invisible to me. I was prescribed spectacles, but my new sharp picture of the world lacked any straight lines except those that intersected the centre of my spectacles' lenses. The photographs that I made provided me with a different story and enabled me to construct my own reality through my camera and I have been busy doing so ever since.

I was intrigued by the reactions of others who saw these images. I noticed how viewers sometimes reacted quite strongly, and very differently from my drawings and paintings. When I made paintings viewers reacted to them as paintings, aware of their form as much as their content.

People didn't react to photographs in such a knowing way as drawings or paintings. They seemed to be caught off guard. Having noticed this as a child, I saw it again working in a child and adolescent therapeutic community. The staff would look at the young people's photographs and react completely differently from their reactions to their paintings. Their cultural filters seemed to be out of circuit as if they were responding to the very screen of their memory.

My experience of art analysis, particularly in art education, is that art's emotional and communicative qualities can be overwhelmed by rational approaches. Form is analysed, systems, semiotics and labels (often extraordinarily verbose, lengthy, and impenetrable) are imposed. Creativity becomes sapped of its emotion and reduced or deconstructed into its identifiable component parts. It could seem in criticism and education that the words to describe art became more important than the art itself. If I could have said it with words why would I have gone to all that extra creative and practical effort?

As a photography undergraduate I experimented with images that were emotive, using self-portraits, "Equivalents", and reconstructed dreamscapes. These last led me into exploration of the idea of photography itself and what photographs mean to many of us.

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Some tutors and students responded uncomfortably, but unrelated to the technical quality or apparent content. It was the commonplace items which claimed a kind of 'reality trap' (especially when photographed on Polaroid film). This *reality trap,* or perhaps *reality gap* is for me one of the great strengths of photography as an expressive medium.

The illusion of near perfect gestalts of the photograph appeals to the conscious intellect, but this appeal might also attract defence, perhaps because of the closed nature of the gestalt. Thus some photographers become rigid adherents to the technicalities of exposure, development, depth of focus etc perhaps in denial of unconscious material. Indeed it may be an attraction by the apparent ease by which these technicalities can be used to exclude anything feared to be ego threatening.

In my own photography I have remained intrigued by the responses of others to my images whose history they know. In a college studio workshop I constructed room-sets of dreams and photographed them as though movie stills from a dream. I became fascinated about the strength of reaction to these dream photographs. Students and staff who had already seen my sketch book drawings in preparation to the making of the photographs, who had watched the evolution of the constructions and who were familiar with what I was trying to achieve, reacted unexpectedly strongly to the final prints. Some described them as uncomfortable to look at, even though they were only the familiar bits of coated paper.

Plate 1: **Jo Spence and Terry Dennett**: *Industrialization* 1982
I began again to ask questions to which I could find no answers among the literature in the college library. What different quality was imbued in some photographs that touched such raw nerves in their viewers? Does the nature of the photographic image allow it to bypass our personal filters, which we would routinely apply to other human artefacts?

Then I met Jo Spence who had recently exhibited a collection of work that concentrated on her experience of breast cancer, and her emotional responses and experiences of treatment. In conversation with Jo we discovered much in common in the responses we had received to our photographs. Jo offered me the alternative idea that the viewer's responses reinforce the validity of such photographs.

Photography is both art form and mass communicator. Photography is rarely mentioned among studies of the impact of art forms on the psychology of their creators and their consumers (viewers or listeners). Little has been written about the unconscious processes involved in photography and its consumption, apart from by a few photographers themselves. Such analysis lies in the interzone, which is more than overlap between two or more parameters, it creates resonances that only occur in the interzone. This dissertation considers photographs created to be viewed in a gallery context, sometimes combined with other media, which is a context removed from the everyday bombardment of photographic images in editorial, advertising and domestic arenas.

This dissertation seeks to explore those unique qualities and their relationship with other "art" activity, rather than through the socio-cultural photo-historical lens often applied to this medium. It has been lightly touched upon by commentators whose principal interest has lain elsewhere and it is my intention to gather some of their thoughts where they overlap with the central theme of this dissertation.

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This study seems to be particularly timely. Photography is reaching the end of its natural life as the dominant inexpensive mass reproducible, reproductive, illustrative, or mimetic process. Inexpensive digital cameras are now commonly adopted by mass printed media and domestic picture makers as the first option.

The democratisation of photography, including the popular Eastman "Kodak" camera and the rapid cost reduction and hence expanded use of photo-reproduction coincide approximately with the development of psychoanalysis and other modern psychological theories. New developments in neuro-psychoanalysis are seeking possible connections between activities of the autonomic nervous system with art and music activity and a purely psychological scrutiny of the photograph may become less possible.

The advent of the new, more convenient, digital "photo"-technology, is prompting a backlash among existing photographers rather reminiscent of the protests of miniaturists against photography 150 years ago. The sea change now taking place in the field of reproduced images provides, perhaps, a pause in its development, which may be the ideal opportunity to analyse the process and materiality that gives wet-process photography its particular interaction with people.

One of the major problems of any analysis of this sort is that in attempting to describe experience in words, inevitably the sense of the whole is lost.

The subject is one of multi-layered multi-dimensional process.

That is why we desire to make and experience photographs as art.

Introduction

"All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability."

Sontag (1977, p15)

plate 2

"The catalyst which set The Brass and The Velvet in motion was an opulent Victorian album, bound and crafted for endurance. Back in the 1980s, in an antique shop window, it caught my eye several times, looking as if it pleaded for an owner. I didn't need the album but I had a gut feeling it needed me.

"I was curious about this family, so obviously successful. Not a single name could be found of either the owner or the people, now immortal in sepia."

Christabel Burniston, (2001) *"The Brass and The Velvet"*

Burniston's introduction to her first novel acknowledges the profound impact photographs may have, even old photographs of unknown subjects. Such was her curiosity about these photographs that they inspired her first novel, although Burniston is an established author in other fields.

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"...-all such talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality."

Sontag (1977, p16)

Photographs appear in many different contexts all around us. This discussion concentrates on the photograph seen in the gallery. It questions whether 'fine art' photographic prints contain or mediate an emotional or psychological process and how this differs from that of domestic and commercial photographs or that of paintings.

From its invention, photography has been described, often patronisingly, as a mimetic art. Photography's evangelists in the nineteenth century went to great lengths to demonstrate that photography was a 'proper' creative art like painting. Various factions formed, who each believed themselves to be the bearers of the true photographic artists' standard, and rivalry was intense.

The photographic object itself has little intrinsic material value; its value is imbued by its maker, its keeper, and its viewer. Lately the cult of the 'fine-print', printed by the original photographer (or his or her approved smudger) has given galleries the financial incentive to rank photography alongside other twentieth century investment art. The 'added value' of the original artist's limited edition print inverts the democratising tendency of the negative/print process. Does this imply recognition of a different viewing experience of the 'master' print compared with copies or reproductions?

"Photography's ascent to fine art status was virtually predicated by its claims to aura. Walter Benjamin, who theorized the concept, described it as comprised of those qualities of singularity and uniqueness which produced the authoritative "presence" of the original work of art. Aura was the very quality, he argued, that must wither in the age of mechanical reproduction."

Solomon-Godeau (1984, p77)

The hypothesis that similar engagements between artist and viewer may occur with the medium of photography as with other creative media have long been disputed, by, for example Lady Elizabeth Eastlake (1857) to Donald Kuspit (1983). However, these arguments often neglect the context of the photograph, which here is the 'master print' on the gallery wall.

Human perception becomes uniquely altered by the photographic surface. Unlike drawing, painting or other two-dimensional images, photographs conjure phenomenology and phenomenalism that invites tense relationships with viewers' other perceptions of the world around them. Relationships between ourselves and external objects have special qualities endowed upon them, initially by the perception processes of the viewer, including their saccadic eye movements, pursuit eye movements, unconscious subtle head movements and binocular vision. Then the viewer may even choose to move around to get 'a better view'.

Photographs invite, due to their illusion of tonal and geometrical similarity to the human field of view, similar perceptual processes to those employed on the external world, but this invitation clashes with the reality of the photographic surface. Both the photographer's and the viewer's autonomic nervous system activity might thus be similarly stimulated.

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These unconscious processes might be sufficiently similar for the viewer of the photograph as for the creator to explain a mechanism for mediation between the unconscious or emotional states of the photographer and the viewer.

The photograph has a stationary monocular viewpoint; it is tonally defined by the light sensitive material selected by the photographer; it has a surface quality unique to that print or transparency material selected. A photograph enables particular viewpoints (in every sense) to be offered to the viewer.

The photograph also has a history and surface quality that endows it with conscious and unconscious expectations and reactions unique to it. A dialectical reflective process arises from my own experience of photographs and its congruence with existing descriptions of experience of the transactions involved in making and viewing paintings.

Such is *"the unique quality of photography"* that the modernist polyartist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1936, p50) coined the phrase *"A New Instrument of Vision"* to describe the *"fair way to bringing (optically) something entirely new into the world"* .

plate 3: **Moholy-Nagy**: *View from the Pont Transbordeur, Marseilles* 1929

"Their [particular photographic developments] systematic co-ordination opens up a new field of visual presentation in which still further progress becomes possible."

Moholy-Nagy (1936, p51)

Implicit within his summary is the idea that the development of photography coincided with, and informs, the development of the modern world. Most people experience the modern world through photographs. Hence both the existence and the form of the modern world are mediated through photography, which defines the experience as received reality. Without photographs much of the world would not be known to all but a few. This creates and reinforces the 'reality-trap' of the photograph.

"As photography has come to mediate, if not wholly represent, the empirical world for most of the inhabitants of industrialised societies (indeed, the production and consumption of images serves as one of the distinguishing characteristics of advanced societies), it has become a principal agent and conduit of culture and ideology."

Solomon-Godeau (1984, p76)

This common experience of a world usually mediated through photography extends to common experience of paintings (seen reproduced in books more often than original), further reinforcing the misconception of unmediated representation. Visual trickery or trompe l'oiel photographs may shed light on some of the unconscious assumptions we make when viewing photographs, and of the nature of the photographic image. The Ames room illusion is one of many examples of constructions in space dependent on a specific fixed viewpoint for the illusion to be created and maintained. The camera's rigid monocularity enables this, but it the surface quality of the wet process print or negative actually creates the 'reality' illusion.

A viewer might assume a digital image to have been created in-file rather than in-camera or in-space. When presented with the picture below fresh from a computer printer, the viewer might assume the illusion to have been created in the software, rather than to have

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been painstakingly constructed from timber frame and plywood. The modern viewer in most of the populated world has a sophisticated relationship with photographs owing to the daily bombardment of images in public and private spaces.

plate 5: ***The Ames room*** – *how it appears* (Gregory 1980, p26)

Helmholtz had proposed the idea behind the Ames Room 50 years prior to Ames' construction (Gregory 1980 p27). It took the invention of photography to make the illusion a practical reality that could be shared and disseminated. The success of the illusion is dependant on certain assumptions about the photographic image produced. The assumption of linear perspective is one prerequisite, but the idea that the photographic image is a true record of that view is commonly accepted unchallenged. This is the principal moment where encounters with wet process photographic images differ from those with painting or digital imaging. The success of the Ames Room illusion demonstrates, and indeed depends upon, certain unconscious assumptions about the nature of the photographic surface, described in 1953 by William Ivins Jr, the curator of prints at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

"Inescapably built into every photograph were a great amount of detail and, especially, the geometrical perspective of central projection and section."

Ivins (1953, p181)

Ivins described *"Photography as a way of making visual reports with "no interfering symbolic linear syntax of it's own"."* (1953, p177)

Ivins suggests that photography enables not only optical exactitude, but verisimilitude too, and this lies at the core of our relationship with photographs and photographic process. Arising through abstract thought on which represented images depend, and which permeates our conscious lives, we strive to apply meaning to those events and experiences unique to each of us, including photographs. The drive to experience art may be the same as the drive to find meaning in life.

"Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy."

Sontag (1977, p23)

The first negative-positive photograph, the Calotype (named after the Greek for 'beautiful picture') was made by Fox Talbot, *Latticed Window*.

"Symbolically it speaks to the act of photographing and to the photograph itself, for we look at (and through) a window which suggests an almost mysterious play of presence and absence. It remains an ur-image for both the history and understanding of the photograph."

Sontag (1977, p111)

"Oil painting is category specific; the material is exclusive to artistic endeavour – the dilemma in photography is located in its multiple function and its diverse forms; these do not exist independently, but relate to each other and to other cultural forms".

Stevie Bezencenet (1982, p81)

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Not all photography has qualities of art form. One may draw with a 4B pencil to make art. One may also draw with that 4B pencil to mark out timber for sawing or sketching some idea on the back of an envelope. The same soft pencil is involved, but they are not the same activity, any more than domestic or advertising photography resembles the process of editorial or exhibition photography. The different context imposes different phenomenology. That distinction is prerequisite to discussion of unconscious encounters with photographs and discussion of the phenomenology of encounters with photographs on the gallery wall.

The experience at first hand looking at the gallery print is similar to the experience of an original painting in that the viewer's experience is affected by the facture of the print, the many dimensions craftsmanship and creation of the photograph. The painting loses this degree of affect in reproduction, or over-restoration, as will the photographic print. The viewer's response may be unconsciously mediated, through the print, with the unconscious activity of the artist at the time the object was created. This differs from the conscious experience of context and content analysed in socio-cultural and meaning (semiotic) terms.

The best analyses of images are performed in the presence of the images themselves, and discussions of content are successfully rehearsed by the latter commentators illustrated by reproduced examples. Discussing the subtle features and effects of an original work of art should to be conducted in the presence of the original for legitimacy; the numerous plates included here as examples only hint at the evidence available on the gallery wall.

"Writing about photography is like talking about music – i.e. it can be done but one doesn't really advise it"

Ralph Gibson (1981, p238)

Supportive quotations from established exhibiting photographers have been included in an attempt to bridge this shortcoming. Readers should at least be familiar with the first generation photographic artefact in various settings, which although different in context will share some of the surface qualities described.

"The snapshot often has more life and power than all the arty, pretentious schmaltz of the colour supplement lens-liars".

Bill Jay (1971, p44)

Most encounters with 'real' photographs are domestic, so our encounter with 'art' photographs may be sometimes overlaid with similar projections. Encounters in psychotherapy may shed light on transactions in art. Considering the role of photographs in the construction of people's world-picture, and of the family photograph-album in the construction of families' shared narratives, the narrative-constructing activities of therapy may offer insight into that capacity of photographs. Donald Spence (1982) challenges Freud's "archaeological" historical model of the mind and argues that various imprecisions permit a wider window of truth than that described by Freud. Although Spence's argument mainly concentrates on the practise of psychoanalysis his ideas may be applicable to the creation and experience of images.

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"The language can easily add a reality of its own - both because the patient's descriptions are approximate and incomplete, and because the analysts interpretations tend to become polished linguistic achievements that are larger than life and therefore more compelling"

Donald Spence (1982)

The mediated past is determined in a particular manner which is a created construction, be it mental or physical. It not only shapes our view of our past (an experience, our view, an expression etc) but it, a creation of the present, becomes the past. The photograph viewed in the present becomes the past. Perhaps a further possibility is that any commonality of expression also enables connection between the unconsciously expressed material of the artist and that of the viewer.

Additionally, the viewer or listener seeking patterns becomes a pattern maker. Transferring these ideas from the therapeutic environment to more generalised ideas of perception: that which is experienced is the experience in the sense that tends towards Phenomenalism (rather than Existentialism or Phenomenology) if the concept of archaeological truth is considered an equivalent of physical things and narrative truth an equivalent of their possible appearance.

"Perception is a matter of selecting the most likely object...making sense of the world as best it can with its limited collection of answers from the past - then what happens when we are confronted with something unique?"

Gregory (1980, p36)

Victor Shklovsky (1917 paraphrased) argued that the purpose of art is to present the unknown, particularly the abstract or transcendent, in terms of the known, using the Formalist technique of "ostraneniye", approximately translated as defamiliarisation or making strange. This forces the viewer to notice and to become consciously aware of perception. Shklovsky refers to poems with roughened rhythm (he uses the term "zatrudyonny" meaning made difficult) which arrest the reader's attention, in contrast to the way in which easy lilting rhythms might slip by unnoticed. In visual terms this irregularity could be considered anything which deviates from the representational, the obvious Gestalts.

Shklovsky describes unconscious perceptual processes that invite changes in conscious awareness, exemplified in photography by El Lizistky, Alexander Rodchenko, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. These processes also occur in images not specifically created with this objective in mind.

Plate 6: **Zeke Berman**: *Untitled,* 1979

"To compete with the painter is not really our destiny: we are on the way to speaking our very own language. With it we will have to create our own literature. You will have to decide for yourself what works you want to create."

Ernst Haas (1981, p134)