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The various processes we call photography

How have artists or photographers questioned and challenged the assumption that photographs provided a truthful representation of what was before the lens?
Why has it been important to do so?

The reconfigured eye: thinking through photography

11.2015

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Photography, now, can be anything. It does not matter how it's made or who makes it, but rather all the information baggage it has carried since its appearance. Photography has provoked infinite discussions on the domain of the arts, and has challenged and confronted other techniques as well. But it is this that has made it possible for it to become what it is now: photography acquires meaning through its various interactions and encounters with other media, and within it. The discussion of the content and form of the photographic image and its claim to truth and connection to reality has made it possible for the medium to take the form of countless presentations and forms of making. This essay will show how the questioning by photographers and artists of photographs providing a truthful representation of what is before the lens pushed the medium and obliged it to evolve and survive the different obstacles it has confronted. Artists have shown that photography does *not* actually provide a truthful representation, and furthermore questioned what reality even is.

Photography carries with it the burden of the taken-for-granted assumption that it provides a truthful representation of the world. We are—whether we admit or acknowledge it or not—surrounded, flooded and suffocated by images and photographs of all kinds of realities (Hannula, 2011: 9). The role of photography as a conveyer of a trace of reality that depicts the truth has long been questioned and photographs have always been manipulated, whether it is in the taking or the printing process.

While this essay will provide just a few instances, it is clear that artists and photographers have long ago questioned the real in photography. Many artists in the 1960s and 70s played with context and probed the belief in the photograph as evidence, questioning its relationship to realism and reality in provocative ways (artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, William Wegman, Dan Graham, Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, according to Susan Bright, 2005: 10). The artists presented here will help exemplify the *photography-reality* confrontation in three different levels: how they use the medium itself as a tool to question and critique it; how they want to prove on the contrary that photographs aren't reliable; and an insight on how the question should be rather on *reality*. This will support the conclusion that the questioning is necessary as it pushes the medium further and makes it possible for it to continue evolving.

More than ever, photography appears to be omnipresent in our everyday. We live in an image-led world, and what photography allows is the creation of images. Although it was born in the field of science, photography rapidly moved towards the arts; perhaps for its power to convey meaning in a visual form. It is feasibly this nature (being an image) that has made this practice somewhat difficult to define, and its permanent evolution just makes it harder. An exhibition called *Revelations: experiments in photography* held at the Science Museum in London showcased early photography pieces that demonstrate ambition and curiosity for the capabilities of the technique. Almost all the photographs feature content non-related to art (although they all have a surprising aesthetic appearance), but to science: specimens of plants; the first photographs of outer space; electrical discharges; Eadweard Muybridge's experiments in capturing movement. In the 1840s, just after the stated 'discovery' of photography, scientists were using photography to record and measure phenomena that lay beyond human vision. This early understanding of photography-as-science and photography-as-art is important when enquiring about the relationship of these to the real. The reason why photography became popular in the field of science was because it indeed provided a reliable representation of reality. The fact that the image made was the result of direct real light waves hitting a light-sensitive material demonstrated that this 'light drawing' could be reliable. But not only could photography represent what we were seeing: it could go far beyond, being able to grasp things unseen to the naked eye. Painting soon

became of disuse juxtaposed to this new medium, which not only was considered more accurate but also took incredibly less time.

Photographs encouraged changing perceptions of the world. Aspects of early scientific photography prompted a series of formal and aesthetic innovations. This included the positioning of camera-less photography, uses of high-speed photography and the development of a radically abstract visual language. Innovations in the area of the medium occupy a special place in history because they modify the ways in which people think and communicate. The diversity of photographic practice and media and the enthusiasm in early photography for its conveyance of the lifelike has made it difficult to contain the term photography in one single box. Furthermore, in the past decades the technological ambiguities of the digital image have appeared to put the photographic image's established (or taken for granted) ontology under threat. But do photographs indeed reproduce truthfully, or do they rather conceal the complexity of reality through single perspective and partiality? (Dannemann, *Loose Associations*, 2015: 10)

Photography is very provoking. For decades it has challenged the photographer, artist, critic and viewer to define it. But this constant change and provocation is what perhaps makes it so interesting: not only theoreticians have tried to write about it, to search for its meaning in language; similarly photographers have changed the way they make photographs, pushing themselves the medium further. These photographers are choosing to foreground the formerly 'repressed' aspects of the medium: the physical support upon which the image is registered, the myriad chemical and technical processes, as well as the numerous choices that were made in capturing the image (Wiley, 2011).

Artists that produce camera-less photographs like to challenge photography's established conventions. Mariah Robertson, instead of taking photographs, works with photographic papers that are sensible to light and chemicals. But her pieces do enter the category of *photography* when presented. Robertson distils the medium to its bare raw components: light, chemicals and a light-sensitive surface; not even optics are involved. This rather pictorial images could pass as paintings more than as photographs. The processes she uses to create this immense works on paper confront photography's principles regarding controlled darkroom techniques. This pieces invite to think of how photography can be anything, as long as it carries with it the name of photography. In all fields of art artists have challenged the mediums, questioned them, pushed them forward. With the rise of modern art in the beginning of the twentieth century art took a different turn, and an artwork did not even have to be made by the artist. Nicholas Mirzoeff portrays this clearly when he states that art was whatever someone who wanted to be an artist called art (Mirzoeff, 2015: 49). Could this in instance be applied to photography as well? Can a photograph be whatever someone who wants to be a photogra-

pher calls a photograph? For instance, Gerhard Richter's work not only does not involve a camera as in Robertson's, but nothing related to what we would call 'pure photography'. Richter produces paintings which he calls photographs. Richter did not question the objectivity and authenticity of photography itself: instead he has tried to translate the photographic language onto painting. Painting was able to survive as photography in Richter's practice (Elger, 2010: 52).

I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means: I'm not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photographs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source are also photographs.

(Richter, 2009)

Photography is, indeed, anything that has been given this name by its maker.

Shifting to another perspective, we can then talk of how photographers have challenged the *real* inside their photographs. The French photographer Noémie Goudal produces photographs that reflect on the contemporary debate of the reliability of photography. Although this (the challenge of reality) is not her primary intention, it does play an important role as her work is closely related to perception. Her works explore the juxtaposition of two sceneries that she has put together manually and without intention of hiding the method used. Half real, half artificial, these 'scapes' are a duplication of reality. Goudal's dialectical propositions function through an awakening of memory and association, addressing the internal processes at work in what we accept as real, what we assign as make-believe, and what we are willing to leave blurry in the interest of a good story (Montabone1, Lewis, 2012). Goudal works at the intersection between reality and fiction: the represented and the distorted in her photographs embody this idea. The final result she presents doesn't belong to a particular geographic place, but lies in between the two elements that compound the image. The viewer inevitably responds to these photographs as something of the real world but has to complement with his imagination. We know the places in the images exist somewhere as they are photographed, but nothing is given away about their locations.

The constructions are in some ways the essence of my practice, as they exist before the photograph does. The backdrop, for example, represents fiction for me. I photograph a place, very often industrial, in decay, raw and I inject the large-scale backdrops into them, as if they were a story being told. The viewer knows it is fiction; he can see the paper, he can see it's a construction. But still gets into it. The photographs are telling a narrative. There is often a connection and juxtaposition between the man-made and the organic. I'm usually trying to find the right balance between what I can bring to a space to alter it and what might already be there.

(Goudal, 2012)

On the other hand, German photographer Thomas Demand builds life-size models of scenes that we are often familiar with due to their depiction in mass-media imagery. Though intricately constructed, his decision to work with ordinary materials such as

cardboard and paper emphasizes that they are not intended to be reconstructions but representations, therefore articulating the associative processes at work as we interpret the image. Taking a similar approach, Goudal creates a deliberate lack of reconciliation between the photograph and the environment it is inserted into, not only symbolically but also in their differing material qualities. In the age of the digitally circulated image, it seems there is a certain currency to a tangible photograph that can claim authenticity from its existence in real time. By then taking the decision to photograph this construct, Goudal engineers an all-over quality and very contemporary mode of objectivity that asks us to step-back and examine exactly what is at work in our reading of the image.

Our power of perception fails us; in this world of tricks and false appearances we find ourselves dizzy in the face of the ontological loss of the fundamental difference between the true and the false.

(Baqué, 2014)

It is evident how artists have made the medium of photography transform both physically and conceptually, breaking its established rules when asking about its relationship to reality. But to ask about reality in photography we have to first establish which reality it is that we are talking about. First of all: when saying that photography represents the real, what 'real' is it exactly representing? Is there a unique reality for everyone? Photography faces stories of a reality that is not united but fragmented and segmented (Hannula, 2011: 9). We challenge the assumption that photographs provide a truthful representation of what is before the lens by challenging what reality is. Art critic Mika Hannula makes a clear statement: the question is not whether photographs represent or not the real. We must first ask what the real is and then realize that there are multiple realities and that, on top of that, each photograph must be understood within its own reality.

How could there be a more boring, jaded and faded activity than trying to grasp what reality is? Especially when searching for the connections and constitutions between an image of it and the truth claim of that image which always both describes and defines what it depicts. How is it that we could find pleasure in what is reality and how it is made, shaped and maintained with images?

(Hannula, 2011)

This apparent never-ending debate about photography and the real has permitted the medium to evolve, to re-shape. The human being has an obsession to define and control everything that surrounds him. Photography is one of the most-changing visual mediums, and that is what probably has made the attempts of defining it so hard. Because a definition excludes the possibility of change.

Luckily, we have lost our innocence and our ability to hold on to the illusion that we could get an all-encompassing concept and definition of whatever. (Hannula)

It does not matter now if photography depicts or not the real, the important is that it doesn't have to. There are kinds of photographs that will do so, but there are endless more ways of making photographs. But while taking a stand on this debate photographers have been able to explore in their practice possible, and this has often led to new ways of making. This constant questioning is important, and not only in photography. When something is tightly constrained within a box there's little possibility for transformation, and in that scenario a medium can become obsolete very easily. But in photography the technological changes for example have been very important as they themselves incite discussion between one another. Photography allows countless ways of making and infinite physical outcomes.

We have to accept what photography is about now—it isn't about truth. Sure, it can create reliable images of the world, but it can do so much more than that. That's why it's important to question and challenge the assumption that photographs provide a truthful representation of what is before the lens: to make us realize what photography really is about.

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