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Point de vue
The Photographic Activity of "Visual Culture"

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Point de vue

The Photographic Activity of "Visual Culture"

Last summer, *October* magazine ran a special issue on "visual culture." Offering an "initial account of [the] uses and abuses" of this emergent concept, co-editors Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster defined the term as "both a partial description of a social world mediated by commodity images and visual technologies, and an academic rubric for interdisciplinary convergences among art history, film theory, media analysis and cultural studies."[1] Like it or not, they told us, visual culture is here to stay.[2]

The tone of the introduction and of many of the articles featured in this issue is wary, if not outright bleak. The lion's share of contributors discuss the dematerialization of social and cultural experience in an economy of virtual visuality. Their concerns regarding the academic rubric, which collapses distinct fields of inquiry into a single "culture," involve the loss of historical and material specificity, in this instance as it delimits the understanding of the history of individual art forms. A striking affinity arises across the board between the constellation of concerns organized around examination of this phenomenon and that organized around debates on the anticipated impact of the institutionalization of "photographic art" on the museum. While photography has always threatened the cultural function of the museum, the problems posed by visual culture resonate most distinctly within the more recent debate over the "photographic activity of postmodernism."[3] Given that "visual culture" implicates the same field as the previous alliance, it might be worthwhile to review the concerns of the earlier moment. In hindsight, we can perhaps evaluate what, in fact, did occur when "photography [came] to pervert modernism" and anticipate what implications the emergence of "visual culture" might have for the photographic practices of art.[4]

As Vincent Lavoie has noted, at the end of the seventies and into the early eighties the field of photographic criticism was particularly busy.[5] The postwar economic boom that fuelled a burgeoning of social and cultural institutionalization had just ended; a new, pop avant-garde had revitalized the visual arts and its critical discourses; photography departments had been established in art schools, museums, and libraries; and the newly minted discipline of photographic history found itself the arbitrator of a highly charged contest over the photograph's meanings, social functions, and cultural rights. While inquiry into the specificity of the photograph held pride of place, these questions were not always raised to be answered on their own terms. Rather, the work of such critics as Krauss and Roland Barthes did not so much lay a structure of founding myths upon which the discipline of "photographic arts" was to be built as introduce a fault line into that foundation. For the "pure aesthetic" of the photograph was never the actual object of their concerns. Rather, if Krauss and Barthes proposed that the photograph was an "index" of the "real," effectively emptying it of any independent claims to historical meaning, they did so with ethical intent.[6] To posit that the photograph has no discourse of its own is to confirm its service to and location within other discursive regimes.

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Furthermore, these were the principle concerns of an entire generation of photographic critics.[7] The writings of Barthes and Krauss, along with those of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Alan Sekula, and John Tagg, questioned the relationship of photography with the discourses of history, science, law, and pornography. Barthes and Sekula established dialogues with Martha Rosler and Susan Sontag to address the rhetorical bias of documentary. And Barthes, Krauss, Sekula, Solomon-Godeau, Sontag, and Tagg joined John Berger, Victor Burgin, Douglas Crimp, and Christopher Phillips to confront the problematic articulation of "aesthetic" discourse in relation to photography classified as a form of modern art.

The striking unaminity of this critical project can be traced to the translation into English, in the late sixties and early seventies, of Walter Benjamin's writings, which effectively introduced "what were to become the major thematics in the analysis of photography in the 1970's: the destruction of the 'aura' as a result of reproducibility of the image, the challenge of art which photography mounts and the extent to which it poses the question, not whether it counts as an art but if art can itself exist after photography."[8] These same issues form the crux of the problem introduced by the wholesale institutional transfer of photography from the archives to the aesthetic field of the art museum – an institutional reorganization that was understood to inaugurate postmodernity. Succinctly stated, "Postmodernism begins when photography comes to pervert modernism." [9]

As the title of Douglas Crimp's 1981 article "The Library's Old/The Museum's New Subject" suggests, postmodernism in the visual arts was motivated by what such an institutional reorganization implied for both the social function and the evidential integrity of the photograph. As Crimp notes, at the same time that John Szarkowski was realizing the MoMA's fifty-year project to confirm the aesthetic values of photograph, the New York Public Library was establishing a division of Arts, Prints and Drawings, and a formalist vocabulary informed the values of both collections. The end result, one imagines, will be that "what was once housed in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library will eventually be found under Arts, Prints and Photography under the classification August Salzman . . . Egypt will become Beato . . . Urban poverty becomes Jacob Riis . . . World War II becomes Robert Capa."[10]

If this move entailed a lateral transfer of materials and forms from the realms of the information sciences to the field of fine arts, it also involved the renegotiation of a set of economic and cultural relations. Whereas the retrenchment of modernist values is enabled by the aestheticization of photography as art, the photograph's social and political potential are not so easy to repress. Incrementally or abstractly, the indexical status of the photograph necessarily returns to the formerly hermetic world of culture traces of the social and political world

that have been squelched. This is the photograph's perverse function. Against the "aura" of authenticity and authority that connoisseurship of photography invested in the image, the postmodern, photo-based artist appropriated photographic materials from popular culture, the library, and even the museum itself.

Reviving the historical avant-garde's strategies to exploit and invert the exchange of values – index for aesthetic and back again – these postmodern artists forced a reconfiguration of the disciplinary rules informing both institutions. It is often forgotten that appropriative strategies work on two fronts simultaneously. The same impulse that motivated Sherry Levine to critique the concepts of originality and artistic authority by rephotographing and re-presenting master-works of art also inspired Carrie Mae Weems to reappropriate images of her African-American ancestral community from the Smithsonian Institute and Christian Boltanski to re-present the haunting grade-school photos of whole communities of Jewish children lost to the Holocaust. The radical contingency of photographic meaning which the "re-presented," recontextualized photographic image displayed undermined not only the autonomy of modernist art but the empirical values upon which the various other representational regimes of modernism were founded. Photographic postmodernism posed challenges to the discourses of science and history as well.

By now, the appropriation or "recycling" of historical photographic and film materials from private, public, popular, cultural, medical, police, and social-science archives has become a common aesthetic strategy within the contexts of both high and popular cultural production, and critical response to this more general phenomenon has been divided. Fredric Jameson, for example, has argued that many of these productions are principally and problematically informed by nostalgic sentiment. He argues that the recycled materials represent a mere pastiche of stereotypes of history and are more sympotmatic of the "waning of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" than productive of any significant historical analysis or critique.[11]

Insofar as Jameson's critique discusses the viability of an avant-garde practice within an era of advanced high/low cultural compression, his concerns are shared by Foster in his essay on the archival threat to the autonomy of the museum. Likening the effective spatio-temporal trangression that characterizes the digital image (re)processing of visual communications in a late capitalist economy to the surrealist appropriation and montage practices of the early part of the century, he claims that the "dissident position in modernism has become a dominant position in postmodernism. ... There is no tradition of autonomy to subvert; our tradition is Surrealist."[12] With regard to the threats posed to the materiality of the museal experience by global information systems, and those to the autonomy of cultural practice by a conservative economic agenda that has forced cultural institutions to seek more directive corporate funding from the very industries undergirding the social phenomenon of visual culture, Foster advocates the development of new aesthetic strategies. If "autonomy is a bad word," he continues, "it may not be a bad strategy: call it *strategic autonomy*."[13]

There is another position available, however, one that requires appreciation of the uses rather than the abuses of the concept of visual culture. Anticipated by postmodernism, affiliated with anthropology, visual culture as an academic rubric can be seen to emerge alongside, informing and informed by, the changing function of the museum. Andreas Huyssen argues that we need "to rethink (and not just out of a desire to deconstruct) the museum beyond the binary parameters of avant-garde versus tradition, museum versus modernity (or postmodernity), transgression versus co-option, left culture poltics versus neoconservatism."[14] Instead, one might consider the significance of the currency of strategies of citing in contemporary aesthetic practice as they underscore the value placed on spatio-temporal reflection in contemporary cultural life. Such "returns to history," Huyssen claims, make evident the important role that "nostalgia, as a form of memory, always implicated, even productive of utopian visions" can play in a cultural era otherwise preoccupied with discourse on the loss and disappearance of the real. [15] "Moreover," as Huyssen also notes, "the desire for history and memory may also be a cunning form of defense. . . . against the attack of the present on the rest of time."[16] This is, I think, the political potential of the photographic image as Walter Benjamin intended, the radical promise of its historical force. "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."[17]

Cheryl Simon

1. Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, "Introduction," *October, 77* (Summer 1996): 3.

2. Ibid.

3. The reference is to Douglas Crimp's article of the same name, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, 15 (Winter 1980). See also his article "Pictures," *October*, 8 (Fall, 1979).

4. Douglas Crimp, "The Library's Old/The Museum's New Subject," in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Context of Meaning* (Boston: MIT, 1989), p. 8.

5. Vincent Lavoie, "Les fins de l'ontologie photographique," *CVphoto*, 36 (Fall 1996): 5–6.

6. Rosalind Krauss, "Note on an Index: Part I," In Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1985); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

7. See Bolton, *Context of Meaning*, and Victor Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Education, 1982) for a fair selection of these authors' writings.

8. See the following by Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer," in Burgin, *Thinking Photography;* "A Short History of Photography," *Screen*, 13(1) (Spring 1972); "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed and intro. by Hannah Arendt, transl. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

9. Crimp, "Library's," p. 8.

10. Ibid.

11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 21.

12. Foster, "Archive," p. 118.

13. Ibid.

14. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 19.

15. Ibid. p. 88.

16. Ibid.

17. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," in Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, p. 255.