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Photography and the Imagination<sup>1</sup>

Debates over the status of photography as an art form have more than a theoretical interest, they have practical implications as well. It was only very recently that the Tate Gallery in London allowed photography into its collection of modern art. The previous policy was to collect artists' photographs on the basis that their interest was parasitic on the artist's actual artworks. Thus Paul Nash's photographs were held on the basis that they were important to his creation of paintings, they were, if you like, documents for the study of his practice, and Richard Long's photographs were collected on the grounds that they documented or, even, authenticated his land art. Given a choice, the gallery would still prefer to collect photographs on the basis of their links with a centrally acknowledged art world than on the basis of their links with general photographic practice. While one finds documentary photography included in the history of photography as an art form the Tate has, up until this moment, declared a strong lack of interest in collecting works by leading documentary photographers. Photographs have been collected on the basis that they have been used to document art but not on the basis that they are interesting as a documentary art form.

In the British artworld, the most important collections of photographic art are housed by the Royal Photographic Society in Bath, which is in the Provinces and therefore artistically marginal, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is the country's leading museum of decorative arts. While there have been strong arguments over transferring the V&A's collection of drawings by John Constable to the Tate, there have been no similar arguments over its photographic collection.

Looking at the photography that the Tate is currently in the process of collecting one may see that it has a pedigree in sculpture on the one hand and conceptual art on the other. In the same way that back in the 70's *The Art of the Real* was conceptualized as effectively two dimensional sculpture or three dimensional painting, Tate sponsored photography has been conceptualized as a two dimensional realization of a three dimensional subject,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first part of a tripartite paper on the possible status of photographs as works of art. The first part of the paper is historical, the second part will have a theoretical perspective and the third part will be philosophical.

as in the work of Andy Goldsworthy, or as a material realization of a thought, as in the work of Victor Burgin. This isn't confined to the Tate. It is a current curatorial practice. There is a growing sense of a difference between artists' photographers and photographers' photographers in the terms in which critics describe their work and the galleries in which their work is exhibited.

This is where we get to the starting point of my paper. It is the artworld which determines whether or not photography will achieve recognition as an art form and it is the artworld which provides the rationale. In the same way that titling and context of production have a bearing on our response to Danto's fictional red paintings, described at the beginning of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, strategies of curation and criticism have a bearing on the ways in which we might be invited to respond to photographs.

With this in mind, I would like to turn to Baudelaire's famous *Salon of 1859* in which he celebrated »Imagination, the Queen of the Faculties« and berated photography for its attempt to achieve the same status as Art.

Photographs had previously been exhibited in the Great Exhibition held in Paris in 1855 but on that occasion they were excluded from the Palais des Beaux-Arts and included in the Industry section. In 1859, the Société Française de la Photographie persuaded the Ministry to allow it to exhibit at the same time as the Salon des Beaux-Arts, in the same building, but in a different area; it had to be entered by a separate door.

Baudelaire's paid employment, as a critic, was to review the art so he concentrated his attentions on the painting, on which he spent 56 pages. He also spent 12 pages on sculpture, probably more out of a sense of duty than conviction. And he spent 3 to 4 pages on photography, using those pages to reinforce his attack on the contemporary taste for realism in painting. For him, photography was a minor issue; there could have been no way in which even the best photographs could have been a match for his favorite paintings. One can't even be sure that he bothered to look at the photographs as we know from his correspondence with his friend Nadar that his Review had been written with little regard for the work actually on exhibition. As he described it, his review offered »something like the account of a rapid philosophical walk through the galleries«. <sup>2</sup> His central concern was the state of contemporary painting, which he saw as suffering from the blight of realism.

In his rather brief discussion of photography, his central concern was the way in which it might offer an absolute value in terms of the possibili-

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<sup>2</sup> »The Salon of 1859« in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, London 1965, p. 144.

ties of realistic depiction. As he said, the realist painters and their admiring audience shared the creed

»I believe in Nature, and I believe only in Nature ... I believe that Art is, and cannot be other than, the exact reproduction of Nature ... Thus an Industry that could give us a result identical to Nature would be the absolute of art.«

Their wishes were answered

A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. And now the faithful says to himself: »since Photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude... , then Photography and Art are the same thing.«<sup>3</sup>

From a rhetorical standpoint, it was only necessary for Baudelaire to warn of the absurdities of photographic practice which aspired to the condition of art in order to be able to condemn realist painting. He had already set the stage for his attack on painting by addressing the subject of the discord between their titles and their appearances:

*Amour et Gibelotte!* Doesn't that immediately whet the appetite of your curiosity? »Love and Rabbit-stew!« Let me try and make an intimate combination of these two ideas, the idea of love and the idea of a rabbit skinned and made into a stew. I can hardly suppose that the painter's imagination can have gone so far as to fit a quiver, a pair of wings and an eyebandage upon the corpse of a domestic animal; the allegory would be really too obscure. I imagine that the title has been invented upon the recipe of *Misanthropie et Repentir*. The true title would thus be *Lovers eating a Rabbit-Stew*. Now you will ask, are they young or old, a laborer and a working-girl, or perhaps a tired veteran and a waif, in some dusty bower? I really ought to have seen the picture!<sup>4</sup>

There is an obvious gap between what the artist thinks that he is achieving, an *Idea*, to use the jargon of academic theory which was still very alive in the nineteenth century, and what he actually achieved, which was a scene of the utmost banality. The artist used his title to pitch his painting at a higher level of accomplishment than he was actually capable of achieving. In another context, speaking of the 'painter of modern life', Baudelaire spoke of his desire that the artist should amalgamate the actual with the ideal. The *flâneur*, the solitary man »gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert« is looking for a quality called »modernity«

He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.

... By »modernity« I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.<sup>5</sup>

Baudelaire's criticism of the painter of *Amour et Gibelotte* was that his image was rooted in the merely contingent and a contingency which would make no demands upon a complacent audience. He was as hostile to the audience which admired the painting as he was to the painting itself despite the fact that he hadn't even seen it and that it might be half decent.

He underlined the discordancy between ambition and result by imagining a photograph which tackled a subject of the highest artistic value, a history painting:

Strange abominations took form. By bringing together a group of male and female clowns, got up like butchers and laundry-maids at a carnival, and by begging these *heroes* to be so kind as to hold their chance grimaces for the time necessary for the performance, the operator flattered himself that he was reproducing tragic or elegant scenes from ancient history. Some democratic writer ought to have seen here a cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history and painting among the people, thus committing a double sacrilege and insulting at one and the same time the divine art of painting and the noble art of the actor.<sup>6</sup>

Baudelaire is, here, actually engaging in a thought experiment. He invites his readers to imagine the clash between a heroic subject and a *realistic* representation of the models who would normally pose for the subject. He was as well aware as everyone else that the figures in such paintings were supposed to be idealized products of the imagination; the true artist would never leave his model uncorrected. Uncorrected models are bad enough in the imagination, they simply exist at the level of bad drawings, but bad models in photography are worse than that: they are downright ungainly if not plug ugly. Remember that Baudelaire was writing for a middle class audience, which prided itself on its airs and graces. He is asking that audience to believe that its most cherished ideals could be represented in the form of butchers and laundry-maids, practitioners of smelly, stench-generating trades. As there could be nothing to admire in such people, why should realist painters believe that there is anything to admire about their subjects:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Painter of Modern Life*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Salon of 1859*, p. 153. Note also George Bernard Shaw's observation in *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, L VI (1909): »There is a terrible truthfulness about photography. The ordinary academician gets hold of a pretty model, paints her as well as he can, calls her Juliet, and puts a nice verse from Shakespeare underneath, and the picture is admired beyond measure. The photographer finds the same girl, he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her Juliet, but somehow it is no good – it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet.«

the painterly equivalent of butchers and laundry-maids was people devoid of any human interest.

It might be thought that Baudelaire's enthusiasm for the painting of modern life might have opened his mind to the possibilities of photographic practice. But in its state of technical development in 1859, that would have been only a remote possibility, demanding a more imaginative response to the image than Baudelaire was prepared to offer. Baudelaire's favorite »painter of modern life« was Constantine Guys whose interest in the fugitive aspects of life was developed through his use of the sketch and whose subject was the crowd »responding to each one of its movements and the flickering grace of all the elements of life«. <sup>7</sup> The long exposure times demanded by photography in 1859 rendered it incapable of simulating flicker, indeed its central problem, in artistic terms, was the complete continuity of detail in its imagery: it did not offer the possibility of selective focus, as did painting. If the painter of modern life could focus on the transitory changes of fashion, *that* neckline or that collar, the photographer could not be so selective. *That* neckline could be easily undermined by *that* neck!

The problem with realistic painting, for Baudelaire, was its attention to technique as the expense of an imaginative treatment of subject. In 1859, Baudelaire felt that photography's

true duty, ... is to be the servant of the sciences and arts ... (L)et it be the secretary and clerk of whoever needs an absolute factual exactitude in his profession ... But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary ... then it will be so much the worse for us. <sup>8</sup>

While *Amour et Gibelotte*, like photography, tied the imagination down, Guys' sketches released it. For later critics Baudelaire's mistake was not to underestimate the possibilities of photography, it was to hold up Guys as a hero rather than his friend Manet. For the historian of photography, 1859 was early days and, as Lady Eastlake observed, in her very thorough essay for the *London Quarterly Review* two years earlier, there were a great many technical problems still to be overcome.

At the end of his *Short History of Photography* Walter Benjamin, who was one of Baudelaire's greatest admirers, commented :

One thing ... was not grasped ... by Baudelaire, and that is the direction implicit in the authenticity of the photograph. It will not always be possible to link this authenticity with reportage, whose clichés associate themselves only verbally in the viewer. The camera will become smaller

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<sup>7</sup> *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Salon of 1859*, p. 145.

and smaller, more and more prepared to grasp fleeting, secret images whose shock will bring the mechanism of association in the viewer to a complete halt. At this point captions must begin to function, captions which understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature, and without which all photographic construction must remain bound in coincidences.<sup>9</sup>

This is, of course, a typically inscrutable Benjaminian remark: what can we make of it? He was certainly not interested in elevating photography to the status of Art. As he declared in his essay on the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility:

... much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question – whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised.<sup>10</sup>

What he is talking about is the use of the photograph as an object of social insight:

Not for nothing were pictures of Atget compared with those of the scenes of a crime. But is not every spot of our cities the scene of a crime? every passerby a perpetrator? Does not the photographer – descendant of augurers and haruspices – uncover guilt in his pictures. It has been said that »not he who is ignorant of writing but ignorant of photography will be the illiterate of the future.« But isn't a photographer who can't read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate? Will not captions become the essential component of picture? Those are the questions in which the gap of 90 years that separates today from the age of the daguerrotype discharges its historical tension. It is in the light of these sparks that the first photographs emerge so beautifully, so unapproachably from the darkness of our grandfathers' days.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin took the view that the spectator who was sensitive to history and to social life would experience the shock of confronting the optical unconscious in the photographic image. Photographs of the Parisian *bourgeoisie* betrayed, for him, their very social being, their mode of existence in social life, in the same way that August Sander's photographs revealed, for him, the very structure of contemporary German society. If photography was to be an Art then it would be one produced by the imaginative caption writer, no less a person than Walter Benjamin himself. Benjamin was one of the many writers for whom the business of being a critic was co-extensive with

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<sup>9</sup> »A Short History of Photography« reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essay on Photography*, New Haven 1980, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, London 1970, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

being an artist. Photography stood in need of completion and he was the person who was going to complete it.

As the saying goes, what comes around turns around. In 1981 Roger Scruton published an essay in *Critical Enquiry* on Photography and Representation and like Walter Benjamin before him he discussed both photography and film.<sup>12</sup> Working from the notion of an »ideal photograph«, an ideal based on the essential differences between painting and photography, Scruton came to the conclusion that photography cannot be an art form:

In looking at an ideal photograph, we know that we are seeing something which actually occurred and seeing it as it appeared. Typically, therefore, our attitude toward photography will be one of curiosity, not curiosity about the photograph but rather about its subject. The photograph addresses itself to our desire for knowledge of the world, knowledge of how things look or seem. The photograph is a means to the end of seeing its subject; in painting, on the other hand, the subject is the means to its own representation.<sup>13</sup>

One way of looking at this conclusion is to say that it is massively naive. Classic photography, meaning photography of the photographers' kind, is an art because of the distinctive qualities of vision it embodies in looking at the world. This is not simply a matter of making the world look beautiful, as Scruton might hold, but also a matter of capturing something which might have escaped the ordinary spectator's attention. Quite apart from the specific qualities which attach to a well produced print, qualities which are shared by other graphic arts, a good photograph is a product of the photographer's vision. Not just vision in the literal sense, but vision in the metaphorical sense as well. It is a vision which offers us a grip on our lives and our experience of the world. But this is not the art institutional way to deal with Scruton. One only needs to point out that in 1981 the art world is a different place from what it was in 1857.

It is extremely difficult to maintain after Duchamp and the adventures of modernism, not to say postmodernism, that arguments about the similarities or differences between painting and photography carry any weight in debates about Art any more. The argument is more, now, about what the photographer brings to the creation of an image and the critic bring to its appreciation. If the photographer chooses to work in a gallery or museum environment there are tacit understandings of the issues and practices which may be addressed. Alternatively, the photographer may simply choose to opt

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<sup>12</sup> Roger Scruton, »Photography and Representation«, *Critical Enquiry* 7 (1981) reprinted in *The Aesthetic Understanding*, Manchester 1983.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 114.

out altogether and simply be as successful as possible in practicing the trade. The rewards are different.

This situation is not particularly new. In the earliest days of photography there were practitioners who celebrated its existence as an industry and pursued its potential mass appeal. There were others who wanted to remain exclusive and not get involved in the tedious business of commerce; their ambition was to produce art. The difference between art and commerce was defined in terms of a difference between an appeal to an élite and an appeal to the mass. This is a view now shared by Roger Scruton. He has argued that it is precisely because the masses can make photographs, photography cannot be an art:

the ability to create, to appreciate, to resonate – the ability to stand back from the world and record its meaning in an aesthetic judgement – is the property of the few.<sup>14</sup>

He has failed to recognise that it has been by strategies of curatorship and criticism that photography has, actually, become an art form.

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Scruton, »But is it Art?«, *Modern Painters* 2 (1), Spring 1989, p. 65.