THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC AESTHETIC

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Abstract

The development of an indigenous photographic aesthetic was the result of four factors: our changing assumptions about the nature or range of subjects that could (or should) be photographed, advances in camera technology and the light-sensitivity of emulsions which expanded the range of scenes and events it was possible to record in photographs, changes in our ideas about the desirable arrangement of elements (composition) – and the interaction of these three. This brief essay will suggest that these factors eventually led to the idea that a successful photograph depends on the active (act of) contribution by the medium.

Taking lessons from painters

In the work of many early photographers, we can see striking similarities with the work of painters in both their choice of subjects (what was deemed 'worthy' of being depicted) and in the ways in which the elements within the frame were treated and arranged (composed). These remarkable similarities should not be surprising because, as the then-dominant medium of two-dimensional representation, painting was the most influential model for their assumptions, decisions and judgements about 'how a picture should look' – including both the type of subjects it was appropriate to depict, as well as the way in which these subjects should be composed and arranged within the frame.
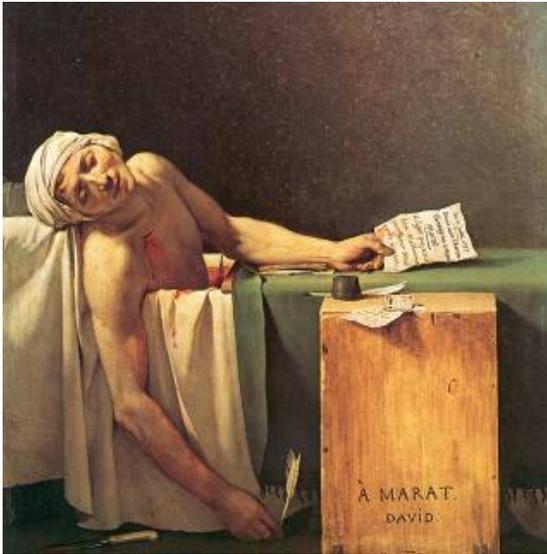
Consider the following examples:

The Doctor, Luke Fildes, 1891   *Fading Away,* Henry Peach Robinson, 1858

Marat, Jean-Louis David, 1794   *Self portrait as drowned man,* Hippolyte
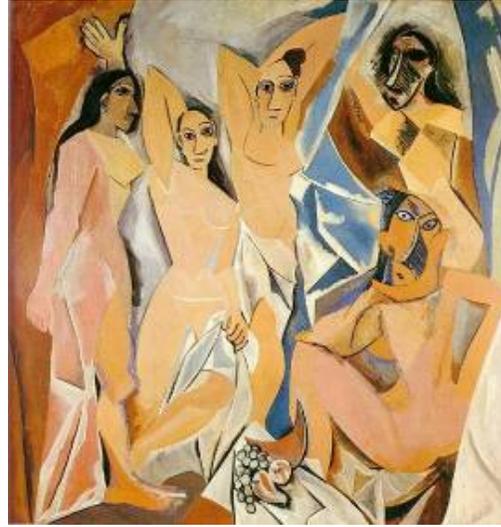   Bayard, 1840

In response to the announcement by Dageurre of his invention of the *Daguerretype* process at the Paris Exposition of 1839, (the rights to which were subsequently purchased by the French government and made available to the public), it was reported that the painter Paul Delaroche remarked (probably apocryphally) that "*From today, painting is dead*". Of course, Delaroche was mistaken; photography did not result in the end of painting. Instead, the invention of photography 'liberated' painting from its traditional responsibility to represent the world 'out there' *realistically* and *objectively* – because photography could now do this more accurately. (One of the pioneers of the early photographic process, Fox Talbot described photography as *"The pencil of nature"*.) As a result, painters were free to use the medium to depict their thoughts, feelings and impressions about what they saw. In other words, the subject of paintings (what paintings are 'about') shifted from *objective* to *subjective* representation. This led eventually to the idea that the 'real' subject of the painting was not 'the thing(s) depicted' – but was instead the subjective experiences (the *impressions*) of the painter, as well as the act, process or difficulty of expressing these.

las Meninas, Velazquez, 1656   *les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Pablo Picasso, 1907

Ultimately, this led to the idea (explored by Pollock and others) that the true 'subject' of painting was painting itself.

Convergence, Jackson Pollock 1952

The medium of photography was initially dismissed as 'anti-art' because it was able to reproduce scenes, objects and events 'photo-mechanically' without (or so it was assumed) the need for any artistic ability on the part of the operator. By exploiting the capacity of the medium to mechanically (and therefore accurately and objectively) record objects, scenes and events 'as they really were', photographs confronted the public with 'realities' many had never seen (or been able to see). As a result of the 'photo-mechanical' depiction of (for example) the horror of war and the living conditions of the poor, these issues became harder

to ignore or to romanticise, and so photography had a profound impact on our attitudes towards important social issues.

The Harvest of Death, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, July 1863

Baby in Slum Tenement, Jacob A. Riis, 1888

The early masters

Early in the 20th century, photographers such as Steichen, Stieglitz and Strand explored the possibility that, rather than being a liability, the photo-mechanical property of photography was in fact the source of its aesthetic value; that the photograph was remarkable *because of* – not *despite* – the way it renders & depicts (what I have called) *The Things in Front of the Lens*.

Consider *The Steerage* by Stieglitz (1907), *Big White Cloud* by Steichen (1903) and *Wall Street NYC* by Strand (1915).

The Steerage, Alfred Stieglitz, 1907

The Big White Cloud, Lake George, Edward Steichen, 1903

The reason that these photographs interest or engage us is a direct result of the photo-mechanical accuracy, or objective 'truthfulness' by which the process has interpreted, rendered and depicted *The Things in Front of the Lens*. In other words, these images are beautiful, moving and powerful *because* they are photographs.

Wall Street NYC, Paul Strand, 1915

The work of these and other early masters suggested that there was an indigenous photographic aesthetic: one that acknowledged – and even celebrated – the active (the act of) contribution by the *modus operandi* of the medium and its way of interpreting, rendering and depicting *The Things in Front of the Lens* in the creation of uniquely 'photographic' images.

Consider the photographs *Derrière la gare St-Lazare, Paris* by Cartier-Bresson (1932) and *Ballet NYC* by Kertész, (1938).

Derrière la gare St-Lazare, Paris,
Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1932

Ballet NYC, André Kertész, 1938

Like countless others, these images exploit the photo-mechanical capacity of the medium to record scenes and events 'as they really were' for only a fraction of a second and extract what Cartier-Bresson called *le Moment Décisif* (the Decisive Moment) from what we experience as a seamless chronological continuum. As a result, the figures are both 'truthfully' and implausibly suspended over a ground they will never touch. This too, is a photo-mechanical 'truth': and one which is the direct result of the way in which the *modus operandi* of the photographic process records and depicts *The Things in Front of the Lens*.

Consider the photograph *Allied landing on Normandy - 6th June 1944* by Capa.

Allied landing on Normandy - 6th June, Robert Capa, 1944

In most photographs, the blur resulting from the motion of the camera during exposure would be deemed a 'flaw' or weakness. In this image however, this feature is understood to be the result of (and therefore the objective 'proof' of) the frantic effort of the soldiers' (and Capa's) struggle to get ashore on D-Day. This 'flaw' in the photo-mechanical recording of *The Things in Front of the Lens* is therefore both the source of the 'truth' depicted in this photograph and the origin of the power of the image.

Consider the photograph *Dali Antomicus* by Halsman (1948).

Dali Antomicus, Philippe Halsman, 1948

Exploiting our unquestioning faith in the objective 'truth' of the photograph and the 'reality' of what it shows, Halsman's surrealist 'trick' delights us because, by being able to 'see through' his construction, he has simultaneously 'fooled' and not fooled us (like tickling, which we 'know' is a false attack, but which we 'pretend' that we do not). Working with several studio assistants just outside the frame, Halsman has created ('made') and recorded a scene that is both 'real' (the various elements were 'really there' in the unlikely positions in which his photograph has recorded them) – and surreal at the same time.

Consider the photograph *El Morocco* by Winogrand (1955).

El Morocco, Gary Winogrand, 1955

Like Cartier-Bresson and Kertész before him, Winnogrand's work extracted moments from their chronological continuum. But where Cartier-Bresson, Kertész and others anticipated and used their knowledge of the way(s) in which the photographic process interprets and renders *The Things in Front of the Lens*, Winnogrand invited a more active collaboration by the medium and its often 'unanticipatable' contribution in the creation of the 'Moments'

depicted in his photographs. As Winnogrand wrote: "*I have no preconceptions. I make photographs to see what something looks like as a photograph.*"

Consider the photograph *Miami Beach*, by Frank (1959).


Miami Beach, Robert Frank, 1959

Frank was one of the first photographers to explore the capacity of the photo-mechanical properties of the medium to produce Art without the imposition of the conscious intent of the photographer – sometimes without even looking through the viewfinder. Frank's work poses the questions What happens when we point the camera at scenes and events and allow it to record *The Things in Front of the Lens* in accordance only with its modus operandi? And, is it possible that a beautiful image can be made by the 'natural' operation of the medium?

Consider *The Great Sand Dunes, November 1979*, and *Baja California, 24 February 1980*, by Krzyzanowski.

The Great Sand Dunes, November 1979, Michel Szulc Krzyzanowski

In his work, Krzyzanowski encourages us to ignore or to forget that these images are composed of 'sequences' and so 'read' them instead as a record of a single scene or event. More explicitly than for many other photographers, the 'subject' of Krzyzanowski's work is the photo-mechanical properties of photography. In other words, his 'subject' is *the medium itself* and the way in which we are accustomed to make sense of the way in which the medium records, interprets and renders *The Things in Front of the Lens*.
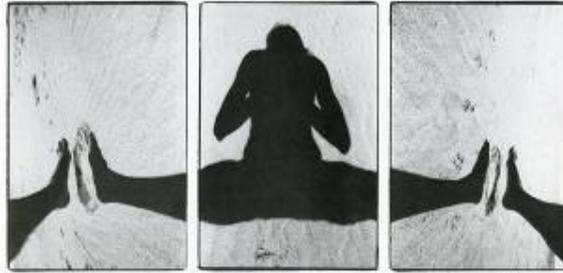
Baja California, 24 February 1980, Michel Szulc Krzyzanowski

What is 'Art'?

What is 'Art'? How do you define it? What quality do you think makes something 'Art'?

Does your definition make reference to or depend on what you (or someone to whose judgement you defer) consider to be the work's 'artistic merit': some special quality, property or characteristic (even if you can't define precisely what this is) that somehow makes one image 'better' than another made by an amateur?

It is tempting to assume that Great Art™ is the product of, and is therefore dependent on, the possession and application of Great Talent™. But imagine for a moment that a baby gets hold of a camera and, while bringing it to its mouth, accidentally pushes the button. Assuming that you were unaware of the origin of the image, imagine that, when looking at the resulting image, you realise that it resembles in every important respect a famous 'artistic' photograph. If you were then to learn the origin of the image, what does the knowledge that the creation of the image was not the result of the artist's intent do to your estimation of the 'value', quality or 'merit' of the resulting photograph? To what extent then, is Great Art™ dependent on the intentional application of talent or ability – and to what extent is it the consequence of the medium just 'doing what it does'?

While it is a common assumption that 'Art' is a property of the medium ('paintings are Art…'), I submit that Art is like fire and depends on the presence and/or interaction of three essential elements: the *artist* (which may include his/her intention and ability), the *work* (including the contribution of the medium), and *the reaction of the viewer*. Take away any one, and there is no Art. (Imagine a gallery full of the world's greatest masterpieces, but which is sealed shut so that no-one can see them, or even know if they are inside. Are they still Art?) Accordingly, I submit that Art is *not* the physical object itself – but is *an experience*: the 'thing that happens' to us when we are confronted by, and prompted to reflect on, our reaction to a work.

The basis of the photographic aesthetic

Every medium is governed by certain 'rules' resulting from the physical properties of the medium that determine the way(s) in which it depicts or renders its subjects, and the way in which its practitioners exploit these. In photography, these 'rules' are the determined by the technology and the process.

Some of these 'rules' are:

- Every photograph is understood to depict a 'truth': a record of something that was really 'there' (This 'rule' does not, of course, apply to images created by photo-manipulation software.)

- Every photograph asserts the importance or significance of the scene, event or object(s) depicted or recorded, and that what it 'shows' is worthy of the viewer's attention

- As a consequence of seeing the world through a single 'eye', every photograph flattens the two-dimensional planes 'out there', thereby changing (or creating new) relationships between the elements on these planes (i.e.: a telephone pole seeming to protrude from someone's head)

- Every photograph removes the 'moment' recorded from its chronological continuum

- As a result of 'framing' (as determined by the direction in which the camera is pointed), every photograph removes *The Things in Front of the Lens* from their environmental context and, in doing so, provides a new one (sometimes one the photographer did not or could not anticipate)

- The photo-mechanical process is capable of capturing details that we did not notice at the time (*There ought to be a word for this; I propose a 'UDIP': 'unanticipated details in pictures'*)

- The use of slow shutter speeds can 'blur' or 'smear' the record of a scene, object or event

- The use of depth of field can render areas of the scene or event 'out of focus'

- Details are irrevocably lost when rendered at the limits of exposure (very bright or very dark)

The camera is traditionally assumed to be (and is therefore usually treated as) a passive tool controlled by the operator. As a result, photographs are typically considered to be the product of the interaction of three factors: the photographer's intention (what we want to achieve), our expertise (our capacity to manipulate the camera controls and the technology of interpretation in pursuit of a desired result) and the appearance and/or behaviour of The Things in Front of the Lens.

The photograph is a two-dimensional description of a world we know only through binocular vision. This means that the world we see and experience in three dimensions is rendered and described by photography as a two-dimensional surface because, with its monocular eye, this Cyclops 'sees' it as one. By treating the linear distance we perceive as three dimensions as an infinite succession of two-dimensional planes and by extracting discrete 'slices' from what we experience as a seamless chronological continuum, the camera records – and in doing so, sometimes creates – relationships between planes and 'moments' not always visible to, or anticipatable by, a *Bino-Chrono* consciousness like ours.

This phenomenon has been noticed before.

> *I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed […] the photograph isn't what was photographed, it's something else.*   Gary Winogrand

> *I never have taken a picture I've intended. They're always better or worse. You don't put into a photograph what's going to come out. Or what comes out is not what you put in. Photography is 'real' because the camera is 'recalcitrant'. You may want to do one thing and it's determined to do something else.*   Diane Arbus

Some have suggested (and I am one of them), that an essential characteristic of a 'successful' image in any medium is that *its power to engage and affect us depends on the irreducible contribution of the process or medium in which it was created*. In other words, a 'successful' photograph is as much 'about' photography as it is 'about' the artist's intention or *The Things in Front of the Lens* as made special by the photographer's attention or application of technique.

Picture your favourite photograph in your mind's eye. Now imagine the same image rendered as a sketch or a watercolour. According to this view, if the loss of its photo-mechanical 'truth' has in any way reduced or lessened its power to affect us, regardless of whether we may still 'like' the image, it is not a successful photograph. I submit therefore that a 'successful' photograph is one whose beauty and/or power to affect us is, to some extent, the direct result of the operation or application of these 'rules' and is therefore dependent on the active (act of) contribution by the photo-mechanical modus operandi in rendering what I have called *The Things in Front of the Lens.*

To be 'successful' therefore, I submit that the photograph must explicitly acknowledge – or even celebrate – the active (act of) contribution by the medium in rendering *The Things in*

Front of the Lens and in the creation of a 'Moment', that (like those in the works of Cartier-Bresson, Kertész, Capa, Halsman, Winogrand, Frank, and Krzyzanowski reproduced above) did not exist – *and could not have existed* – until brought into being by the act of photographing.

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> Rutherford is interested in the often 'unanticipatable' contribution of the photographic medium in the record of scenes and events, and whether this contribution – which is the result of neither intention, expertise nor The Things in Front of the Lens – constitutes an active (an act of) participation by the medium in the creation of uniquely photographic images. Previously a commercial photographer in Toronto, Canada, since 1997, Rutherford's photographic projects exploring these themes have been exhibited in Canada, the US, France, New Zealand and Japan.

> Rutherford's website: http://www.theshadowofthephotographer.co.uk/