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National College of Art and Design
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Photography and Authorship

by

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Introduction

This thesis will examine the parallel and at times intersecting careers of photography and the author.

The concept of the author as the owner and sole creator of the text gained currency during the enlightenment in the seventeenth century. Before that it was commonly held that God was the true creator of all knowledge, and the writer of any given text merely revealed divine knowledge. Although photography was not invented until 1839, Geoffrey Batchen argues that the invention of the photographic process was preceded and prompted by a widely felt desire to anchor perception at a time when the representation of nature was in crisis (Batchen,1991, p.22). This thesis will examine the debate which surrounded the origin of the modern concept of the author/creator in eighteenth century France. It will also outline the invention of photography and the accompanying understanding of photography's function.

The attempt to locate photography within the parameters of nineteenth century cultural theory took the shape of a fierce debate which was fought out in the newspapers columns and, even in the Courtroom (see chapter two). The degree to which the photograph is authored, as opposed to merely produced by a mechanical process was the central theme of this debate.

From the 1960s through to the 1980s photography was the favored medium of postmodern artists who contested long held notions of originality, subjectivity and the relationship between the author and the artifact. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg and later Levine and Sherman, used photography to question the role of the author. Having considered the postmodern troubling of the author function in visual culture, this thesis will then examine the preceding theoretical revision of the author function as presented by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.

For a discussion of photography's invention this thesis uses Geoffrey Batchens essay *Desiring Production, Notes on the Invention of Photography*. Batchen's essay,

although short, contains a complex essay, which prompted this thesis' inquiry into photographic authorship. As a source for the history of photographic practice from the mid eighteenth to twentieth centuries Aaron Scharf's *Art and Photography* was used. Chapter two draws extensively from Solomon-Godeau's, anti-formalist treatise *Photograph at the Dock*. Chapter three uses primary texts by both Barthes and Foucault and also Carla Hesse's essay Enlightenment Epistemology and the laws of authorship in revolutionary France 1777-1789. While other texts were used (see Bibliography) these were the main texts to inform this thesis.

Chapter one

The announcement in 1839 of the invention of photography caused a great deal of excitement. Even before the official presentation of Louis Jacques Daguerre's device in the chamber of deputies, news of the Daguerreotype's ability to create images of detailed pictorial accuracy was trumpeted in newspapers and feverishly passed by word of mouth[1]. Sir John Herschel the British astronomer wrote to photographic pioneer, William Fox Talbot after seeing the Daguerreotype,

> It is hardly too much to call them miraculous. Certainly they surpass anything I could have conceived as within the bounds of reasonable expectation....I cannot commend you better than to come and see. Excuse this ebullition (Squire, 1990, p.7).

It is possible that Sir John's letter prompted Fox to announce his own invention, the "calotype"(based on the Greek for beautiful picture) days later. The Announcement of two independent photographic processes within the same month created a media frenzy. Not everyone was as enchanted as Sir John however, and the sceptics were vociferous. One writer in a German newspaper thundered,

> To fix fleeting images is not only impossible, as has been demonstrated by very serious experiments in Germany it is sacrilege. God has created man in his image and no human machine can capture the image of God. He would have to betray all his eternal principles to allow a Frenchman in Paris to unleash such a diabolical invention upon the world (Squires, 1990, p.7).

Because of the proximity of the two announcements, the traditional history of photography has often been preoccupied with arguing and debating the question of who was the first to invent the process we now call photography. In fact twenty four people have claimed at one time or another to have been the first to invent the photographic process. Seven of these were from France, six from England, five from Germany, a Belgian, an American, a Spaniard, a Swiss and a Brazilian. Of these, four had solutions that were truly original[2]. Geoffrey Batchen in the essay *Desiring*

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[1] Carol Squires, 1997, p.7.

[2] Geoffrey Batchen, 1991, p.24.

Production paraphrases Derrida when he addresses this aspect of the traditional history of photography,

> photography's historians have a vested interest in moving as quickly as possible from the troubling philosophical question "what is photography" to the safe and expository one "where and when did photography begin (Batchen, 1991, p13).

Batchen is however interested in the fact that so many people claimed to have invented the process of photography. He calls these pioneers "protophotographers", who produced "a voluminous collection of aspirations for which some sort of photography was in each case the desired result". It is this aspiration that interests Batchen. His essay is an investigation into the "desire" to photograph and the timing of the emergence of this "desire" (Batchen, 1991, p12). Batchen's essay examines the concepts which accompanied and (he would argue) prompted the invention of photography. The question "why did photography happen when it did?" is the focus for Batchens essay. It is suggested that the appearance of the photographic process and the preceding desire for that process was not a result of the uninterested march of technological and scientific inquiry, but rather that the invention of the process was the result itself of a broader desire to fix or anchor perception at a time of fundamental change in western epistemology. Batchen's notion of the subject's relationship with photography and the photographs function, form part of the argument of this thesis. It is thus worth outlining Batchen's essay *Desiring Production* in some detail. The *essay Desiring Production, Notes on the Invention of Photography* begins by Batchen establishing that there existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a desire for a device and that this desire would lead to the invention of the photographic camera. There follows a summary of the arguments Batchen assembles to support his argument.

In 1772 the English clergyman William Gilpin, a famous advocate of picturesque theory, expressed his frustration at not having available the means to adequately capture the visual sensations of a river journey. In his *Observations on the River Wye* there is the following passage;

> Many of the objects which have floated so rapidly past us, if we had had time to examine them would have given us sublime and beautiful hints in landscape: some of them even well combined, and ready prepared for the pencil: but in so quick a succession, one blotted out the other (Batchen, 1991 p.19.).

Several years later in 1791 Gilpin again writes of his desire for some type of perceptual aide. This time to fix the image in his camera obscura,

> A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye. They are like the visions of the imagination; or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Forms, and colours in the brightest array, fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should give any price to fix and appropriate the scene (Batchen, 1991, p20).

A similar desire is present in a poem by the poet William Cowper entitled *The Task* written in 1785. In the passage below he suggests that the mind of the poet must behave like a camera obscura[3] and hold transient images in the mind,

> To arrest the fleeting images that fill
>
> The mirror of the mind, and hold them fast,
>
> and force them sit, till he has pencilled off
>
> a faithful likeness of the forms he views.
>
> (Batchen, 1991 ,p17).

The camera obscura is again mentioned by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge who in 1817 uses it as a metaphor to describe his poetic ideal,

> Creation rather than painting, or if painting, yet such, and with such co-presence of the whole picture flashed at once upon the eye, as the sun paints in a camera obscure (Batchen, 1991, p.18).

Batchen quotes another luminary of the period, the English painter John Constable who in 1833 describes painting as an attempt,

> to arrest the more abrupt and transient appearance of the chair'oscuro in nature...give to one brief moment caught from fleeting time a lasting and sober existence...

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[3] The camera Obscura is a device consisting of an internally darkened box with an aperture for projecting the image of a brighter space outside the box onto a screen inside it.

> (Batchen, 1991, p.20).

The last example of Batchen's which we will quote is by the critic Arago,

> There is no one who after having observed the nicety of the outlines, the correctness of shape and colour , together with that of the shade and light of the images represented by this instrument [camera obscura], has not greatly regretted that they be preserved of their own accord; no one that has not ardently desired of some means to fix them on the focal screen (Batchen, 1991, p.21).

Having established the existence of a desire for an as yet non-existant device, Batchen asks why this desire arose. He quotes Helmut Gerustein's *The Origins of the Photograph,* , " the circumstances that photography was not invented earlier remains the greatest mystery in its history" (Batchen, 1991, p.24). The photosensitive qualities of certain chemicals had been widely know since the 1720s and the camera obscura had existed in some form since the eleventh century[4]. Why did this discursive desire to photograph not appear until the 1790s? Batchen maintains that it was not other factors often suggested, such as the social and economic impact of a emergent bourgeoisie's demand for portraits (Batchen, 1991, p.23).

Batchen urges a consideration of the broader significance of the timing of photography's appearance. He suggests that the "epistemological status" (the status of the theory of knowledge itself) of nature and its representation was in the eighteenth century in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. Batchen links the desire for and subsequent invention of photography to what Foucault describes as the "profound upheaval" that occurred around two centuries ago. What is significant about this crisis is that " what appears to be at issue is not just the representation of nature but the nature of representation itself (Batchen 1991,p.20). The consequence of this upheaval according to Foucault is that in a more fundamental fashion;

> at the level where acquired knowledge is rooted in its positively, the event concerns, not the objects aimed at, analysed, and explained in knowledge, not even the manner of knowing them or rationalising them, but the relation of representation to that which is posited in it .... what came into being.... is a minuscule but absolutely essential displacement, which toppled the whole of western thought... (Batchen, 1991, p.20).

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[4] Haliday,1989,p.78

As evidence of this "essential displacement" Batchen makes reference to the writings of Thomas Watling, Australia's first professional painter. In 1794 Watling published a book of his letters which he himself describes as a "heterogeneous and deranged performance". Watling consistently complains of the difficulty of representing both by pictures and words his new and unfamiliar antipodean surroundings. We are told how Watling laments "never did I find language so imperfect as at present" (Batchen, 1991, p.21). We are told that the letters have a certain rambling and inconsistent quality, they are "uneven...unruly and confused" these qualities are attributed by Batchen to " the pressures that prevailed upon a creative subject attempting to "methodise" experience at the time of white Australia's inauguration". Watling becomes "an effect of his own authorial dilemma"(Batchen,1991, p.24). While this argument may be worth keeping in mind and fits neatly with the above ideas, in isolation this example is deductive and circumstantial to support such a claim.

In his Book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's describes the panopticon, a notorious design for a system of incarceration first proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The design consisted of a prison in which the prisoner could be watched by his gaoler at any time, without knowing if he was under observation or not. This was hoped to create uncertainty in the prisoners mind, which would force the prisoner into regulating their behaviour. The prisoner was thus complicit in their own incarceration. The prisoner "inscribes himself in the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (Batchen, 1991, p.25). The dynamic of the panopticon is used by Foucault as a metaphor to describe the modern subjects relationship with power. Foucault describes a strange,

> empirico-trancendental doublet...which was called man...a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible" this figure is "..an invention of recent date... a figure not yet two centuries old (Batchen, 1991, p.25).

Foucault used the panopticon as a metaphor to describe the system of power relations in which the modern subject finds itself. Batchen locates the dynamic present in the

panopticon (and so modern subject/power relationship) as also existing in the expectation of the early protophotographers. Batchen offers these quotes by the three most important figures involved in the invention of photography, Neipce, Daguerre and Talbot (respectively) as evidence for his claim;

> ....that is to say:
> 1. Painting by nature herself
> 2. Copy by nature herself
> 3. Portrait by nature herself } roughly
> 4. To show nature herself
> 5. Real nature
> 6. True copy from nature.

> ..In conclusion, the daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw nature; on the contrary, it is a chemical and physical process which give her the power to reproduce herself (Batchen, 1991, p.27).

> Some account of the art of photogenic drawing, or the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artists pencil... (Batchen, 1991, p.25).

These quotes by Neipce, Daguerre and Talbot compel an argument that early conceptions of photography's nature exemplify the subjects status as defined by the epistemological shift described by Foucault. Batchen can thus position the invention of photography within a;

> ...general epistemological crisis that has made the relationship between nature and her representation a momentarily uncertain one, photography is conceived as neither one nor the other, but is at the same time a parasitical spacing that encompasses and inhabits both (Batchen, 1991, p.25).

It is Batchen's argument that photography was born in the midst of and as a response to, a crisis in our very understanding of how nature is represented. It can further be argued that photography's invention was an attempt to anchor our representation of nature at a time of uncertainty. It is not surprising then that the subject's relationship with photography has been problematic and unresolved ever since its inception.

Chapter two

> There is a dualism [that] haunts photography, lending a certain goofy inconsistency to most commonplace assertions about the medium (Sekula,1995, p.16).

We have seen in chapter one how it has been suggested that photography appeared at a time when the relationship between nature and its representation was uncertain and how it can be argued that photography's appearance in the 1830s was in response to a desire to anchor the representation of nature. It is not surprising then that photography has been plagued by "goofy" inconsistencies since its appearance. This chapter will look at the arguments surrounding photography's shifting status from its early years until the 1950s when it is considered to have came of age as a fully self-conscious art form. This Chapter will also look at photography's role as the favoured medium by 1980s postmodern artists.

Soon after its invention photograph found its way into the artist's studio. Mayer and Pierson (a large Parisian photographic firm) claimed in their book *La Photography* that no artist would begin a portrait without first having photographs taken of his model. Ingres, later one of the most virulent opponent of photography's claim to be a fine art medium used photography in his studio, as did Gerome, Courbet, Delacroix and possibly Manet[5]. These artists treated photography as artists in preceding centuries had treated the camera obscura. The photograph was regarded by painters such as Ingres as a means and not an end in itself. In the mid nineteenth century there appeared a desire among many photographic practitioners for their work to be accepted as a fine or high art alongside painting and sculpture. Over the years the "Art photographers" tried different strategies in an attempt to elevate photography to the canon of high art. An influential group which promoted photography as a fine art was the *Societe Francaise de Photographic*. The aim of the society was to establish photography as an art. Among its members it listed several regular contributors to the salon, the most prominent among them being Delacroix. In the society's founding year it held the photographic equivalent of the salon de refuse,

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[5] It remains a matter of debate as to whether or not Manet used photographs to achieve the sharp tonal style in his paintings. The existence of an etched portrait by him of Baudelaire drawn from a Nadir photograph suggests he may have used photographs. Evidence also exists that Manet used photographic studies for his painting "The execution of the Emperor Maximilian".

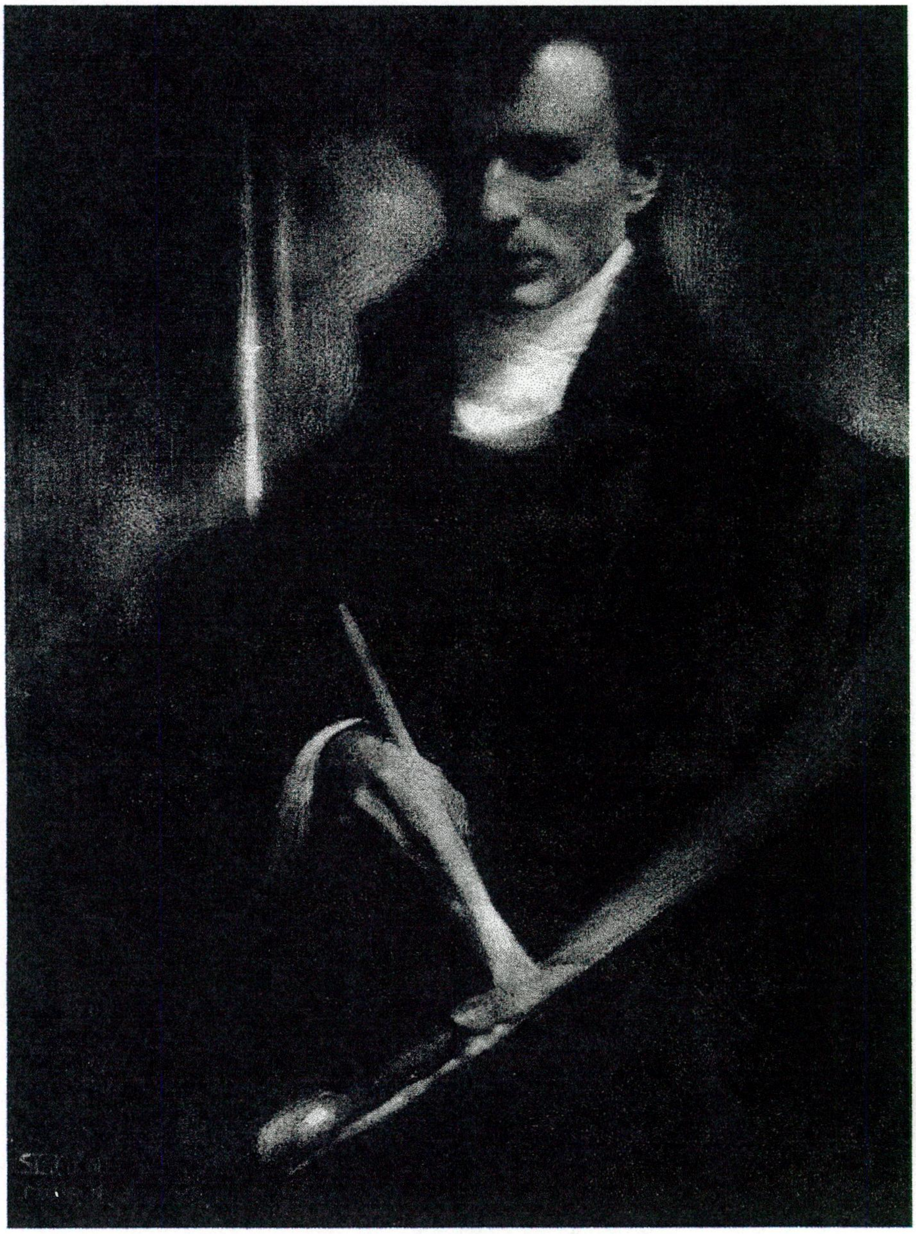
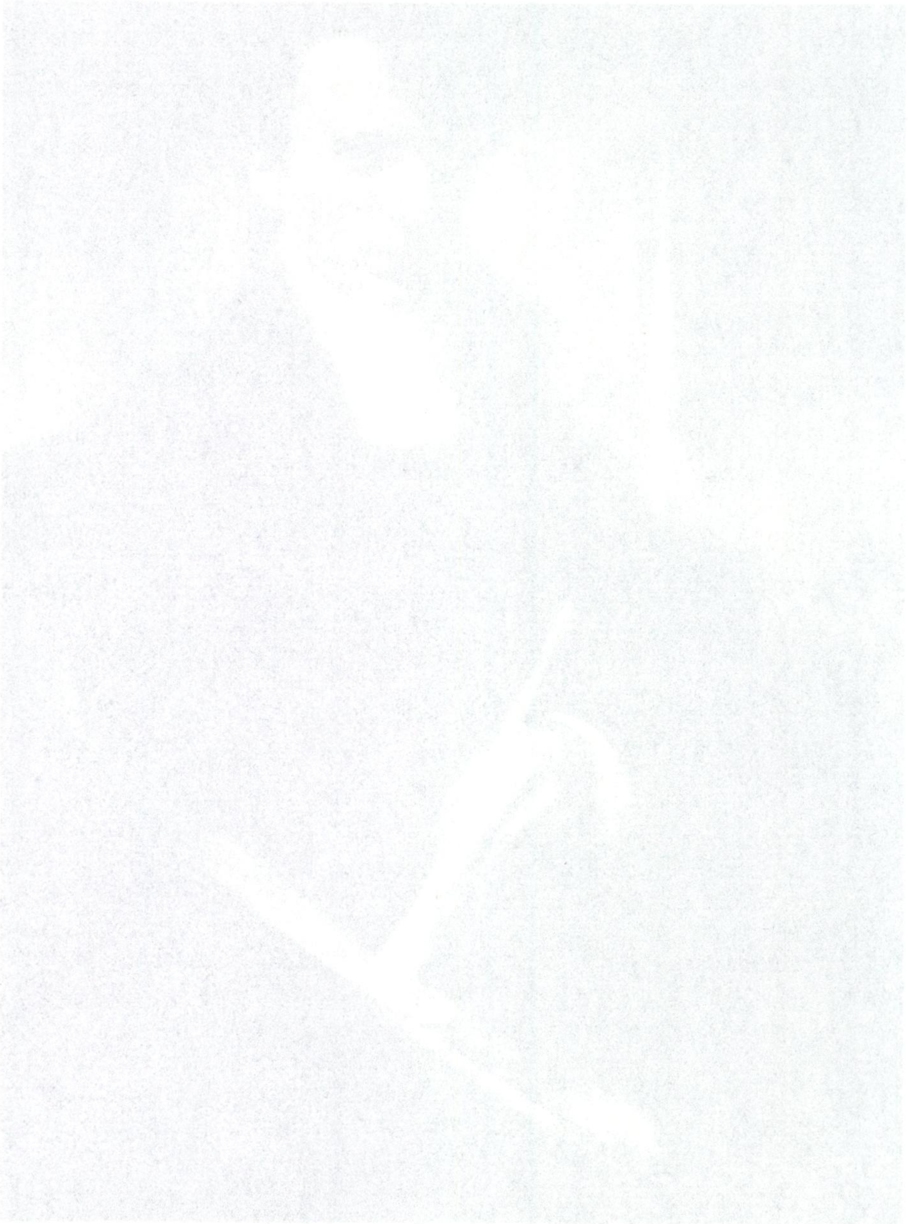


Fig.1. Edward J.Steichen, Self-Portrait with brush and Palette, 1902.



(Photographs were regularly submitted to the salon, none were ever accepted) to assert their position in the hierarchy of art. The society set about attempting to demarcate art photography from other photographic practice. In order to do this the society created a strict criteria which all submissions to their exhibitions had to meet before being accepted. Only traditional "high-Art" subject matter would be accepted (the society, for example, rejected a photograph of a man cutting his corns). The society would under no circumstances accept nudes. The society rejected any work that was touched up or coloured in any way. It could be said that apart from using a new medium, the society was highly conservative in other respects.

In 1859 the society won a victory of sorts when the government yielded to pressure and consented to a yearly exhibition in the Palais de Industry, although the photographic salon had its own entrance separate to the painting and sculpture areas, it occupied an area adjoining them. Opposition to photography's place as a fine art persisted however. Charles Baudelaire's attack on photography’s artistic pretensions illustrates the heights to which passions often ran;

> ...I am convinced that the ill applied progress of photography has contributed much, as do indeed all purely material advances, to the impoverishment of French Artistic genius already so rare. Modern stupidity can well groan and belch up all the rubbish and vomit out all the indigestible sophistry that a recent philosophy has us with from top to bottom. All that is going to collapse because of industry, in breaking through into art, has become its most mortal enemy and the confusion of Art and industry impedes the proper functioning of both. Poetry and Progress are two ambitious creatures who hate each other instinctively. And when they meet on the same road one of the two must give way to the other. If photography is allowed to stand in for Art in some of its functions it will soon supplant or corrupt it completely thanks to the natural support it will find in the stupidity of the multitude. It must return to its real task, which is to be the servant of the sciences and of the arts, but the very humble servant, like printing and shorthand which have neither created nor supplanted literature (Scharf, 1983, p.145).

The opponents of photography’s attempted elevation to the status of art often emphasised what they saw as the ethereal properties of painting. For them painting and sculpture occupied the province of the spiritual,. Real art, they argued could convey a truth that was superior to literal truth. Photography was on the other hand a mere mechanical procedure and as such stood outside the province of the transcendental in the hum drum world of machinery. The following quotes by Zola, Paul Heut, (a critic of the time and author of

Painting After Nature), and Charles Blanc, (editor of the *Gazette des beauxs-arts* are representative of this),

> Art is a human product....the individual element, man is infinitely variable; as much in his creations as in his temperaments (Scharf, 1983, p.147).
>
> No matter how perfect a photograph, one will never find in it the quivering hand that drew Rembrandt's etching.... Paul Heut (Scharf,1983, p.147).
>
> What is drawing? Is it a pure imitation of form? If it were that the most faithful of drawings would be the best, and consequently no other copy would be preferable to the image fixed on the daguerreotype plate (Scharf,1983, p.14).

From the above quotes it is clear that for photography to be accepted as a fine art in the late nineteenth century it was necessary first to settle the question as to what degree the medium was under the control of the photographer. Could the photographer manipulate formal elements, light and shade etc, to a degree where the artist's personality or genius was present in the finished photograph just as the painters was in the painting. The nub of the question put simply was this, to what degree was the photograph authored by the photographer? This question became the central theme of an important case in the French courts in the years 1861 and 1862. The photographers Mayer and Pierson had accused another photographic firm, Bethbeder and Schwabbe, of copying their prints of Lord Palmerson and Count Cavour. Widespread affordability and availability of tintypes of public notables, otherwise only read or heard about could often guarantee a lucrative return. And companies such as Mayer and Pierson would often buy exclusive rights to a celebrity's image. The plaintiffs claimed the protection of the French copyright laws of 1793 and 1810. These laws applied only to the arts. It followed that photography had to be legally declared as Art if Mayer and Piersons' photographs were to qualify for protection. The courts first decision went against Mayer and Pierson, the verdict was appealed and came before the court three months later. The Plaintiffs attorney, M.Marie asked the court;

> What is art? Who will define it? Who will say where it begins and where it ends? Who will say you may go just so far and no further? I put these questions to the philosophers who have dealt with them, and we can read with interest what they have written about art

> in its different forms. Art they say is beauty and beauty is truth in its material reality. If we see truth in photography and if truth in its outward form charms the eye, how then can it fail to be beauty! And if all the characteristics of art are found there, how can it fail to be art! well! I protest in the name of philosophy. Is the painter any less of a painter if he re produces exactly (Scharf,1983, p.152).

These arguments won the case for Mayer and Pierson. The controversy did not end there however, as that Autumn a petition was presented before the court. It was signed by a powerful list of artists headed by Ingres and including Flandrin, Fleury and Philippe Rousseau. The petition read as follows:

> whereas in recent proceedings, the court was obliged to deal with the question of whether photography should be counted as a fine art, and its products given the same protection as the works of artists;
> whereas photography consists of a series of completely manual operations which no doubt require some skill in the manipulations involved, but never resulting in works which could in any circumstances ever be compared with those works which are the fruits of intelligence and the study of art - on these grounds, the undersigned artists protest against any comparison which might be made between photography and art (Scharf ,1983, p.152).

The court however upheld its previous decision. In its statement the court declared that photographs could be the product of taste, intelligence, thought and spirit. The signatories lamented what they considered a mortal blow to painting, they complained that the work in the salon now showed an obvious lack of drawing ability. The anti technological arguments such as those above by Flandrin were part of a wider agenda. 1863 was the year of the salon des refuses. Neo-classicism was engaged in a struggle for its survival. The same year Napoleon issued a decree ordering a restructuring of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, which would extensively weaken the influence of the Academe. Ingres used denounce the reforms from the senate,

> Now they want to mix industry with art. Industry! We do not want it! let it keep its place and not set itself on the steps of our true temple of Apollo, consecrated solely to the arts of Greece and Rome (Scharf , 1983 p.153).

Following victory in the courts the photographers insisted that photography be classified and exhibited as a fine art at the international exhibition of 1862. However photographs were still not accepted into the salon. The art journal of the time published a note from the photographic society complaining how the commissioners had placed photography amongst carpenters tools and agricultural implements. In the 1860s sundry books on

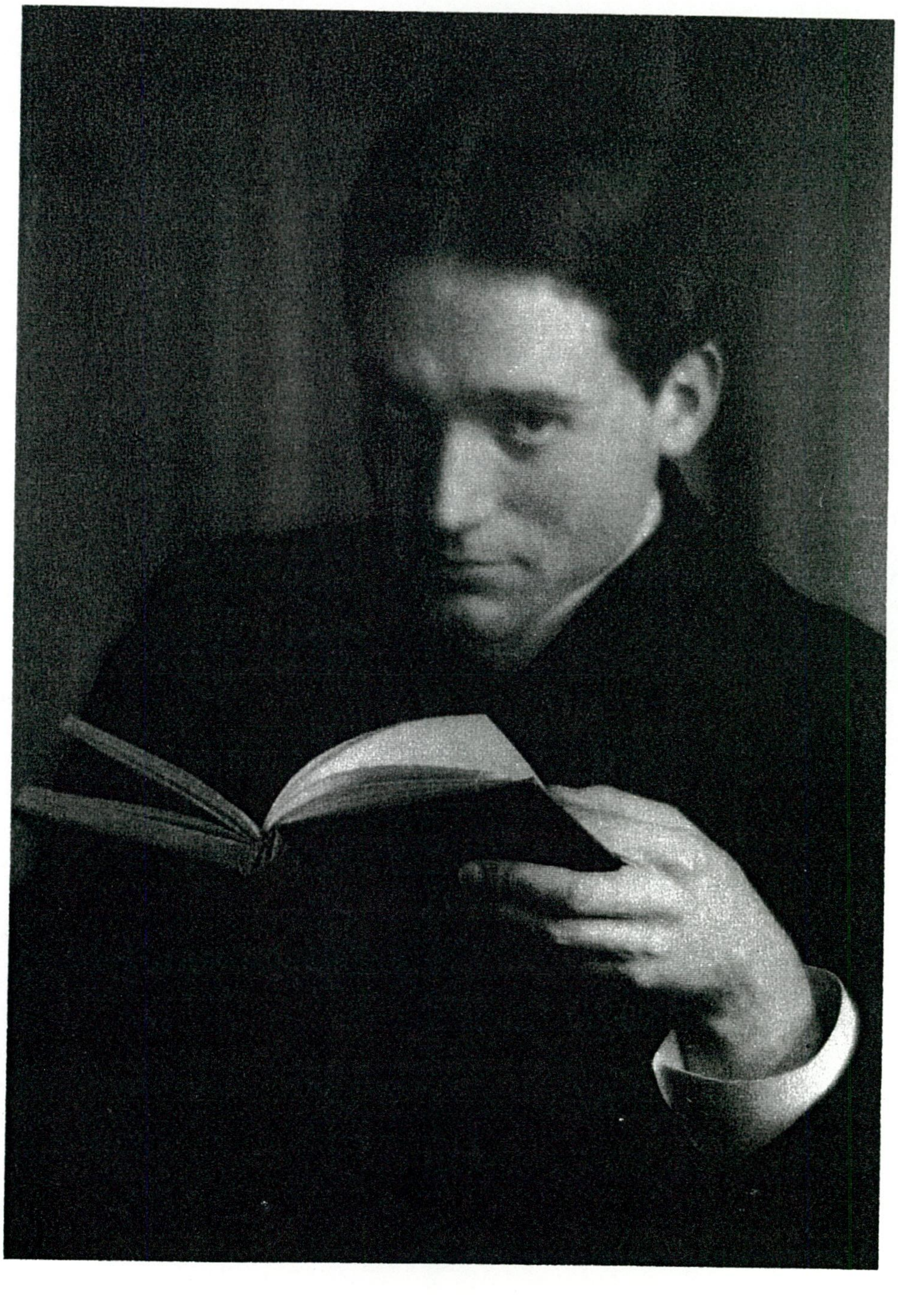


Fig. 2. Fredrick Evans, Portrait of Granville Barker, 1905

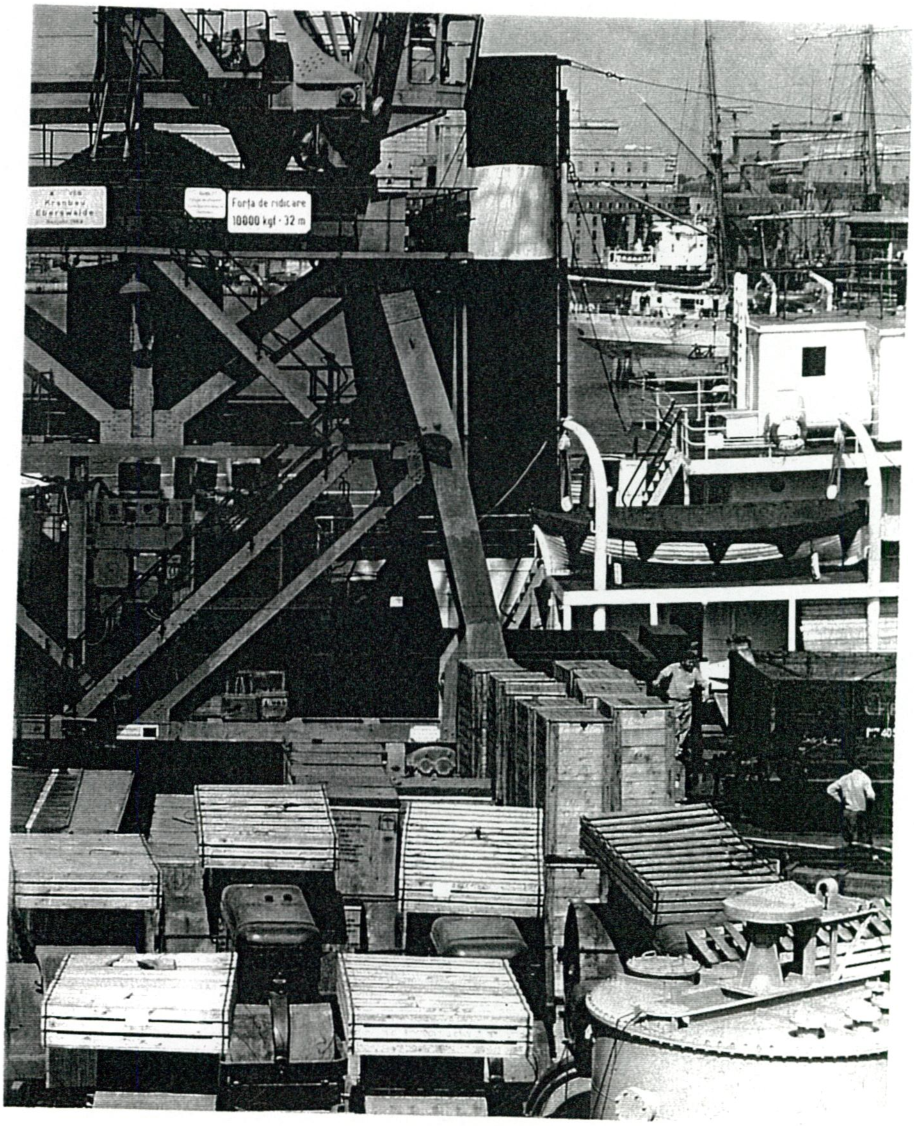

Kranbau
Eberswalde
Forța de ridicare
10000 kgf · 32 m

Fig.3. Paul Strand, Romanian Dock, 1917

photographic technique began to appear. The purpose of these books was to prove the importance of photography among the arts. Mayer and Pierson stated in their book *La Photography* published in 1862, that the photographic image had been so widely absorbed by the public that great artists were now compelled to surpass themselves. Photography, they argued, makes the existence of mediocre art impossible, and can be a valueable tool to the artist. In Another book published in 1862, *L'art de la photography*, Disderi compares the different styles of photographers to the different styles of the masters, such as Ingres, Delaroche and others. The camera, Disderi asserts, can be manipulated like the painter's brush. The camera can be used to create works; "like the battle scenes of Salvator Rosa or the Kermesse of Rubens; and may show interiors like those of van Ostade, or Peter de Hooche.... " (Scharf, 1983, p. 54). Photographers in the late nineteenth century would often emphasise that they expended the same time and effort as a painter would in producing a work. One commentator said of H.P Robinson's *Bringing Home the May* that "the time and expense indispensable to the production of such a photograph , or rather set of photographs, can scarcely be less than would be necessary to the painting of a picture of the same size"(Sharf ,1983p.157). In the 1880s the widespread dissemination of gelatino-bromide dry plates, perfected enlargers and in particular the Kodak push button camera made this last argument obsolete. These technological factors resulted in a vastly increased accessibility and an accompanying decrease in the level of expertise necessary to take and process photographs. As a response to this, art photography distanced itself from hobbyists and amateurs. The strategy adopted by the "pictorialist" photographers was the use of gum bichromate colouring and texturing of the photograph in an attempt to mimic the texture and look of painting (fig.1). In 1861 the Englishman Alfred H Wall published the *Manual of Artistic Colouring as Applied to Photographs*. The 262 pages of instructions detailed techniques of painting over photographs, a practice which Wall assures his readers was no more illegitimate than Leonardo or Titian painting over the abozzo. Wall states that it was common knowledge that artists would trace over photographs, why then should the artist not paint directly onto the photograph. Wall may have had in mind the embarrassing case at the Royal Academy that year when the Photographic News quoted with glee an indisputable authority who claimed; " that the academy had unwittingly accepted a coloured photograph for their exhibition" (Scharf, 1983, p.155).

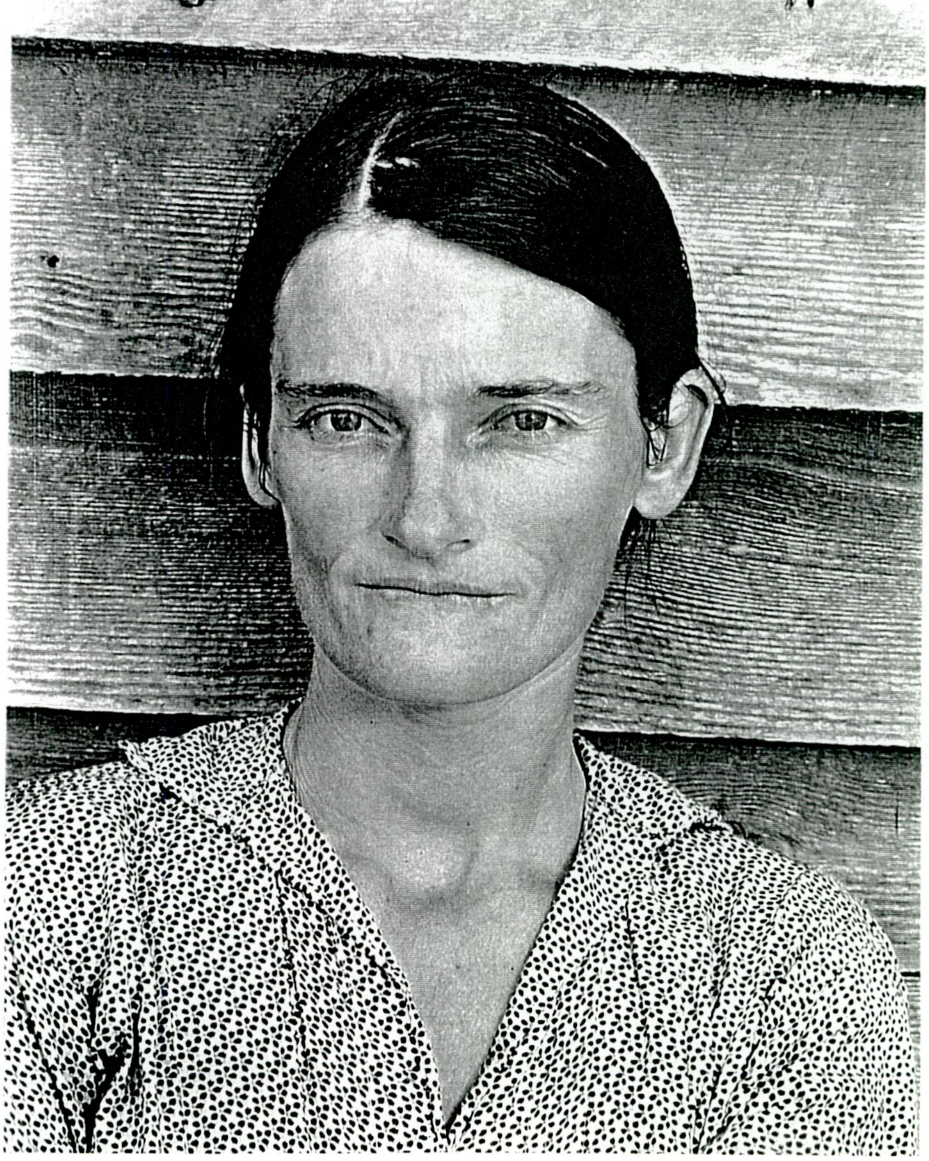


Fig. 4. Walker Evans, Commission for Farm Security Administration, 1927

Coloured photographs were rejected by artists because they were not paintings and by photographers because they were not photographs, Wall asked "should an art which combines the truth of the one with the loveliness of the other be held in such low regard" (Scharf, 1983, p.155).

A shift in attitudes toward photography occurred around the turn of the century, prompted largely by a group of photographers who became known as the "Photo-Secessionists". They gave unquestioning support to every new style of painting and sculpture which appeared at the beginning of this century (Scharf, 1983, p256). The Secessionists led by Alfred Steglitz opened a highly influential gallery known as the *291* . In addition to contemporary photographers Rodin, Matisse, Cezanne and Picasso among others exhibited at the *291.* The Secessionists published their journal, *Camera Work* from 1903 to 1917. It became the most influential journals which considered both photography and conventional art. Among its contributors were Gertrude Stein, Maurice Maeterlinck, H.G. Wells and G.B Shaw. Camera Work did much to promote photography's elevation to the canon. Typical of its content is this quote by Shaw regarding a photograph by Fredrick Evans (fig .2),

> At that time the impression produced was much greater than it could be at present; for the question whether photography was a fine art had then hardly been seriously posed ....Evans suddenly settled it at one blow for me by simply handing me one of his prints in platinotype (Sharf, 1983, p.241).

In 1908 Camera Work published a series of interviews with several leading artists of the time. The artists were shown photographs by Steichen, Demachy, Puyo and others and asked to give their comments. All the reactions, although not unreservedly so, were positive. Rodin for example, declared;

> I believe that photography can create works of art.... I consider Steichen a very great artist ... I do not know to what degree Steichen interprets, and I do not see any harm whatever, or of what importance it is, what means he uses to achieve his results...which, however, must remain always clearly a photograph (Sharf, 1983, p.250).

Matisse also qualifies his praise;

> If it is practised by a man of taste, the photograph will have the appearance of art [but] The photographer must ... intervene as little as possible, so as not ...to lose the objective charm which it naturally possesses... Photography should register and give documents (Sharf, 1983, p.250).

It is often stated that photography really became a fully self-conscious art form in the early twentieth century when it stopped impersonating painting and began to pursue its own internal formal properties. This is the photographic incarnation of Greenbergian modernism. Accordingly photography's inherent property is its self-referentiality, its own history and tradition and, the argument went, its ability to reflect or mirror the unique vision of the author. Intrinsic to this belief is a retreat from any reference to painting or any external social or political documentary. It has long been claimed in standard photographic history that the work of Paul Strand (fig.3) during the first world war, (particularly the work championed by Alfred Steglitz in the last two issues of camerawork) heralded photography's self awareness as a self referential art form. This has generally been regarded as a moment of renewal for American art photography. Previous photographers such as Steglitz, Weston and Walker Evans, practised "straight" photography, making direct, unmanipulated prints. Often, particularly in the case of Evans (fig.4) and Weston, with an explicit "documentary" political or social content. Strands "uncompromising Formulation" of the aesthetics of straight photography and his insistence on pursuing photography's intrinsic qualities have traditionally been seen as a key moment of reorientation in American art photography. Photography from this moment on, the argument goes, has been more or less accepted as a fine art, more or less because it's acceptance has not been universal. It is not uncommon to encounter arguments such as that forwarded in 1989 by the professor of Aesthetics at London University's Brick College, Roger Suction in Modern Painters (Brighton,1989, p.105). The professor argues that photography is not an art on a par with painting. A true representation, the professor claims, is an expressed thought about something rather that a copy. He continues; " ...The relation between painting and its subject is an intentional, not material, relation. A photograph is caused by its subject, and causality is a material relation" (Brighton,1989, p.107).

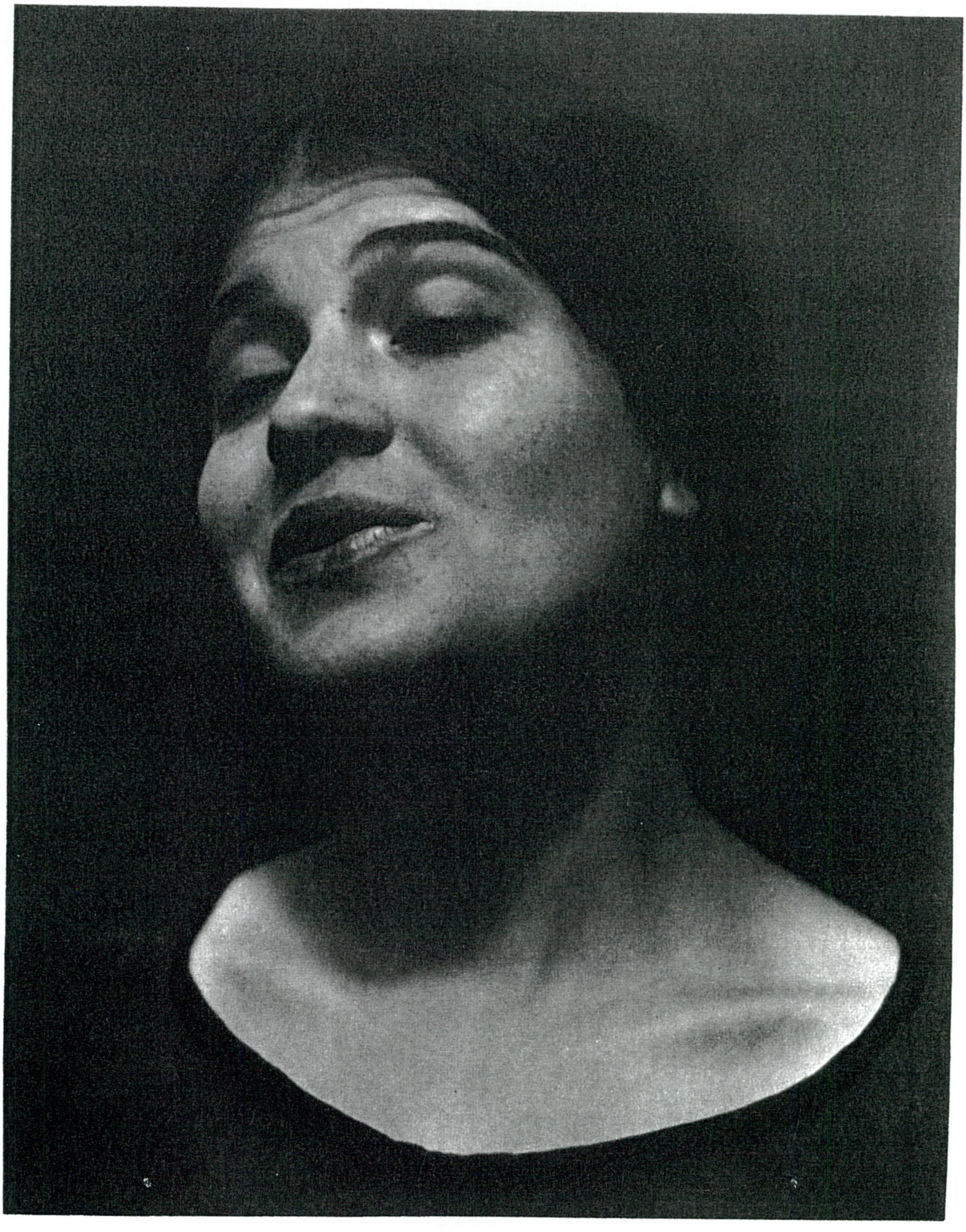


Fig. 5. Edward Weston, Adia Reciting, 1912

Another indication of Photography's less than top shelf status is the segregation awarded photography by the British Arts Council in the 1970s. When the council widened its brief to include photography, it set up a different section, distinct from the rest of the visual arts department. Solomon-Godeau in her book *Photograph at the Dock* is also unconvinced by photography's new credentials. She seeks to link contemporary art photography with its embarrassing predecessor, pictorialism, which produced works such as Edward Strichen's 1902 self portrait in which the photographer is represented as a painter and the pigment print is itself disguised as a painting (fig.1). She argues that the difference between contemporary, formalist art photography and the pictorialists are the methods employed by each, but she argues, both share the same goal. Solomon Godeau contests that the "self definition and accompanying belief system" have remained substantially unchanged throughout all of photography's changing styles, technologies and cultures. Photography's exclusive concentration on stylistic developments and its preoccupation with its exemplary practitioners obscure the "structural continuities" shared by both the embarrassing pictorialists and the triumphant modernists. As evidence of this unchanging belief system she presents two quotes one by Steichen. " Man is the actual medium of expression-not the tool he elects to use as a means" and one by Westons, "it is the artist that creates the work, not the medium"(Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p.109).

Throughout *Photography at the Dock* Solomon-Godeau pursues a consistent, hard hitting critique of aesthetic formalism in Art photography. For Solomon-Godeau such photography severs the subject from its socio-political context and thus makes invisible the ideological constructions that surround the subject in real life. There is little space for visual pleasure from Solomon Godeau's position. Aesthetic pleasure for her, says Emily Apter in her review of *Photography at the Dock*, "...is complicit with an aestheticization of social reality that distracts the viewer from intelligible yet invisible ideological doxa" (Apter, 1992, p.55). Although *Photography at the Dock* was first published in 1991, many of the essays were written in the early eighties when the cultural and political landscape a was great deal more polarised and ideological taut. It often seems that the essays in *Photography at the Dock* share a sense of fun with Mao tse Tung's Red guard. However as if to pre-empt this criticism opens her introduction by quoting Benjamin; "The events

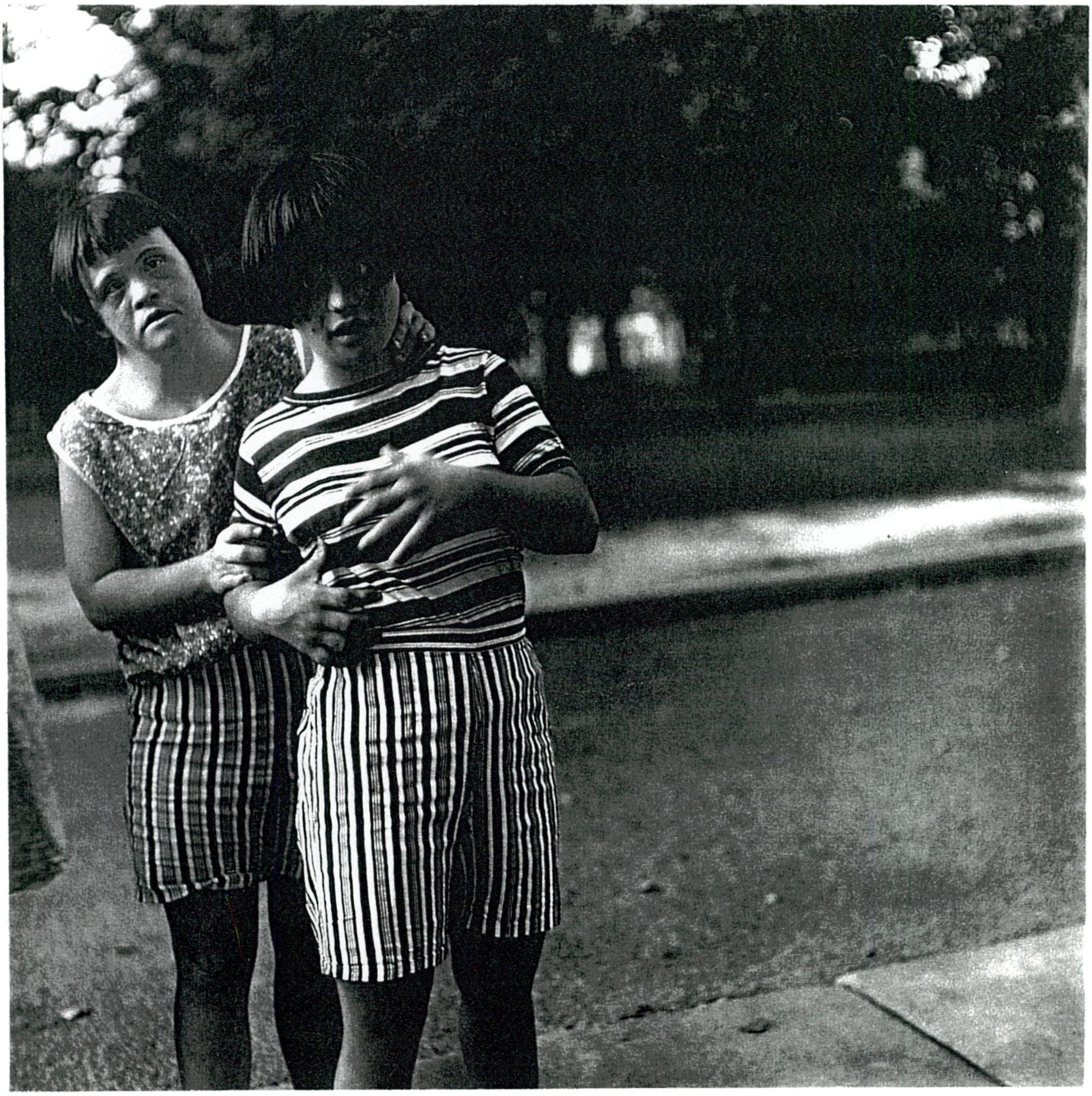


Fig. 6. Diane Arbus, 12 of Children series

surrounding the historian and in which he takes part will underline his presentation like a text written in invisible ink" (Solomon Godeau, XX1). While some of the arguments contained in *Photograph at the Dock* may seem too austere in the hedonistic 1990s her arguments are still cogent. As when she bemoans the way photographic formalist criticisms are "promiscuously imposed" on all photographic practice be it documentary, pictorialist, topographic survey, the 49th parallel survey or modernist photographic practice, all end up finally as "grist for the aesthetic mill" irrespective of intention or context"(Solomon-Godeau, 1991, p.109). The concepts of self -expression, originality and subjectivity associated with photography have remained ambigious up to and during photography's elevation to the status of "high Art". However, more significantly, the canon of fine or high art which photography had so tentatively entered was itself by the mid twentieth century in crisis.

Chapter three

As we have seen in chapter two photography had achieved some, if not complete success in acquiring the credentials of a fine art medium. Photography became an accepted (if second class) activity in the institutional precincts of fine art, the gallery, the museum and the art college[6]. In the early 60s two distinct photographic tendencies emerged. Firstly there were the art photographers such as Diane Arbus (fig.5) and Robert Adams who continued in the tradition of Steglitz, Weston etc. Photographs, typically appropriated from mass media, also began to appear in the work of artists such as Warhol, Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha. These artists insisted on what Barthes called the deja-lu (already read/already seen) property of the photograph while the art photographers meanwhile were concerned with what they considered the aura of the autonomous photograph. The Rauschenberg/Warhol axis, together with the concurrent profusion of deliberately repetitive minimal sculpture, caused a crisis in the museum. Many traditional institutions turned their backs on contemporary practice. Another response to this crisis was the recuperation of photography and the conferral of aura to the photographs. The quotes that follow illustrate the type of language used by two art photography authorities of the time considering the work of Diane Arbus; " Her pictures...are concerned with private rather than social realities...Her real subject is no less than the unique interior lives of those she photographed". The other speaks of how, "it is their dignity that is, I think, the source of their power"(Burgin, 1982, p.40). Implicit in the above quotes, is the idea that their are unique essences within things and people, which in this case the photographic image can reveal. These and similar notions are central to art photography's understanding of photography. The photographic image as employed by Warhol and Rauschenberg was informed by very different ideas which considered not just the photographic image but the nature of the medium itself. The incorporation of photography into art such as Warhol's *16 Jakies*

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[6] In the National College of Art and Design, the Fine Art department is structured as follows- there is a professor of fine art, then there are four departmental heads one for the photography department, and one each for painting, sculpture and print. The four departmental heads each sit on the college's Academic Council. The photography department theoretically occupies a position on a par with painting, print or sculpture. However the department has no students of its own. If a student wishes to practic

(fig.6) and Rauschenberg's *Buffallos II* (fig.7) in the 1960s emphasised the photograph's identity as a reproducible mass medium. Warhol used readymade, mass produced images culled from the media to produce series and multiples. His highly publicised work practice replicated the industrial assembly line, and the public persona which Warhol cultivated was diametrically opposed to the romantic concept of the artist. All of this represented a significant break with tradition. By using photographs Warhol effectively jettisoned the modernist stress on the purity of the aesthetic signifier. The work of Warhol owed much to Duchamp's readymade. By presenting or re-presenting humdrum everyday objects as art, Duchamp's readymades can be understood to be performing a political function in so far as they work to breakdown the notion of aesthetic autonomy and so rejoin art and everyday life. This is in contrast to art photography's ideas of the transcendental and spiritual function of the artefact. Duchamps readymades also served to demonstrate that the category `Art' was contingent on context and was therefore arbitrary. Art is according to this logic, the function of a discourse and not a revelation. Duchamp posited that the identity, value and meaning of the artefact were constructed. The artefact therefore, does not exist autonomously.

The 1970s saw an increased attack on artistic representations. The attack was led by a small group of art critics among them Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster (Bertens, 1994, p.40). The postmodern reading of contemporary culture offered by the above critics quickly reached a large audience and acquired gospel status. Linda Andre noted in 1984, " Within a mere 6-7 years postmodernism has acquired all the weight of orthodoxy in the art photography world. To take any other position as a critic is to be ignored" (Andre,1984, p.17). Out of all these critics, perhaps the most influential was Crimp whose 1977 *Pictures* essay was widely read. Later republished in *October*, the original *Pictures* essay appeared as a catalogue essay for an exhibition of New York artists using photography. Among the artists exhibiting at the *Pictures* show were Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Richard Prince. Although the work from the exhibition was formally diverse, the artists shared a propensity to enquire, and contest notions of subjectivity, originality and the

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photography they must do so from the print, sculpture or painting department.

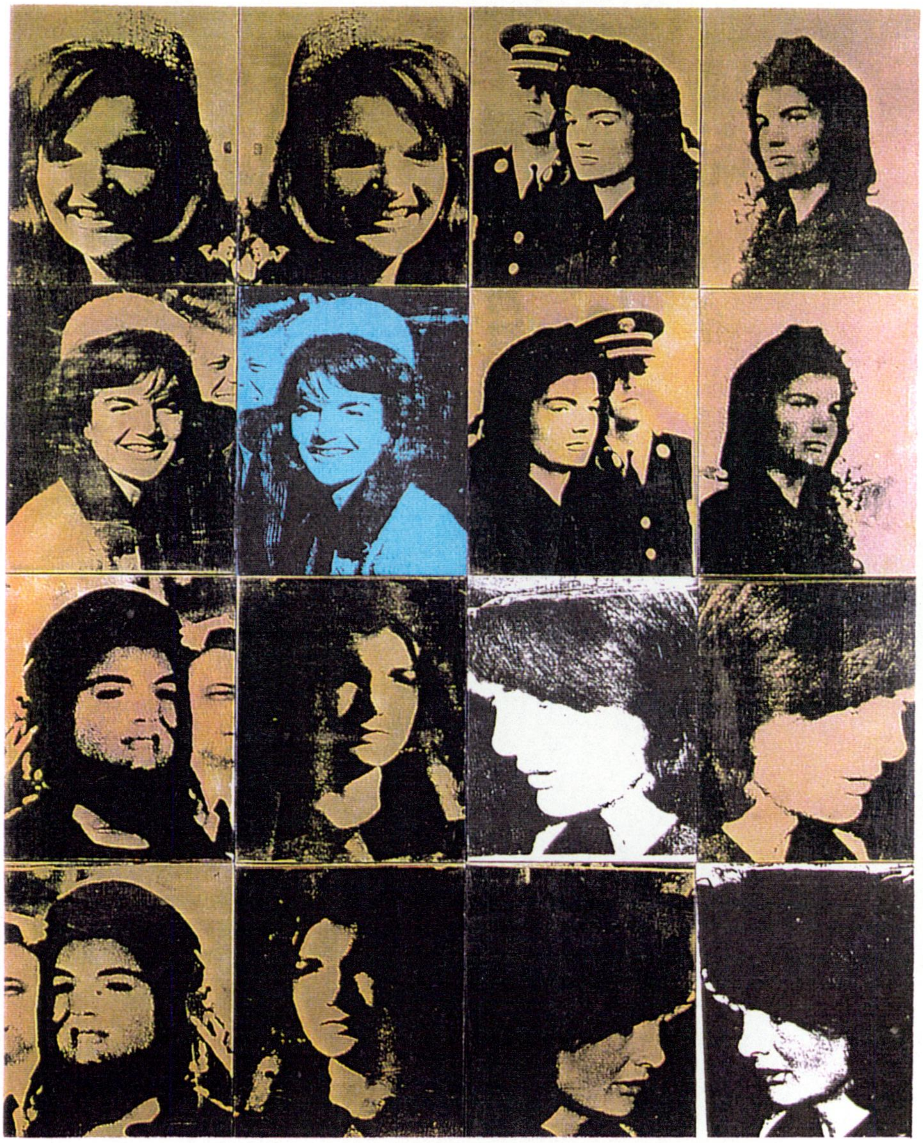

Fig. 7. Andy Warhol, 16 Jakies, 1965

relationship between the author and the original artefact. Crimp provided a critical framework within which these artists could be read. The artists from the *Pictures* catalogue, particularly Levine and Sherman have come to represent postmodern art practice for a generation of art and art theory students.

Levine's work in the seventies and much of the eighties involved the re-presentation of specific modernist art icons. At one of her most famous showings she exhibited six photographs of a nude child (fig.8). The photographs were re photographed from the famous series by Edward Weston of his son Neil. Levine's work re-examines the idea of creative originality. Weston's photographs are themselves appropriations of classical sculpture poses. By (re)appropriating these images Levine foregrounds the already present quotation in Weston's iconic, high modernist art photographs.

Cindy Sherman's self portraits share a preoccupation with authenticity and quotation. Sherman's photographs at the time of the *Pictures* show presented a cast of fantastic characters. Each character refers to stereotypical images of women, as presented in film and television (fig.9). Her photographs expose the function of the photograph (and it has come to be argued, all representation) to construct fictions, in this case unwanted fictions. Sherman turns the photographs veracity against itself by creating pictures which are simultaneously convincing yet ridiculous. Crimp wrote that the *Pictures* artists were guided by the notion that "we only experience reality through the pictures we take of it"(Bertens, 1991, p.19). In his essay *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,* Crimp says of the pictures artists,

> Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, stolen. In their work the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy.(Crimp, 1996, p.105)

Postmodernism, as defined by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens and in particular Douglas Crimp forms a central plank of the curriculum in many art colleges today. Because many of the key texts by the above critics were written in the late seventies and early eighties, their tone often implies an attractive subversive/oppositional position. However as Andre has noted above, this brand of postmodern theory/practice has over the last fifteen to twenty years acquired all the weight of orthodoxy. The postmodern theory advanced by Crimp et al was a crucial

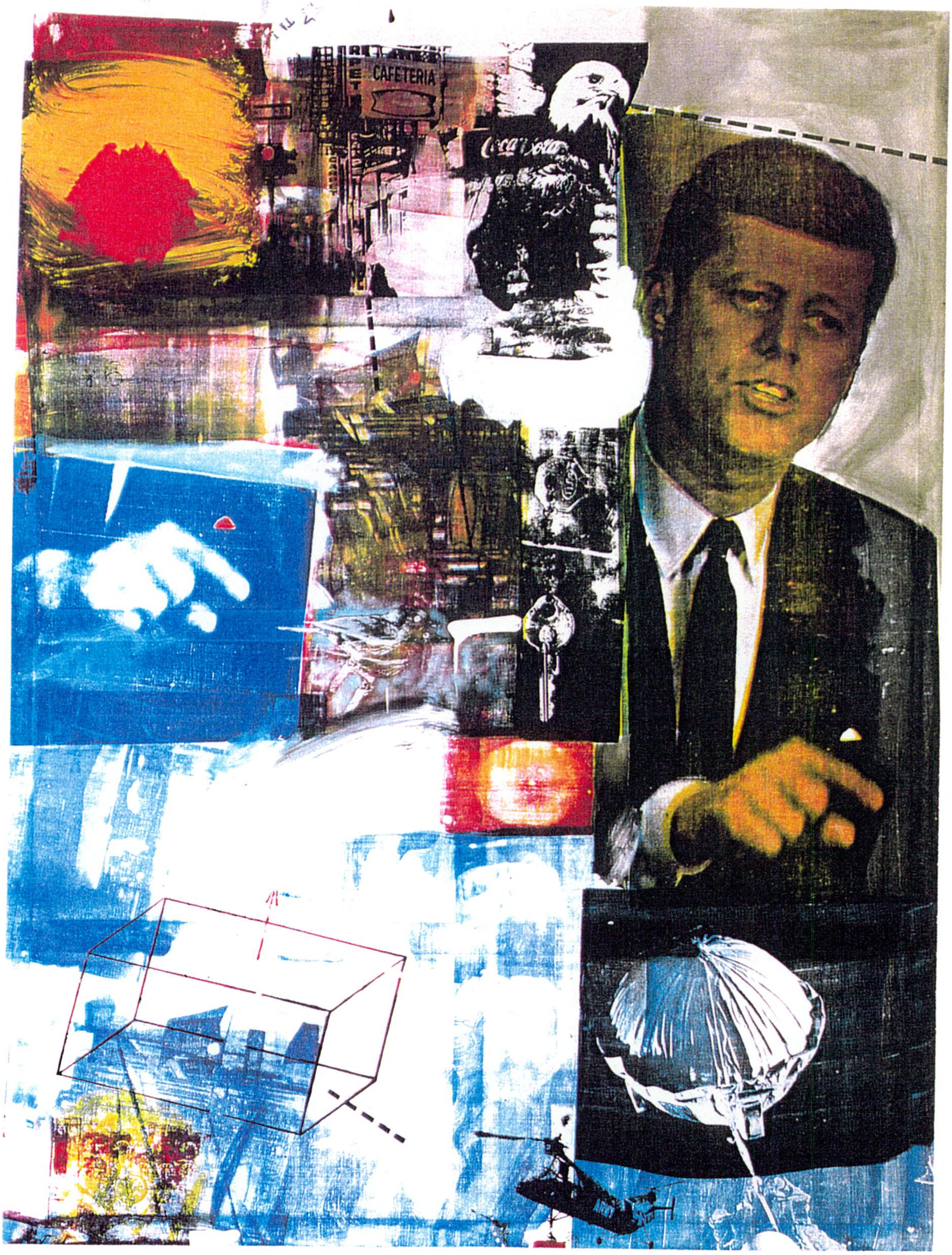
CAFETERIA
Coca-Cola

Fig. 8. Rauschenberg, Buffalo II , 1964

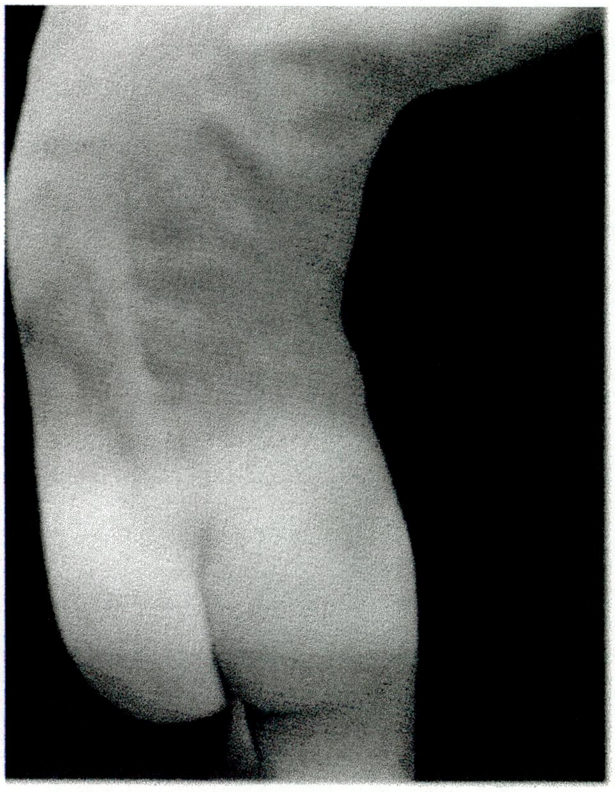

Fig. 9. Sherrie Levine, After Edward Weston, 1981

and, in the context of the 1980s art market's staleness, very exciting. Not all art which questions notions of subjectivity and originality has necessarily passed its best before date. However there are only so many times the same message is interesting. It could also be argued that the emphasis on the conceptual element of art practice and the demotion of the aesthetic can, twenty years on, sometimes seem oppressive. In a Sherrie Levine exhibition Catalogue there is a good illustration of the effect one understanding of postmodern theory can have,

> "pleasant though it was to be in a room with the photographs that compose *after walker Evans* it did seem embarrassing to be caught looking at them too closely" (Kunsthalle, 1991, p.34).

Chapter 4

We have seen how in the 1960s photography as employed by Warhol and Rauschenberg began to problematise the integrity of modernist conceptions of artistic authorship. We have also seen how the *Pictures* artists, as they have come to be known, have continued this "emptying operation" (Crimp, 1996, p.107). This thesis will now provide a historical-theoretical context for those changes that postmodern photographic practice was involved with. We will look at two of the key semioligical texts concerned with what is known as the Death of the Author. Much of the critical work which undermines these "modern" notions of the author and the individual can be rooted in the work of French linguists and post-structuralists. Structuralist linguistics was by the late sixties a sufficiently established discipline to provide many ready made theoretical models of communication and of representation. Linguistics informed writers such as Barthes and Foucault, who in turn informed the generation of critics (Crimp, Bertens, Krauss) who attacked representation and the conceptual baggage it carried.

Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" is an attempt to deconstruct the traditional ideas implicit when we use the word "author". Barthes rejects the coherency created by the notion that the author exists before the book, "thinks, suffers, lives for it, in the same relation....as a father to a child"(Barthes,1977 P.145). In contrast the modern author is born simultaneously with the text. For Barthes the author does not exist outside the text. Any preoccupation with biographical detail in an attempt to get closer to the true meaning of the text is misplaced. The authors only power is to mix other writings so each writing refers to another, which refers to another and so on *ad infinitum*. When the author "expresses himself" he uses a ready formed dictionary, words that are only explicable through other words, and so on. The author must then conform to inherited linguistic conventions. Barthes writes that,

> Succeeding the author the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary...life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.. [the text is a] multidimensional

> space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash... a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture (Barthes, 1977, p.143).

Barthes' argument attempts to undermine the author's primacy as the creator of meaning. The true place, he argues, where meaning is produced is in the mind of the reader. According to Barthes the text is thus constructed from multiple sources which enter into mutual relations of parody, dialogue and contestation. The unity, or coming together of these disparate quotations, Barthes says, occurs as the text is read. That is where meaning is created. Meaning is not deposited or hidden in the text to be discovered by the cleverest reader, instead it is manufactured as the text is read. It is often said that postmodern theory is nihilistic, because it eliminates the possibility of definite human communication. However this interpretation is at odds with the closing sentence of Barthes' *The Death of the Author*, where he says "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes,1977, p.144).

Another text that much postmodern theory has drawn from is Foucault's "What is an Author?". Foucault's criticism focuses on the "discourse" which at any time constitutes the "author". By discourse Foucault means all the ideas in circulation about a given theme, ideas which emanate from institutions, such as state apparatus; police, legislature, army, educational institutions and so on. Any dialogue or consideration of a theme, in this case the author function, takes place within a discourse created by these institutions. For Foucault there is no possibility of disinterest or neutrality when the subject[7] enters a discourse, for example, by speaking about the author. Nothing we say can exist outside the discourse because the very language and the categories we inevitably use when we speak have a function within discourse. Foucault gives

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[7] Throughout postmodern, critical texts, there is an absence of the word "individual" outside of inverted commas, instead the word "subject" is used. This is on account of Foucault's argument that "individual" implies concepts of freedom and liberty rooted in the enlightenment, which are now obsolete. The "subject" within postmodern theory is understood within the context of the *individual* being the *subject* of government apparatus of control (for example).

examples of how the concept of author can be troubled. In one example Foucault imagines the publication of all Nietzche's work, and poses the question, where should the publisher stop?

> Everything that Nietzche himself published, certainly. and what about the rough drafts for his work? obviously. The plans for his aphorisms? yes. What if, wthin a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or an address, or a laundry list: is it a work or not ? Why not? And so on, ad infinitum (Foucault, 1979, p.144).

In the second example Foucault asks, what if someone who was not an author dies, what do we call what he has written?

When the Marquis de Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his writings? Were they just the rambling fantasies of a prisoner? Foucault's point is that there are criteria adhered to which define the "author" as opposed to just anyone who writes. Foucault examines these criteria and asks what purpose they serve, and perhaps more cogently *whose* purpose do they serve. Foucault predicts that as our society changes and "historical modifications" take place, the author function will disappear and the polysemic text will operate according to some other mode yet to be determined.

Foucault closes his argument in *What is an Author* by rehearsing his view of how a text should be read,

> We will no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: "who really spoke ? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?" Instead there would be other questions, like these: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions ?" And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: "What difference does it make who is speaking? (Foucault, 1979, p.160)

One conclusion that can be drawn from Barthes' and Foucault's revision of the authors function is that the historical figure of author is not an inherent entity, but rather a creation. Foucault establishes a parallelism. The relationship between `author'

and text emerged historically as the cultural expression of an emergent relationship between the rights bearing individual and private property which occurred in the eighteenth century. The "privileged moment of individualisation" (Foucault,1979, p.156) was also characterised as a moment of privatisation of knowledge as property. The individual author came to be the sole principle by which meanings are composed and determined. In Foucalts essay "What is an Author" he writes "it would be worth examining how the author became individualised in a culture like ours". Carla Hesse's essay *Enlightenment Epistemology and the laws of Authorship In Revolutionary France, 1777-1793* is such an historical examination. Hesse examines the legal evolution of the concept `author' in eighteenth century France and concludes that the emergence of the author is the product of a rise in writers who sought to earn their livelihood from the sales of books to new and rapidly expanding reading public. The valorisation of original genius (central to modernism) and the development of a Lockean concept of "possessive individualism" occurred in the same era as the commercial laws of copyright. It was here that the modern concept of the author as the owner of the text was formed. The advent of a modern cultural system is according to Hesse marked by the translation of these new relationships into laws of copyright. Hesse quotes the contemporary French legal philosopher and specialist in Franco-American copyright law, Henri Debois. Debois agrees with Foucault and Hesse's presentation of the birth of the author, " The French law, allegedly imbued from its revolutionary inception with natural rights philosophy, is said to enshrine the author: exclusive rights flow from ones (preferred) status as a creator" (Hesse, 1990, p.110).

The first legal recognition of the author occurred in 1777 as royal decrees on the book trade. Prior to this date there is no mention of the author and his relationship to his text in French law. According to the royal "Code de la Librairie", (established to regulate the Parisian and later the national publishing world in 1723) there was no "property" in the text or in ideas which could be owned by the author. The code employed the doctrine of divine revelation and a long tradition of medieval thought. Accordingly ideas were the property of God, and as such could not be owned or sold. Ideas were revealed through the writer. Gods first representative on earth, the King had the power

to determine what was Gods knowledge, and who could enjoy the privilege of it. Thus it was the King alone who, by his grace and pleasure, possessed the power to determine whom could be published and for how long. Publishers were required to submit all books for royal censorship. If the book met with the approval of the king or his representatives it would receive a "privilege". It was the publisher and not the author who was granted the privilege which amounted to a kind of copyright in so far as it assured the publisher legal exclusivity on the publication of the book. From a strictly legal point of view the author had no claim upon his book. Authors survived by way of royal or aristocratic patronage rather than by commercial profit from the sale of their work.

The privileges system evolved into a complex system involving the Paris Publishers' and Printers Guild and the Royal administration. Exclusive rights to whole spheres of knowledge could be given to a single publisher[8].

In order to protect their monopoly, the Paris publishers evolved their own interpretation of `privilege'. In 1726 the publishers guild commissioned the jurist Louis d' Hericourt to write a legal definition of `privilege'. The new definition argued that `privilege' was not a Royal grace, but the confirmation of an existing property right. The definition evoked Locke's notion of possessive individualism. According to this concept the "individual" was defined by their property, for example, "I own property, I am a property owner". D'Hericourt argued that ideas were the fruits of the authors inventiveness and labour "which one should have the freedom to dispose of at ones will" (Hesse,1990, p.112) It was d'Hericourt argument which prompted the Crown to issue the 1777 decrees and make the first legal reference to the author. The Crown council made its own interpretation of `privilege'. The decree created two categories of `privilege' while also reaffirming the absolutist interpretation of divine revelation. The 1777 decree recognised the author by creating a "privilege d'auteur" which was granted to authors in recompense for their labour, and passed to their heirs in perpetuity, unless sold to a third party. The `Privilege d'auteur' allowed the author to publish his book himself, the author did not now have to sell his document in order to

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[8] In 1670, for example the crown granted a Parisian publisher the sole publishing rights to the Old and New Testaments for fifty years.

be published. Publishers `privileges' were, by contrast limited to the lifetime of the author and non-renewable. After the authors death the publisher lost control of the book and it entered the public domain. The crowns decrees thus moved towards creating the modern author, but stopped short of recognising property rights, instead choosing to revise the `privilege' system. Hesse argues that the new system inscribed in the 1777 decree models the feudal system. Just like the Kings will, the author's will functioned beyond his lifetime, in perpetuity. The author was thus conceived as a little mirror of the King. The Debate which prompted the 1777 decrees was a very public one and drew key Enlightenment figures into the debate. A consequence of this was that there appeared several systematic efforts to reground the relationship between writer and text.

Two distinct positions emerged. The first was articulated 1763 by the philosopher-novelist Denis Diderot who was commissioned by the chief officer of the Paris Publishers and Printers Guild. In his *`Lettre Historique et Politique sur le Commerce de la Libarie'* Diderot argues that ideas are the most sacred form of property because they are created by the individual mind, indeed ideas, he argues constitute the very substance of mind,

> What form of wealth could belong to a man, if not a work of the mind...if not his own thoughts ...the most precious part of himself that will never perish, that will immortalise him? What comparison could there be between a man, the very substance of man, his soul, and a field, a tree, a vine, that nature has offered in the beginning equally to all, and that an individual has appropriated through cultivating it? (Hesse, 1990, p.114).

There was however a second school of thought on the ownership of ideas and `privileges' articulated by the Marquis de Condorcet in 1776, the eve of the decree,

> There can be no relationship between property in ideas and that in a field, which can only serve one man. [literary property] is not a property derived from the natural order and defended by social force, it is a property founded in society itself. It is not a true right, it is a privilege (Hesse, 1990, p.116).

Unlike a field, an idea can be used by an infinite number of people at one time. According to this model, ideas are not created or invented but inhere in nature. They

therefore cannot be the property of the individual. Condorcet rejected the social value of the individuals claim on ideas. Because true knowledge was objective the individual could only lay claim to the style of a particular written piece. This style was nothing more than the form and not the substance of the idea, and as such distorted the objective truth of the idea. To encourage style was thus to deform truth. Furthermore legal privileges would inhibit the spread of ideas.

The debate between Diderot and Condorcet played out a tension inherent in Elightenment epistemology concerning the origin of ideas and hence what claims could be made on them. Did knowledge inhere in the mind or in the world? To what extent was knowledge revealed or invented? We can locate the arguments and expectations surrounding photography's invention within the broader context of this tension. It could also be argued that photography (and the desire which preceding it), were an attempt to resolve this tension.

Conclusion

Photography and the author both arose from the same crisis or epistemologicial shift that occurred in the enlightenment. If we compare the debate in eighteenth century France which resulted in a legally definable author, with the expectations of the eighteenth century photographic pioneers, we find similarities. The arguments which surrounded the coming into being of the author played out a tension between two ideas, one that knowledge was inherent in the world, and the other that knowledge is a product of the mind of the individual author. The expectation of the photographic pioneers envisaged a device that gave nature the ability to reproduce itself. This was a conceptual effort to reconcile to two conflicting notions of knowledge as revealed or invented. Thus the parameters, within which both photography and the author were born, are the same. The conceptual tensions within the enlightenment created the author and the means with which it would be undermined.

Efforts to define and situate photography vis a vis the fine arts have consisted of attempts to establish the nature of the role of the author in the photographic process. This effort was, and remains, unresolved. Anti-technical critics and commentators argued that photography was a mere mechanical process and not capable of conveying higher spiritual truths in the same way that painting could. Those who sought photography's acceptance as a fine art medium always foregrounded the role of the authorial decision making process and unique the vision that were needed to create photographic art.

From the 1960s onwards there has been, theoretically at least, an undermining of the primacy of the author as the paternal-like creator of the text. In postmodern visual culture photography has been the primary medium employed in this troubling of the author function. Artists such as Warhol and Rauschenberg in the sixties used photography to undermine the modernist emphasis on the purity of the aesthetic signifier and the autonomy of the art object/process. Levine and Sherman's work in the eighties was interpreted by critics, such as Crimp, as forwarding the notion that representations do not reflect or describe reality, but in fact create our understanding of it. Contemporaneous with this troubling of the author function was the acceptance of art photography into the traditional precincts of fine art; the Museum, the Gallery and the art

school. The canon into which art photography had so precariously entered was in the midst of a crisis. It could be said art photography was the rats swimming out to join a sinking ship. What is interesting for the purpose of this thesis is that photography itself was responsible in no small part for creating the crisis in which the modernist canon found itself. To stretch an unfortunate metaphor even further, photography was the rats swimming out to join a ship they helped to sink. It may be worth recalling Baudailaire as quoted in chapter one, "If photography is allowed to stand in for art in some of its functions it will soon supplant or corrupt it completely."

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