

DECONSTRUCTING PURISM: UNCONSCIOUS DRIVES AND META-ARGUMENTATION IN STRAIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

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One. Pictorialism and Purism in photography – short history of a long controversy

Introduction

At the beginning of it, photography was... photography. Without too many discrepancies within its own context or playground. Much like the humans, who were enjoying the garden of Eden without realizing they were quite different. After committing the original sin – which probably became a sin only apocryphally – there were men and women. Or, respectively, Pictorialist photographers and Purist photographers. And as always when we're talking about dichotomies, the difference is almost never that big as it is implied to be...

Pictorialism appeared in England during the Victorian epoch. Its origins seem to be related with the use of gum bichromate¹ process, special substances and proceedings², tangential to the classical materials and techniques applied in photography. At its beginnings, the Pictorialist photography was trying to replicate famous paintings and religious scenes, but then evolved towards a much more subliminal interpretation of the “picturesque”, retaining only its hint, its suggestibility as main facet of its approach. Pictorialism's main intention is to facilitate personal expression and to “use” the camera – or the analog tools³ – with the finality of creating something beautiful or “expressive”.

¹ Gum bichromate is a 19th century photographic printing process based on the light sensitivity of dichromates. It is capable of rendering painterly images from photographic negatives. Gum printing is traditionally a multi-layered printing process, but satisfactory results may be obtained from a single pass. Any color can be used for gum printing, so natural-color photographs are also possible by using this technique in layers.

² These proceedings includes the use of the calotype, a specific photographic print invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1840. A special tipe of paper was exposed during the making of the photograph, paper from which, afterwards, could be obtained positive paper prints. These final prints were somehow blurred due to the nature of the paper negative. Also, the intermediary negative allowed all types of corrections or inteventions. Other preferences comprised using soft focus, in order to create the atmosphere of a painting, photo filters and coatings, and unusual printing methods, such as cyanotype and platinotype.

³ This observation refers to the practice of taking photos without a camera, directly imprinting the silhouette of an object onto a surface treated with photo-sensitive emulsion, and exposing it to light. These types of images obtained in this manner are called photograms. Fox Talbot, one of the first and most famous Pictorialists, used to call these images *photogenic drawings*, or *shadowgraphs*.

Therefore, it usually involves a preparation phase, consisting of choosing a theme, finding a way to render it, encountering the appropriate manner of expressing it, constructing the scene etc., and sometimes also a post processing phase. The post processing phase differs immensely nowadays, obviously, from what it was back then, due to the huge progresses realized in the field of creating and manipulating images. All this complex process foster the implicit idea that photography is an art and consequently it can lead to the creation of artworks. From this point of view, it clearly results that the photographer-artist is free to make use of any methods he/she finds appropriate in order to express his/her vision, the camera being only an instrument and the photography only a mean of achieving this vision.

Purism was – only naturally – a reaction to this view about photography. It began in France around the end of World War I and mainly outlines the fact that photography is a unique craft, that cannot and may not borrow ideas or savoir-faire from painting or any other art forms. The expression in photography, it says, must be circumscribed to the nature of this peculiar medium, photography being a finality in itself and not a way to achieve a certain “artistic” vision. It is based in the fervent belief that the strict observance of its rules and results makes photography what it is, and the import of techniques or concepts from other imaging fields is nothing but a contamination. The post processing is almost always austere prohibited, and the “pre-fabrication” of the images is an a priori rejection. Purism strives to obtain the most out of the “purely” photographic act, being in this regard an admirable effort, for it sustains and nourishes the perfectionism and strict diligence of this technique, promoting further knowledge and exploit of its attributes.

Among the Pictorialists, names such as Henry Peach Robinson, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Henry Fox Talbot, Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll, Lady Hawarden are notable for the first phase of the movement, as for the second wave of Pictorialism, of

Anna Atkins, conational of Fox Talbot, published a collection of such images of botanical species, realized by cyanotyping; and Man Ray, the American-Paris based artist, was also affectionate toward this kind of images, that he called rayographs, re-discovered by him by accident, when his girlfriend-photographer Lee Miller opened the door of the dark room while he was developing photos.

a more international scope, the most renowned are Robert Demachy, in France, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen (at the beginning of their work), Gertrude Käsebier, Clarence H. White and Frank Eugene, in the United States of America, Heinrich Kühn, in Austria, Theodor and Oskar Hofmeister, in Germany, José Ortiz-Echagüe, in Spain, Alexander Keighley in United Kingdom.

The Purist branch counts a huge number of illustrious names in the field of modern international photography: Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz (who are actually mentioned as pertaining also to the Pictorialist branch, before their declared intention to depart from it and adhere to the other “front”), Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Williard van Dyke, in the United States of America, Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, in Germany, Francis Frith, Peter Henry Emerson, in Great Britain, Eugene Atget, in France.

Definitions tangle

In order to put these two movements into perspective, let's start with an interesting definition proposed by John L. Ward⁴: “Pictorialism is based on the premise that a photograph can be evaluated using the same parameters that are used for evaluating any other type of image (for example, engravings, drawings and paintings); the Purist position is based on the premise that photography has a certain intrinsic nature and that the value of a photograph depends directly on the conformity to this nature. For the Pictorialist, photography is the mean, and art is the end; for the Purist, photography is the mean and the end at the same time, and the Purist is also reluctant when it comes about art.” If we stand back a little, we notice however that this definition says nothing about Purism. It is like saying that an eggplant is good if it is indeed an eggplant. (Well, letting apart the fact that this prejudice could be the practical grounding of the organic agriculture, although in this case we can also identify other reasons, that it is healthier etc.) But in the case of the

⁴ Ward, L. John, *The Criticism of Photography as Art*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1978, as quoted in Joan Fontcuberta, *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 27, our translation.

Purism, if this is the only criterion to be applied, it's pretty difficult to build on it a fertile theory, because it would seem really scant and insufficiently descriptive. On the basis of such a theory, Purist photographs cannot be appraised and are somehow infallible, preventing any further artistic approach. Cutting off any possibility of artistic evaluation, the Purism defines a comfortable frontier between photography and art, closing the circle around itself and rejecting the intention of being digested and rendered by the art world.

If we take these two definitions, we can see that neither of them is truly useful. The criterion should be what photography manages to express, either it is or it is not art. And from this point of view, yes, photography can be judged using art standards. I mean that only because a photograph is "truly" a photograph is not a sufficient condition. We can of course talk about its necessity, but its sufficiency seems way out of discussion. Even more, there is a confusion in these two definitions presented together, because the first one could easily be taken for a general case, while the second may be a particular case. I mean the second definition says that photography must be evaluated by photography's standards, but this only leads us to saying that painting should be evaluated by painting's standards, sculpture should be evaluated by sculpture's standards and so on, while the first definition could be a generalization that says that any type of image can be analyzed or evaluated using standards or criteria "that are used for evaluating any other type of image".

However, when it comes to talking about the proximity between photography and art – or more exactly painting – it may prove difficult to draw a definite line somewhere, since the Pictorial look, in the Purist's definition, meant a totally different thing at the time when this critique was formulated. Everything depends on what art/painting means at a certain moment in time: "While the Pictorialist tendency survived for a long time among the group of some of its supporters, Stieglitz and his group managed to leave it behind them and impose the idea of a pure photography, free of manipulations, free also of the dominance of painting, at least in what concerns the elaborated technique, because the impact of cubism over the New York scenes, for example, is undeniable."⁵ In this

⁵ Sougez, Marie-Loup, *Historia de la fotografía*, Ediciones Catedra, Madrid, 1981, our translation, p. 193.

account, Marie-Loup Sougez is calling attention to the legendary Purist pictures of Stieglitz, among others, that are portraying the Big Apple and that are obviously inspired by the cubist style of the beginning of the century.



Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz and cubist painting by April Buckley – is there a slight resemblance between the two?

Other theoreticians of the photographic domain are describing this schism between Pictorialism and Purism in terms of a reaction to the accuse that photography is not an art: “Photographers responded to criticism of this kind in two main ways: either they accepted that photography was something different from art and sought to discover what the intrinsic properties of the medium were; or they pointed out that photography was more than a mechanical form of image-making, that it could be worked on and contrived so as to produce pictures which in some ways resembled paintings. ‘Pictorial’ photography, from the 1850s onwards, sought to overcome the problems of photography by careful arrangement of all the elements of the composition and by reducing the signifiers of technological production within the photograph. [...] In the other camp were those photographers who celebrated the qualities of straight photography⁶ and did not

⁶ An alternate name for pure photography, actually more widely used and preferred by the Purists. Funny enough, today this name also connotes a sexual orientation, the “orthodox” one or heterosexual, thus indicating, subversely, that the other option, the Pictorialist one, has something to do with an uncanny, un-straight orientation.

want to treat the medium as a kind of monochrome painting. They were interested in photography's ability to provide apparently accurate records of the visual world and tried to give their images the formal status and finish of paintings while concentrating their attention on its intrinsic qualities.”⁷

Yet, this explanation does not make justice to the either one of these movements, since it ascribe the intention to “give the image the formal status and finish of paintings” also to the Purists, which is by no means accurate and is vigorously denied by most of them. Actually, this is exactly what they were avoiding to do and that which represented their creed – well, at least at a manifest level – , beyond doubt in order to clarify their position and split from the Pictorialist attitude. In conveying this definition, maybe the author is trying to put more in Purists' basket, but sometimes more is less. Denying the minimalist aim to the Purists, it would be like depriving them of their true nature and identity.

The confusion can get even worse. While some are presenting the Pictorialists as saying that photography *is* art and the Purists as saying that it is something else, unique and distinct from art, as we've seen before, others are talking about Pictorialist photography as *imitating* art and about Purist photography as an art in itself! Peter Henry Emerson, one of the most notorious partisans and spokesperson for the Purists, ex-physician converted in photographer, “reached the conclusion that photography was ‘superior to etching, wood engraving and pencil drawing’, thanks to the precision with which is capturing the perspective, and that only painting was being ranked before it, since photography still lacked color and – so he thought – the ability to reproduce the exact tonal equivalences.”⁸ Emerson's complete trust and confidence in the flawlessness of photography had been for him, at one moment, an enough good reason to certify that photography *was* an art, and still, some time later, after understanding that photographic technique was not quite perfect, he was disappointed and, again, this represented for him

⁷ *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2006, third edition, edited by Liz Wells, p. 14-15.

⁸ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 141.

a reason good enough to declare, sad and miserable, that photography was not an art... after all.

Suspicious

So, apparently, what Purists are saying is that photography is all about spontaneity. Photographing means “snap”, snap, snap... snapshot, not all this premeditation concerning the context, the frame, the “framing”. And, as it seems, neither the post-mediation of the processing, montaging, collage-ing etc. Purism versus Pictorialism is the war between spontaneity and deliberation, the war between the “decisive moment”⁹ and the chosen moment, between carelessness and carefulness.

But is this really what they are saying? Or is something deeper? Is this a “spontaneous” argument or not so spontaneous? The very nature of photography – a dual nature, involving two parts, human and technological, – invites one to make this interrogation and to express doubts when in front of “suspicious” verdicts, such as those proposed by the partisans of the so-called “straight” photography. This interrogation can be elaborated with different tools, certainly from a cultural perspective: semiotical, esthetical, anthropological, journalistic, artistical etc.

However, the peculiar nature of photography makes it a particularly suitable subject for the psychoanalytical approach – the symbolic that lies within the photographic and that confers it all its force is at the same time a deposit of significances impossible to be ignored. The eye is a powerful organ, and it is the eye that is the main tool of the photographer. At a fantasmatic level, the eye can benefit of an important libidinal investment. Accordingly to the psychoanalytical theory, the libido, that is the “entire available energy of the Eros [...] still undiscriminated”¹⁰ – or as Jung sees it, the “psychic energy” in general – represents the main energetic deposit of the individual. In the case of

⁹ Syntagma made famous by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, well-known for his opportune documentary and journalistic photos.

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *Obras completas*, XXIII, Buenos Aires, 1989, p. 147, our translation.

a mature sexuality, the genital organs are the ones that are mainly designated as being sexually significant, but the libido can also be invested in external objects (“object-libido”), sublimated toward symbolic objects or it can be directed toward any area of the body – Freud gives the example of the mouth, that becomes an erotogenic zone due to the suction process, during breast-feeding: “Thus we learn that infants perform actions which have no purpose other than obtaining pleasure. It is our belief that they first experience this pleasure in connection with taking nourishment, but that they soon learn to separate it from that accompanying condition. We can only refer this pleasure to an excitation of the areas of the mouth and lips; we call those parts of the body ‘erotogenic zones’ and describe the pleasure derived from sucking as a sexual one.”¹¹ However, the versatility of the human body when it comes to erotogeneity¹² seems astonishing, as analytical practice seems to confirm it: “As you probably know, the hysterical neurosis can produce its symptoms in any system of organs and so disturb any function. Analysis shows that in this way all the so-called perverse impulses which seek to replace the genital by some other organ manifest themselves: these organs are then behaving like substitutive genitals. The symptoms of hysteria have actually led us to the view that the bodily organs, besides the functional part they play, must be recognized as having a sexual (erotogenic) significance, and that the execution of the first of these tasks is disturbed if the second of them makes too many claims.¹³ [...] We learn too to what a large extent the organs for the intake of nourishment and for excretion can in particular become the vehicles of sexual excitation.”¹⁴

Obviously, in these discussion Freud is talking about the condition of psychological illness, but psychoanalysis stipulates – this being one of its greatest discoveries – that the difference between psychological health and illness is only a quantitative one, not one

¹¹ Freud, Sigmund, “General Theory of the Neuroses – The sexual life of human beings”, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 1, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, translated by James Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1979, p. 355-356.

¹² The capacity of being or functioning as an erogenous zone.

¹³ Here, Freud sends to a paper about the psychogenic disturbance of vision, dating from 1910 (!).

¹⁴ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 350.

that refers to quality. That means that between the “normal” and the deviant, the difference is one of degree. The pathological libidinal charge directed onto an organ can function in a symbolic register for a sound person, the same amount of libidinal energy being “sublimated” in this case.

“Other forms of the neurosis, the brooding kinds”, adds Freud at this point, “correspond to an excessive sexualization of actions which ordinarily have their place as preliminaries on the path to normal sexual satisfaction – an excessive sexualization of the wanting *to look* or to touch or to explore.”¹⁵ Well, it’s the eye that looks around, that watches through the camera lens, it’s the eye that is being cut apart in Buñuel’s film, the eye that continues obstinately to see and follow the main character in Becketts’s charade, the eye that sees and lets itself being seen. It’s the eternal polarization of the voyeurism/exhibitionism.

The camera is also an eye, but a mechanical, cold eye. An eye that can be accepted as an instrument, as an assistant, one that can stir up fear and resentment, or one that can be idealized and idolatrized. Camera can give one a sense of empowerment, an illusion of seeing it all, of possessing “more” eye than the others, or it can also be a hiding, a mask, a stratagem that allows one to see without being seen.¹⁶

The third element that completes the image is the hand. It is well-known the fact that the neural image of the hand – the way we perceive our hands – occupies a sizeable

¹⁵ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 351, our emphasizing.

¹⁶ A funny observation is that many photographers display on their personal page, in the contact/about area, a photo of themselves while holding a camera, most often covering one eye or even more than half of the face. This would be useless or redundant, because it is already of understanding for the visitors that the pictures presented on the page were obtained using a photocamera, and that they were made by the person stating him/herself as author. However, it is often a predilection of the artist to do so. One explanation could be that it is a manner of contextualising himself, of integrating and including his person as a nonexclusive entity of the photographic context of his webpage. It could also be a way of “merchandising” himself, or of erasing softly the frontiers between person and work, of immersing his identity into the universal context of “taking pictures”. But it can also be a way of empowering himself, of presenting his “persona” as being more than human: a sort of android that benefits of the advantages of the two worlds, the organic, human world, and the anorganic, mechanical world. And, not the least, a way of masking himself, of constructing a character, or even more, of fulfilling an infantile desire – that of seeing without being seen (e.g. A child says to his mother: “Mom, when I put this coat on, I become invisible...”).

area of the brain – right hand/left side of the brain, left hand/right side of the brain. This speaks fully about the importance of this part of the body, if only at a purely physical level. However, using the idea of one study accomplished in the year 1999 at McGill University, Montreal, Canada¹⁷, when it was discovered that a specific area of the brain became significantly enlarged for the taxi drivers in London, that being due to the fact that they had to learn all the names of the streets of London in order to pass the taxi driver’s exam, we can only imagine the “magnitude” of the hand’s image on the brain of the photographers, if we think of the countless number of times he/she has to push the shutter button.

Freud makes a very interesting association between the intense activity of the hands and masturbation, while dedicating a study to Dostoevski’s personality. The idea comes from the alleged addiction with gambling, displayed by the writer. Gambling, that in the same time means “playing”, a term used in nursery to describe the masturbatory activity: “The ‘vice’ of masturbation is replaced by the addiction of gambling; and the emphasis laid upon the passionate activity of the hands betrays this derivation. Indeed, the passion for play is an equivalent of the old compulsion to masturbate; ‘playing’ is the actual word used in the nursery to describe the activity of the hands upon the genitals.”¹⁸ If this entire

¹⁷ “Structural MRIs of the brains of humans with extensive navigation experience, licensed London taxi drivers, were analyzed and compared with those of control subjects who did not drive taxis. The posterior hippocampi of taxi drivers were significantly larger relative to those of control subjects. A more anterior hippocampal region was larger in control subjects than in taxi drivers. Hippocampal volume correlated with the amount of time spent as a taxi driver (positively in the posterior and negatively in the anterior hippocampus). These data are in accordance with the idea that the posterior hippocampus stores a spatial representation of the environment and can expand regionally to accommodate elaboration of this representation in people with a high dependence on navigational skills. It seems that there is a capacity for local plastic change in the structure of the healthy adult human brain in response to environmental demands. [...] Taxi drivers in London must undergo extensive training, learning how to navigate between thousands of places in the city. This training is colloquially known as “being on The Knowledge” and takes about 2 years to acquire on average. To be licensed to operate, it is necessary to pass a very stringent set of police examinations. London taxi drivers are therefore ideally suited for the study of spatial navigation. The use of a group of taxi drivers with a wide range of navigating experience permitted an examination of the direct effect of spatial experience on brain structure.” *Navigation-related structural change in the hippocampi of taxi drivers*, Communicated by Brenda Milner, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, November 10, 1999.

¹⁸ Freud, Sigmund, “Dostevsky and Parricide”, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, translated by James Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1986, p. 459.

manipulation of the camera and its buttons and controls – and the more sophisticated the camera is, the more controls it includes – can equal to a fantasmatic masturbation, then the pressing of the shutter can only equal to a climax of the entire act. We can only think of the success that Cartier-Bresson’s phrase, “the decisive moment”, encountered. Could it be that the satisfaction granted by pressing the shutter in the exact moment amounts to an orgasmic flash in the order of the symbolic?

Of course, this is true for all the professions that involve an extensive use of the hand. Still, the simplicity of this gesture – as in “push the button” – turns this hand activity into a magic trick. The photographer’s hand is invested with symbolic capability, since it does not imply a “muscular” action, a strong treatment. It is not an investment based on quantity of effort, but on quantity of output. It is miraculous because with a minimal endeavor one obtains a maximum of results. Contrary to forging all day long to get a coin, you slightly press a sensitive button and get a full-picture.

Actually, art has been many times paralleled with magic, and while nowadays this expression is used in a metaphorical sense, it wasn’t always like that: “People speak with justice of the ‘magic of art’ and compare artists to magicians. But the comparison is perhaps more significant than it claims to be. There can be no doubt that art did not begin as art for art’s sake. It worked originally in the service of impulses which are for the most part extinct today. And among them we may suspect the presence of many magical purposes.”¹⁹ Among these purposes can be listed the “evoking” or “conjuring” of the supernatural powers. Whether photography is or isn’t an art, that’s a different story, but if it will be decided that it is, it must be the most “magical” of them all: being so “instantaneous”, it allows an immediate and complete recovery of the sense and signifiers involved, acting like a narcissistic bandage for the psyche.

¹⁹ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, “Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thoughts”, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII, translation by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 90.

What's wrong with the Purism

But since photography in general seems to be so fitting for a semiotic and psychoanalytical investigation, since the dual nature and the surprising *modus operandi* are its true personality, why it would be that our suspicions manifest only in the direction of one manner of considering and practicing it, namely the Purism?

First of all, it must be said that there is no intention here to make a comparison between the Purist photography and the Pictorialist one, that there is no aim to acknowledge the superiority – aesthetic, artistic, commercial etc. – of either one or to analyze the philosophical systems that represent their theoretical basis, as a platform for measurement and review.

The suspicions were stirred up by the peculiar nature of the Purist argumentation: the views expressed by the supporters of the straight photography seems to include almost always a frenzied edge, an unnecessary ardor, a combative tone that may disclose that fact there's something hidden there, lurking, something that does not serve the purpose of presenting an unbiased philosophical claim – well, as long as this ideal is humanly possible. In the following chapters, I would like to advance and argue for the hypothesis that underneath the Purist reasoning there is a strong narcissistic-type attitude and to clarify the features of this attitude. Also, it will be interesting to see in which way the unconscious component influences the practical results, but mostly to see how it is possible to build an entire “aesthetic” theory upon “sentimental”, psychological drives, merging admirably these motives with the texture and consistency of the rational assessment.

Two. Purist argumentation – unveiling the narcissistic structure of discourse

About narcissism

Before proceeding to a thorough analysis of the Purist discourse, it is useful to introduce the concept of narcissism, as it was depicted by the psychoanalytical theory. First of all, I must say that the idea of unconscious is central here. When Freud proposed this concept, he was aware of the antipathy with which it will be encountered: “The division of mental life into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise on which psychoanalysis is based; [...] psychoanalysis cannot accept the view that consciousness is the essence of mental life, but is obliged to regard consciousness as one property of mental life, which may coexist along with its other properties or may be absent. [...] To most people who have had a philosophical education, the idea of anything mental which is not also conscious is so unconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic.”²⁰ From a more philosophical perspective, the philosopher Robyn Ferrell introduces this concept in an intent to use it for discussing the mind/body problem: “The unconscious is then that with which consciousness struggles, all that which lies beyond itself, both mental and material.”²¹

Well, the unconscious is the realm where unconscious or repressed ideas exist, ideas “which can produce in the mind all the effects that ordinary ideas do (including effects that can in their turn become conscious as ideas) without themselves becoming conscious.”²² Along this unconscious segment of the person, resides another segment, that one we are more familiar with: “[...] in every individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes, which we call his *ego*.... From this ego proceed the repressions, too, by means of which an attempt is made to cut off certain trends in the

²⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.697.

²¹ Ferrell, Robyn, *Passion in Theory. Conceptions of Freud and Lacan*, Routledge, 1996, London & New York, p. 2.

²² Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.698.

mind not merely from consciousness but also from their other forms of manifestation and activity.”²³

Narcissism can be seen, in part, as a modality through which the individual tries to preserve and construct his self, and also as a smart evolutive solution for the human being to cope with precariousness of life: “An object which was lost has been reinstated within the ego; that is, that an object-cathexis²⁴ has been replaced by an identification. [...] Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken on by the ego and that it contributes materially toward building up what is called a *character*. [...] The ego, which at its inception is far from being robust, becomes aware of the object-cathexes, and either acquiesces in them or tries to defend itself against them by the process of repression. [...] When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues a modification in his ego which can only be described as a reinstatement of the object within the ego [...] We must also take into consideration the case of simultaneous object-cathexis and identification, i.e., in which the alteration in character occurs before the object has been given up. In such a case, the alteration in character would be able to survive the object-relation and, in a certain sense, to conserve it. [...] From another point of view it may be said that this transformation of an erotic object-choice into a modification of the ego is also a method by which the ego can obtain control over the id²⁵ and deepen its relation with it – at the cost, it is true, of acquiescing to a large extent in the id’s experiences. When the ego assumes the features of the object, it forces itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and tries to make good the loss of that object by saying, ‘Look, I am so like the object, you can as well love me.’ The transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido

²³ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p.699.

²⁴ Cathexis is the libidinal charge and also the term chosen by James Strachey, the official translator of Freud’s work, for the original German *Besetzung*. It derives from the Greek word *kathexis*, that means “to hold fast”.

²⁵ The translation proposed by James Strachey for “das Es”. The Freudian unconscious.

which thus takes place obviously implies an abandonment of sexual aims, a process of desexualization; it is consequently a kind of sublimation.”²⁶

Sublimation, actually, is the basis of any cultural act and of every “superior” expression of the spirit. But sublimation means renunciation from the part of the id and of the ego also, and all this for the sake of pleasing the super-ego, one of the most important instance of the individual, the “civilizing” and progressive instance, that puts a lot of pressure over the other two instances. Super-ego is synonymous to unhappiness for the humans, but also with evolution, enlightenment and, not least... art. Maybe it’s not a surprise that what’s considered to be most elevated, namely art, has its roots into that which is the most primitive: “The sexual instinct is particularly well fitted to make contributions of this kind since it is endowed with a capacity for sublimation: that is, it has the power to replace its immediate aim by other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual.”²⁷ It is a bit like the precious truffles, that grow in the dirt...

The libidinal energy, however, has to respect a very special dynamic of the psychological functioning, avoiding clustering and blockage: “this displaceable libido is employed in the service of the pleasure-principle to obviate accumulations and to facilitate discharge.”²⁸ Not all of it can be sublimated, neither all of it can be put in the service of the pleasure principle. It has a different destiny, regarding the evolution phase in which the individual places himself. In this sense, Freud talks about primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is the initial phase, that takes place in the early childhood, when the child invests the entire available libido upon himself. The secondary narcissism means a return of the libido to the ego, libido that was

²⁶ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.703-704.

²⁷ Freud, Sigmund, “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood”, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, translated by James Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1986, p. 167.

²⁸ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.710.

in an intermediate phase invested in objects, by the means of the object-cathexes: “At the very beginning, all the libido is accumulated in the id, while the ego is still in process of formation or far from robust. Part of this libido is sent out by the id into erotic object-cathexes, whereupon the ego, now growing stronger, attempts to obtain possession of this object-libido and to force itself upon the id as a love-object. The narcissism of the ego is thus seen to be secondary, acquired by the withdrawal of the libido from objects.”²⁹

At childhood or in the case of severe neurosis, narcissism has definite characteristics: “an overestimation of the power of wishes and mental processes, the *omnipotence of thoughts*, a belief in the magical virtue of words, and a method of dealing with the outer world – the art of *magic* – which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises.”³⁰ But when and why, Freud asks himself, does the self realize the need to go from this narcissistic phase to the next phase, sending its ego-libido towards exterior objects, as he would practically send his “love” away: “[...] whence does that necessity arise that urges our mental life to pass on beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to objects? The answer which would follow from our line of thought would once more be that we are so impelled when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain degree. A strong egoism is a protection against disease, but, in the last resort, we must begin to love in order that we may not fall ill, and must fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we cannot love.”³¹ Actually, he does say that love must be the most selfless way of the ego to attach all his libido to an “object”: “The highest form

²⁹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.711.

³⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p.400.

³¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 404.

of development of which object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to yield up his whole personality in favor of object-cathexis”.³²

Unfortunately, this delegation and withdrawal of the libido to and from the objects, flowing to and from the ego, can experience certain hurdles and deviations, because sometimes the ego may choose, instead of the real objects, imaginary objects, simply because there is an urgent need for an energetic discharge: “The ‘working-over’ of stimuli in the mind accomplishes wonders for the internal discharge of excitations which are incapable of direct discharge outwards, or for which such a discharge is, for the moment, undesirable. Now it is in the first instance a matter of indifference whether the objects of this internal process of ‘working-over’ are real or imaginary. The difference does not appear till later, when the turning of the libido towards unreal objects (introversion) has led to a damming-up. The megalomania of the paraphrenics permits a similar internal working-over of the libido which has returned to the ego to be made; perhaps it is only when this process fails that the damming-up of the libido in the ego becomes pathogenic [...]”³³

There are though healthy and valuable ways to get advantage of this secondary narcissism without letting it become pathogenic, and these are through the way of the ego-ideal. Following the constitution of the super-ego, the ego builds an ego-ideal, a construct that is essential to the understanding of narcissism. This very construct permits to the individual not to give up his/her ideal image about him/herself, that he himself fostered as a child. Faced with the harsh expectancies and demands of the super-ego and of the external reality, the ego projects in front of himself this salvation structure, that allows him to maintain his good opinion about him: “We may say that the one man has set up an *ideal* in himself by which he measures his actual ego [...] To this ideal ego is

³² Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 400.

³³ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 404.

now directed the self-love which the real ego enjoyed in childhood. The narcissism seems to be now displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, deems itself the possessor of all perfections. As always where the libido is concerned, here again man has shown himself incapable of giving up a gratification he has once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo his narcissistic perfection in his childhood [...] He seeks to recover the early perfection [...] in the new form of an ego-ideal. That which he projects ahead of him as his ideal is merely his substitute for his lost narcissism of his childhood – the time when he was his own ideal.”³⁴

But let’s not be fooled, this is still narcissism, still the refusal to give up the high opinion one holds about oneself. Just that it is presented in a different wrapping, safe from the pathological, but still immature somehow, still reluctant to sacrifice the wholeness of the “perfect being”.

Picture-perfect

And now we can proceed to a careful deconstruction of the Purist discourse, to appraise its tone and mood.

The most striking reaction that draws our attention is the conversion-reconversion of one of the most important members of the Purist faction, Peter Henry Emerson. A former physician, interested in Helmholtz’s optical theories, Emerson immersed himself in the study of the photographic technique, trying to exploit its possibilities at its best and to go as far as possible from the Pictorialism, with “its artificiality”. Taking advantage of a moment of resignation among the Pictorialists, he makes an impressive conference at Camera Club in London (1886), criticizing harshly the Pictorialist style and proposing a return to nature as source of inspiration. He is the one, actually, that coined the term of “straight photography”. He was feeling that the Pictorialists were just imitating painting

³⁴ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 407.

and were failing to understand the fact that photography is a art of its own: “The photographic technique is perfect, and these botches are useless.”³⁵

However, despite the fact that he managed to arouse the interest of his colleagues, he will change his opinion later, ending in big disappointment. Why? Because one painter-friend, apparently Whistler, lectured him about photography and painting, convincing him that painting is superior to the former. So, since photography proves not to be “the fairest of them all”, he would rather quit: “In January 1891, Emerson resigned bravely and dramatically to what he had been promoted with such passion. He declared that a ‘great painter’ – which he doesn’t name, but who seems to have been James McNeil Whistler – had demonstrated him the fallacy of misunderstanding art for nature, and he added that the scientific research, recently published, realized by Ferdinand Hurter and Vero Charles Driffield, in what concerns the photographic process, convinced him that the control of the tonal relations, during developing, was much more rigid than he had thought. Disheartened, Emerson concluded that photography was not an art.”³⁶

The announcement he makes after that comes literally like a mourning: *The Death of Naturalistic Photography*, the brochure with black covers published by him, in which he acknowledges, humiliated, that there are so many limitations in photography, that pure photography is actually impossible. Therefore, “impure photography is only a confession of limitations...”³⁷

Emerson’s reaction is so similar to a child’s reaction when he loses something. Suddenly, that something is diminished and lessened within a symbolic discourse, as if to make the loss more tolerable. It is like before, he was allowed to believe that photography

³⁵ Emerson, Peter Henry, *Naturalistic Photography for the Students of the Arts*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Livingston, London, 1889, quoted by Beaumont Newhall in *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 142.

³⁶ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 143.

³⁷ Emerson, Peter Henry, *The Death of Naturalistic Photography*, private edition, 1890, quoted by Beaumont Newhall in *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 145.

was “perfect” and this awareness was enough to sustain his ego’s necessity to believe in something as flawless as himself – we already know that a child’s primary narcissism lets him think so about himself – , but as soon as this belief was shattered, he woke up in complete and terrible disenchant. Judging upon his reaction, we can say that the object-cathexis wasn’t able to find a very good and fruitful new path, that it couldn’t be reassigned with ease to another new external or imaginary object, nor could it return to the ego. This “over-estimation” – the thought that photography, for instance, is perfect – is a “sure indication of a narcissistic feature in object-choice which we have already appreciated”³⁸. A more mature approach to photography would have permitted Emerson to continue being enchanted by this art/technique, even after discovering that it is not perfect, just as it happens when we go from childhood to adulthood and we have to continue living, working, loving, even if we know that everything is not so perfect and dream-like as we thought when we were infants. Maybe it is that exactly the limitations that Emerson is talking about are the ones that should’ve constituted an impulse toward progress, not a reason for discontent.

Nevertheless, Emerson’s statement is not an exception. Francis Frith, for example, another theoretician of the Purism, was stating in his essay *The Art of Photography*, that “the photographic technique is perfect and does not need this kind of cheap tricks”³⁹ – this was being said in regard to the Pictorialist habit of post processing the pictures. This all-pervading quest for perfection and in the same time pretense of detaining it is, again, so similar to the child’s primary narcissism, a time when he considered himself self-sufficient. Because in fact what is so obvious at Purists is their identification with the photographic⁴⁰ – this is in fact the reason why they are so sensitive about it. They fell in

³⁸ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 406.

³⁹ Published in *The Art Journal*, 1st of March, 1859, London, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 29, our translation.

⁴⁰ The “photographical” is used here in an all-encompassing sense, including the technique, the results, the art of it, its symbolic understanding, its practice and all else that can contribute to its meaning.

love with it and identified with it, introjecting this external object as a sure manner of preserving its object-cathexis: “We must also take into consideration the case of simultaneous object-cathexis and identification, i.e. , in which the alteration in character occurs before the object has been given up. In such a case, the alteration in character would be able to survive the object-relation and, in a certain sense, to conserve it.” This allows them not only to secure its preservation, but to secure the self-love: “When the ego assumes the features of the object, it forces itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and tries to make good the loss of that object by saying, ‘Look, I am so like the object, you can as well love me.’”⁴¹ Since they are imperceptibly “assuming the features” of the photographical, it is easy to understand the fervor of their reaction to the Pictorialist intentions of postprocessing, altering, modifying, adding, simplifying, combining etc. These intentions equal to two things: one. An assumption accordingly to which the photographical – meaning them – are not perfect and *need* improvement; and two. A narcissistic wound, caused by the alteration of their identity and by denegation of their supremacy.

Nature rules

We shall see that most of the Purists venerate nature. For them, it is not nature, actually, but Nature! Together with the veneration of the photographic medium – the photographic nature – this is one of their main traits. Maybe the most famous modern American photographer, Edward Weston was one of the first apologists of Nature as invulnerable and majestic “Being”, a Being that is above all human petty concerns. When photographing Nature, Weston believes, one must shake up any personal surcharges and any artistic-expressive intention: “I’m not interested anymore in trying to ‘express myself’, in imposing my own personality upon nature; without prejudices, without falsification, I want to identify myself with nature [...] Therefore, what I register is not an

⁴¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), translation by Joan Riviere, p.704.

interpretation, is not my idea about what nature *should* be, but a revelation: an absolute and impersonal recognition of the meaning of things.”⁴²

The passion for nature animates also other well-known Purists of the time, such as Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, reaching an almost “mystical attitude”⁴³, as Joan Fontcuberta puts it. Ansel Adams’ memorable American landscapes all have a Kantian sublime tinge attached to them, and photography historicist Beaumont Newhall observes about one of his images, in particular, *Mount Williamson – Clearing Storm*, that “it is an epic work, pristine, truly cosmogonic”⁴⁴.



Edward Weston



Ansel Adams

In a certain manner of speaking, the approach is contrary to that one common to the landscape art, when nature is actually “used” as prime material for the *work of art*, or can even be “abused”, metaphorically speaking: “Contemporary earth works and environmental art sometimes appear to be in conflict with nature”⁴⁵.

⁴² Weston, Edward, *My Camera on Point Lobos*, Da Capo Press, Nueva York, 1950, our translation, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 35-36.

⁴³ Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2003, Introducción, p. 35-36.

⁴⁴ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 192.

⁴⁵ Donald W. Crawford, “The Aesthetics of Nature and the Environment”, in *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Peter Kivy (ed.), Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 308.

But the most striking approach to nature is that of the German group of photographers self-titled *Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity), among which were names like Karl Blossfeldt, Ernst Fuhrmann, Helmut Gersheim, Albert Renger-Patzsch. These photographers practiced a very literal and factual photographic style, practically dissecting the real around in the search of a crude visual truth. Albert Renger-Patzsch published in 1928 a book with the name *Die Welt is Schön* (The World is beautiful), including photos with all kind of images taken from nature: “The images were presenting all types of objects in foreground that were showing the most insignificant details; the accent was upon the morphology, flat light, static framing often frontally shot.”⁴⁶



Imogen Cunningham

Albert Renger-Patzsch

Karl Blossfeldt

This peculiar approach to nature – Nature, as we were implying before – uncover the uncanny sort of relation to it: a very primitive type of relation, an idolatric relation, that reminds us of animism, the doctrine accordingly to which one ascribe soul – or spirit – to inanimate objects and things. Animism is common among the primitive tribes and it is thought to be an incipient and crucial stage in the evolution of the human thought: “What led to the introduction of these terms was a realization of the highly remarkable view of nature and the universe adopted by the primitive races of whom we have knowledge, whether in past history or at the present time. They people the world with innumerable

⁴⁶ Fontcuberta, Joan, *Fotografía: Conceptos y procedimientos, una propuesta metodológica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1990, p. 168.

spiritual beings both benevolent and malignant; and these spirits and demons they regard as the causes of natural phenomena and they believe that not only animals and plants but all the inanimate objects in the world are animated by them.”⁴⁷ Freud is perceiving this construction – “this first human *Weltanschauung*”⁴⁸ – as responding to the necessity of understanding and controlling the world around, and also credits this approach as a first “psychological theory”.

Relying on anthropological studies (Spencer, Frazer, Tyler, Wundt) and also philosophical theories (Schelling, Hume⁴⁹), Freud builds a very coherent theory of its own, within which animism constitutes an initial phase, followed by the religious understanding and culminating with the scientific one. Though, these three macro-stages are paralleled by three micro-stages in the evolution of the individual, and animism is corresponding to the narcissism, that time when the human – the child, in fact, in the case of the primary narcissism – ascribe spirit to things in order to control them, when the “omnipotence of thoughts” and the “overvaluation” are the rules. How did Freud noticed this similarity? Comparing the accounts given by the anthropologists with the accounts offered by his patients. He quotes Frazer on saying that “Men mistook the order of their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that the control which they have, or seem to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding control over things.”⁵⁰ Then, what primitive humans were doing was attempting “to replace the laws of nature by psychological ones”⁵¹, and this is also what the infant is doing, not

⁴⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, “Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thoughts”, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII, translation by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁹ “There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious.” – David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, section III, quoted by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, “Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thoughts”, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII, translation by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 83.

knowing any better. The same “omnipotence of thoughts” is what Freud encountered at many of his neurotic patients: “It is in obsessional neuroses that the survival of the omnipotence of thoughts is most clearly visible and that the consequences of this primitive mode of thinking come closest to consciousness.”⁵²

But do things change dramatically in the era of the scientific understanding? “At the animistic stage men ascribe omnipotence to *themselves*. At the religious stage they transfer it to the gods but do not seriously abandon it themselves, for they reserve the power of influencing the gods in a variety of ways according to their wishes. The scientific view of the universe no longer affords any room for human omnipotence; men have acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to death and to the other necessities of nature. None of the less the primitive belief in omnipotence still survives in men’s faith in the power of the human mind, which grapples with the laws of reality.”⁵³

Apparently, man never resign and never accepts its condition – at least as long as he cannot escape the appeal of the narcissism: “Primitive men and neurotics, as we have seen, attach a high valuation – in our eyes an *over*-valuation – to psychical acts. This attitude may plausibly be brought into relation with narcissism and regarded as an essential component of it.”⁵⁴

So, if the Purist is identifying himself with nature, as Weston was declaring⁵⁵, what are the implications of this event? If nature’s laws are his thoughts, he is under the indictment of the magical thinking, because magic is “the technique of the animistic mode of thinking”⁵⁶, as well as it characterizes the neurotic thinking. And “one of the

⁵² Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵³ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵⁴ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁵ “In the discipline of camera-technique, the artist can become identified with the whole of life and so realize a more complete expression”, from “Edward Weston on Photography”, in Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph. Writing on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2006, p. 70.

⁵⁶ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 85.

most widespread magical procedures for injuring an enemy is by making an effigy of him from any convenient material. [...] Whatever is then done to the effigy, the same thing happens to the detested original. [...] The same magical technique may be employed, not only for purposes of private enmity, but also for pious ends and for giving help to gods against malignant demons.”⁵⁷ So, there are two different, nonetheless correlative psychological processes at stake here. First one, if the photography is the “effigy” of the nature, and there is an identification with nature at an unconscious level, then processing it, altering it – the standard Purist taboo – would equal to an alteration inflicted upon the self. This is unacceptable, is a terrible threat for the Narcissus. Secondly, if producing this effigy – the photography – can serve “pious ends”, then it is imperious that the whole ritual be as... pure as possible. A pure and unaltered image-effigy of nature, along with some adorning words – i.e., the famous book Ansel Adams published, that featured wonderful landscapes, completed by Whitman’s poems, or Paul Strand’s book with New England pictures, accompanied by texts – can function as a spell, as a narcissistic restoration.

But whenever there is a taboo - and one so strongly expressed and continuously repeated as the Purist taboo concerning interventions upon the photographic image – must exist also a strong desire to do exactly what the taboo prohibits: “The prohibition owes its strength and its obsessive character precisely to its unconscious opponent, the concealed and undiminished desire – that is to say, to an internal necessity inaccessible to conscious inspection.”⁵⁸ So, when the Purist photographer is insisting upon the fact that you cannot alter the photograph, because any photograph that “shows a certain manipulation or that elude the reality in that which concerns the election of the theme,

⁵⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, “Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence”, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII, translation by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 31.

will be considered *impure*⁵⁹, could it be that what he really wants is exactly the opposite, that is “to alter the whole face of the earth in order to satisfy his wishes”⁶⁰?

Therefore, the solution, in order to maintain the taboo, is to treat Nature as an immeasurable totem, a totem that deserves the highest veneration and respect. The attitude is not that primitive as the one that forbids taking pictures, in some ancient cultures, because of the superstition that in this way one could rob the soul of the being photographed – robbing its nature, literally – but it is somehow spiritualized, elevated: you can take pictures *if* you manifest the most sanctimonious and devout conduct towards the photographed portion of nature. That means adoration and indictment to touch or re-touch it...

Truth or dare?

Truth is invoked in Purists’ arguments in two different situations: as final objective of the photographic endeavor – “photography is my passion, the search for truth my obsession”⁶¹ – that implying, of course, that it is essentially possible to find the truth *out there* by photographic means; and as aesthetic category, stating that truth is beauty, as a parallel but not symmetric position with the more familiar aesthetic/scientific pronouncement that beauty is truth.

The first situation is sending us toward a psychological appraisal of the Purist view over the humane capabilities – an ambitious view, no doubt about it, but this we already expected (sic!). In the light of this view, there are two crucial details to be taken into account: the fact that nothing-but-the-truth must be pursued and the fact that the truth

⁵⁹ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 192.

⁶⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, “Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thoughts”, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII, translation by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 84.

⁶¹ Alfred Stieglitz, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2003, Introducción, p. 33.

exist out there and can be encountered by the photographer. A follow-up question could be obviously if truth pre-exists out there or must/may be constructed, and if its finding/construction depends upon the photographer's craft.

This conviction regarding the ability to grasp the truth and deliver it on photographic paper is imparted by Purists' aficionados, also. It is like a common universe of discourse that carry on along time. Talking about Atget's pictures, for example, one critic says: "In Atget's hands, the new procedure was showing the things as they appear, not as they seem, revealing in this way the epiphany of the real in all its bleakness"⁶². It is a daring thing to say, indeed, and not very much different than saying that it was showing things "as they are". It is correct that this was always one of the alibis of photography, this ability to disclose, to reveal, to be "candid". However, this candidness is not to be taken for granted, and the existence of an author, of a subject, makes it impossible for the photography to be viewed as objective, as for any other thing that involves the intervention of a third part. It is an interpretation and it will always be an interpretation. The problem, of course, surges when you want it to be more than that: "To photograph a rock, have it look like a rock, but be more than a rock. Significant representation – not interpretation."⁶³

Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" pictures represent the exact amount of reality that *he* wanted to convey, and the subjectivity of each one's objectivity is unquestionable. Yet, the label of subjectivity is a reductive label for a prospect so magnanimous such as the Purist prospect. Nothing less than the truth, nothing less than the full objectivity must be the aim. One of the finest Purist photographer, Paul Strand, is making this fascinatingly oxymoronic proclamation: "The author must use and control the objectivity by means of photography"⁶⁴. This looks more like constructing a truth than honestly

⁶² Coronado e Hijón, Diego, *Una mirada a cámara: teorías de la fotografía, de Charles Baudelaire a Roland Barthes*, Ediciones Alfar, Sevilla, 2005, our translation, p. 98.

⁶³ Edward Weston, quoted in "Edward Weston on Photography", in Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph. Writing on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2006, p. 70.

⁶⁴ Paul Strand, "The artistic motivation in photography", in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2003, Introducción, p. 109.

looking for it – so much for *straight photography*... – , and this is an obvious overestimation and over-valuation typical for the narcissism – and actually in this case it is two-folded: on one hand, they assume the right to “control the objectivity”, on the other hand, they’re not really looking for the truth, but “they are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object and their type of object-choice may be termed *narcissistic*”⁶⁵.

The second situation is of a more ethical-aesthetical constitution, at least at first impression. It directs us as well toward contemporary debates about the beauty of truth, or the beauty of mathematics, on grounds such as symmetry, simplicity and coherence.

But first of all, why would truth matter that much if we’re talking, supposedly, about art? “What is distinctive about art as a form of knowledge is that it is not a body of abstract truths derived by generalization or deduction from sets of relations; nor is it a simple item present to the senses in purely material terms. Rather it is a function of the zone of imagery—of world-projection—where abstract thought itself emerges from a mode of more corporeal and sensuous mimetic reference.”⁶⁶ One simplist reasoning could be that if these photographers validate the pretense that they are *portraying* the truth in their straight and pure photographs, that is a sufficient condition for achieving the status of beauty. But even this is complicated, depending upon the theory of truth taken into account – if truth is considered to be the correspondence to reality, that’s the closest it can get. However, at Purists’ time, photography was available only in black and white, so neither the correspondence to reality wasn’t perfect, in the absolute sense of the understanding of the expression “correspondence”.

There is also an ethical consequence here, meant in fact as a presumption – truth connotes truthfulness, honesty and, of course, straightforwardness. Just like its name says it, straight photography... On the other hand, it is accurate to say that this style of practicing the photography lead to the configuracion of new ethical values: “Photography

⁶⁵ Freud, Sigmund, *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1952, William Benton, Publisher, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914), translation by Cecil M. Baines, p. 405.

⁶⁶ Crowther, Paul, *Defining Art, Creating the Canon, Artistic Value in an Era of Doubt*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 65.

not only imposed a certain aesthetic to the world view, but also contributed to the configuration of new ethical categories, such as precision and objectivity.”⁶⁷

The reverse side is beauty as truth. This is a successful idea in contemporary history of science. Ian Stewart, professor of mathematics at University of Warwick and a prolific writer on this theme, puts the things in an unexpected perspective, after exposing a mathematical argument: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty. The Pythagoreans and Platonists would have loved this evidence of the pivotal role of the mathematical patterns in the structure of our world. The octonions have a haunting, surreal mathematical beauty, which Dirac would have seized upon as a reason why 10-dimensional string theory has to be true. Or, if unhappily proved false, is nevertheless more interesting than whatever *is* true. But we have learned that beautiful theories need not be true, and until the verdict on superstrings is in, this possibility must remain pure conjecture.”⁶⁸ Is it possible that the entire Purist theoretization be just a beautiful theory, that aspired to be also true? In this case, we would be talking about what it’s called, in psychoanalysis, rationalization, namely a procedure by the means of which the subject tries to give a coherent explanation – from a logical point of view – or morally acceptable, for an attitude, action, idea, feeling etc., for which the real reasons are not accesible to him⁶⁹.

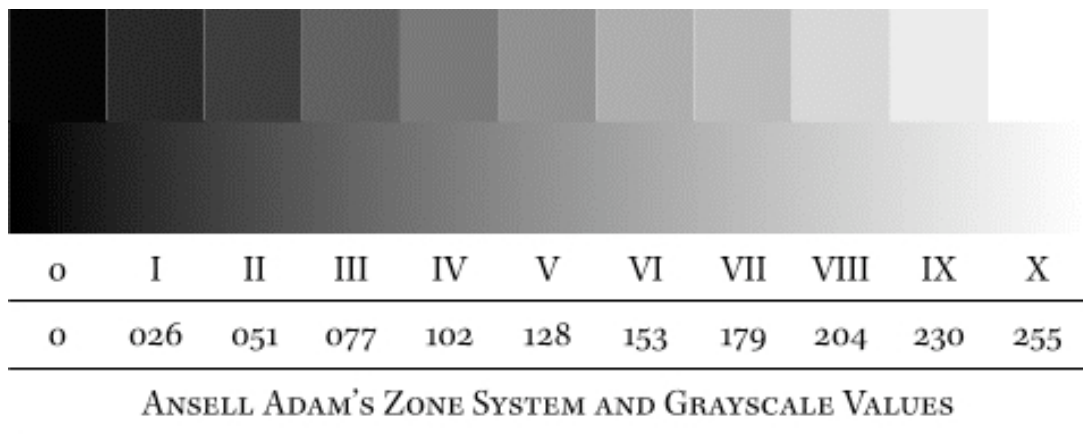
In the same time, the zone system conceived by Ansel Adams, for example, bears a quaint resemblance to the precise and thorough beauty of the mathematical theories that Stewart is talking about, which makes us wonder if it is not an attempt to explain the world in the same way, in terms of “monads”, and based on the principle that truth is beauty/beauty is truth: “In 1941, the photographer [Adams, our account] elaborated his ‘zone system’, a method for the calculation the exposure time and developing time, that

⁶⁷ Joan Fontcuberta, Prólogo, in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2003, Introducción, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Stewart, Ian, *Why Beauty is Truth. A History of Symmetry*, Basic Books, Cambridge, MA, 2007, p. 263.

⁶⁹ <http://www.srdp.ro/>

was supposed to produce an optimal gradation of the grey tones.”⁷⁰ A complementary comment comes from Weston, practically articulating the other half of the argument, accordingly to which “stealing beauty” means stealing truth, while beauty comes from the monadic-like complex universe of the photographic image: “The image that is thus swiftly recorded possesses certain qualities that at once distinguish it as photographic. First there is the amazing precision of definition, especially in the recording of fine detail; and second there is the unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradations from black to white. [...] The photographic image partakes more of the nature of a mosaic than of a drawing or painting. It contains no lines in the painter’s sense, but is entirely made up of tiny particles. The extreme fineness of these particles gives a special tension to the image, and when that tension is destroyed – by the intrusion of handwork, by too great enlargement, by printing on a rough surface etc. – the integrity of the photograph is destroyed.”⁷¹



“Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.” John Keats

But the association between beauty and truth is not new. Stewart himself is quoting the poet John Keats in this regard, and actually begins the book with one of Keats’s poems that talked about beauty and truth. Though, he asks: “Was Keats right? is beauty

⁷⁰ Mißelbeck, Reinhold (ed.), *La fotografia del siglo XX. Museum Ludwig Colonia*, Taschen GmbH, Köln, 2007, p. 19.

⁷¹ Weston, Edward, “Seeing photographically”, in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, 2006, p. 106.

truth, and truth beauty? The two are intimately connected, possibly because our minds react similarly to both.”⁷² But in which way did Keats perceive this truth/beauty around? Well, by means of a special state of conscience, called negative capability, “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. This description is pretty similar to the state of receptivity and identification with “the whole of life” recommended by many Purists, in order to catch a glimpse of the *truth* around. But this is also very reminiscent of the passivity typical to a certain phase in the development of the sexuality and denotes a very passive approach to the camera and the world – as in retracting almost completely and letting the camera do its job. This is a very dangerous polarization between the healthy narcissism of the identification with the world around and the virtually pathological one of the withdrawal from it.

⁷² Ibid., p. 275.

Three. Practical problems when taking Purism seriously

Personal expression versus phantasmatic communication

When talking about the relation between photography and art, the notion of “personal expression” is often invoked in both the discourses, the Pictorialist and the Purist one. Most often, personal expression is correlated with the field of art, being judged as unnecessary by that segment of the Purists who are not interested in any association between photography and the arts. The opinions vary, from Weston’s dismiss of the importance of personal expression in photography – “I’m not interested anymore in trying to ‘express myself’, in imposing my own personality upon nature [...]”⁷³ – to the frontal accusation formulated by the critic Sadakichi Hartmann, an adept of the Purist line of thought – “This ‘personal expression’ is recurrently required. And because in straight photography this ‘personal expression’ is extremely difficult to achieve, the artistic photographer started to imitate the artist [...] But now is the time to respond, and honestly I hope that my words will count for those who will read this apology for the straight photography. I am deeply convinced that something will change if we are not willing to sacrifice what we acquired. I would love that creative photography be acknowledged among the fine arts. It is an ideal that I am fond to and for which I have fought many years; but I am equally convinced that this will be attained only by means of straight photography.”⁷⁴

In Hartmann’s view, personal expression is totally possible in straight photography, while the option to go into the Pictorial direction is solely an acknowledgment of the lack of skills that impede the photographer to manifest this personal expression using only traditional photographic means. So, the lack of talent and expertise are the reason for choosing the less noble Pictorialist art, apparently. It is a bit similar to what Emerson was saying – that Pictorialism, or impure photography, is only a confession of limitations –

⁷³ Weston, Edward, *My Camera on Point Lobos*, Da Capo Press, Nueva York, 1950, our translation, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 35-36.

⁷⁴ Hartmann, Sadakichi, *A Plea for Straight Photography*, in *American Amateur Photography*, no. 16, New York, March 1904, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2003, Introducción, p. 34-35.

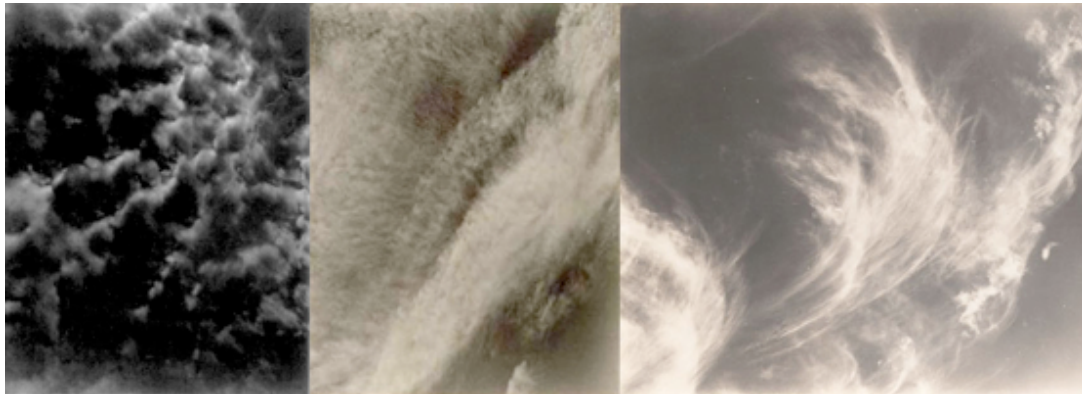
but actually in a completely different sense. Because Emerson was thinking that the possibility of straight and pure photography is very limited in fact, and that impure photography is an acceptance of these limitations, while Hartmann is saying that straight photography is possible and impure photography is a confession of the limitations of the photographer.

However, there is a delicate problem to be taken into account here. This very ambitious ideal of expressing “personal content”, disposing only of very severe and minimalist tools – actually by instrumentalizing only the “pure” proficiency of the photographer – has its downsides and can lead to extreme subjectivity. It may happen that you are the only one that recognizes and responds to that information you intended to express, and that there is nobody on the receiving end. Or you can build an entire story, reinforced by a persuasive theory – story and theory that are completely coincidental to the substance of the photograph – in order to confer meaning retrospectively, to create a fictional texture in which to wrap the image. Sometimes it can be simply a title, other times can be a very sophisticated context that places the image at the intersection of many significant occurrences. This happens too often and I advance the hypothesis that this is also the case, for example, with Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*, even if saying this is like breaking a huge artistic taboo.

Stieglitz created this series of photographs portraying clouds when he was already well known in the world of photography. The images themselves, taken separately, are not convincing. He changed the angle of positioning them⁷⁵, clustered them together in a

⁷⁵ “One of the most arresting aspects of these pictures is how the orientation of ground/horizon/sky was dealt with when the finished prints were mounted. In many cases, this vertically layered orientation, normal in realist landscape presentation, was altered, sometimes by turning the print 90 or 180 degrees. This was not a game, but part of a modernist strategy in which a traditional representation was consciously rejected. The technique had been seen earlier in some of Paul Strand’s work, and O’Keeffe also utilized it. One of Stieglitz’s most famous pictures of O’Keeffe’s hands, made in 1920, carries the instruction that the photograph may be hung or oriented in any of the four cardinal points. In the clouds photographs, this altered orientation was sometimes used to create and enliven the dynamic of the forms and their space. It also works in such a way that subtly, perhaps unconsciously, we are made to feel edgy by sensing that something is *wrong* (meaning different from our ordinary experience of looking up the sky), but we cannot quite realize this sensation or what causes it. Stieglitz’s goal in these sequences was to help regain the viewer’s equilibrium. Another aspect of these works is the rich, liquid tone of the prints themselves, together with their jewel-like size. The prints are some of the most luxurious that Stieglitz ever made. They

series, named them very audaciously *The Equivalents* and constructed a meaningful story to go with them. Supposedly, he made these images for a very simple reason: “I wanted to photograph the clouds to discover what I had learn from photography after forty years. By means of the clouds, to establish my philosophy of life, to prove that my photos are not indebted to the theme, neither to any special privileges: the clouds were here for anybody, there’s still no taxes upon them: they’re for free.”⁷⁶ Photographing clouds in order to prove that he can make a good photograph out of anything proves, maybe, exactly the contrary, that whatever photograph he would make would have the same fate – success. Not to be deducted from here that clouds cannot make a good subject...



Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*

The manner in which these *Equivalents* were presented is crucial. Beaumont Newhall, in his *History of Photography*, describes Stieglitz’s exhibition: “He titled these photos ‘equivalents’ and displayed them in sequences with other photos with expressive gist, often evocative: a meadow shining with rain drops, the hands of a woman, with the palms hold together between her knees. He saw them as equivalents to his thoughts, ideas

are also some of the finest he made on silver paper, and their tone echoes the diaphanous atmosphere of the actual place where they were taken.” Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph. Writing on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2006, p. 27.

⁷⁶ Stieglitz, Alfred, “How I came to photograph clouds”, in *The Amateur Photographer*, vol. 56, 1923, p. 255, quoted in Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografia*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 171.

and aspirations, his disillusion and fears.”⁷⁷ The vicinity of the Equivalents to those evocative photos contributed, no doubt about it, to conveying them the feeling that was abundantly perspiring in the last ones; and designating them the symmetrical position of equivalence compared to his thoughts is another clever way to ascribe significance. It is like saying, if they are so like my thoughts, they must have the same load of conscience and resourcefulness. But does this mean communicating by “purely” photographic means? Because what Stieglitz did is almost *equivalent* to a contemporary gallery performance!

But besides this rather happy situation, made possible by the context of the exhibition space, the real problem with this type of assumption – that straight photography is totally capable by conveying meaning – is that of eluding the Other from the scene, of confounding the ease with which you ascribe signification, with the eventuality that this signification be caught by the others, the non-you *equivalents*. It is, in a sense, a phantasmatic⁷⁸ communication, because the real, fertile communication does not take place; what happens instead is that the subject/photographer isolates himself in a bubble of self-sufficiency, believing that whatever it is that he thinks, the others know it, by a sort of strange osmosis that allows them to enter his mind. And sometimes, the aesthetic focus gets to be entirely and regrettably lost, in favor of a search for the narcissistic Purism, that fills and refills itself by its own resources, losing all contact with the Other. Art cannot be totally non-retinal, cannot resume itself to simply communicating an idea – if this idea at least exists. Ideas can be very well communicated by other media channels, and aesthetization is an option that does not always lead to merriest results.

⁷⁷ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 171.

⁷⁸ The phantasm is an imaginary scenario in which the subject is present and that symbolizes, in a manner more or less distorted by the defense mechanisms, the fulfillment of a wish, and ultimately, of an unconscious wish. (<http://www.srdp.ro>)

Fables about the flawlessness of perception

From this identification with nature, that we were talking about in the previous chapter, comes also a mechanical, non-reflective conviction that nature can be thoroughly and comprehensively known, and that this knowledge can be manipulated as the straight photographer desires it, as long as he did his homework well. This means acquiring a wide-ranging body of knowledge about the process of taking pictures – how to use light, angles, when is the best moment in day to start shooting, what is the ideal exposure time, the most adequate aperture etc. “Get your lighting and exposure correct at the start and both developing and printing can be practically automatic”, Weston thought⁷⁹. Charles Caffin was very precise about the nature of this information: “[The photographer] must understand the laws of composition and also those laws that affect the distribution of lights and shadows; his eye must be trained to distinguish *values*, that means, the varied effects of light upon objects made of different materials, and the gradual changes of color in an object, depending on his proximity or distance from the point of view. These values suppose technical understanding that can be acquired [...]”⁸⁰

The underlying idea that represent the basis of these recommendations for learning how to take pictures is that this knowledge guarantee one beautiful, but in the same time truthful pictures. However, the universality of this specific knowledge is not that guaranteed, nor it is guaranteed its flawlessness. First of all, because it can lead to a self-assurance that can prove itself wrong, as in the example given by an “adversary” Pictorialist fellow photographer, Henry Peach Robinson: “Often one encounter certain effects, especially in cloudy landscapes, that seem uncanny, for the sensible observer, to be found in a photograph, but exactly these are the effects that, almost always, it is more important to keep and should never be ignored, even if it can happen that someone does not comprehend the effect and later say that it is false, and persisting in his mistake will say that the combined positive always produces falseness and therefore it must be

⁷⁹ Quoted in “Edward Weston on Photography”, in Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph. Writing on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2006, p. 65.

⁸⁰ Caffin, Charles H., “Photography as one of the fine arts”, in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 93.

censored. Well, it comes to my mind a little anecdote. Not long ago I send a photograph of a landscape and sky to a friend who's standards in arts are excellent. My friend knew that sometimes I use the combined positive. His answer was: 'Thanks for the photograph; the effect is great; sensational, actually, very beautiful; but it proves, inadvertently, what photography cannot do: your sky does not match with your landscape; you probably shot it in another time of the year. A photograph is nothing if it is not true to reality.' Well, the truth is that the landscape and the sky have been photographed the same time [...]'⁸¹



Carmen Aguado – *Calcinatio* (The project intents “to make visible that which cannot be seen, that the eye, in a simple *clin d’œil*, is incapable to catch”⁸². The photos are not manipulated, being obtained by using three different light types, condensed in a single one.)

Another fable has to do with the superiority of the camera compared to that of the naked eye; and also its reverse version, the superiority of the eye compared to that of the camera, depending on the scientific comprehension of the time. This is a predilect subject for the Purists, because it is important to know which view is the most accurate, if you are to picture reality in *real* shades. Trusting the outstanding abilities of the camera, Paul Strand said: “We have a camera, a machine that science put in our hands, with its so-called *dead eye*; the representation of the objects can be engraved upon a sensitive emulsion; starting with this negative you can make a positive copy that, without any external manual interference, will register a scale of tonal values in black and white

⁸¹ Peach Robinson, Henry, “The Pictorial focus in photography”, in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 63-64.

⁸² *Primavera Fotográfica* 2002, Departament de la Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, p. 330.

beyond the ability of the human hand or the human eye. It can also record the differences of the texture of the objects in a way that the human hand couldn't be capable of.”⁸³ Weston, too, thought that camera is finer: “The lens reveals more than the eye sees.”⁸⁴

Also a believer in the superiority of the camera at his beginning and a passionate apprentice of the science of optics, Emerson acknowledged later his distress about the deficiencies of the camera: “The control of the image is possible only in a limited degree, changing the focus, changing the exposure (but this means working *blindly*) of the developing, even if I doubt it [...]”⁸⁵

So, who owns the better eye, the camera or the human, do the Purists seem to interrogate themselves. Is it the dead eye or the living eye? Because accepting to “work *blindly*”, as Emerson unintentionally puts it, would be a disaster for the Narcissus dwelling inside. It also appears that blindness is a symbol for castration, as Freud describes it starting with the fascinating, but terrifying story of the Sand-Man, that steals children's eyes: “We know from psychoanalytical experience, however, that the fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible one in children. Many adults retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no physical injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye. We are accustomed to say, too, that we will treasure a thing as the apple of our eye. A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration – the only punishment that was adequate for him by the *lex talionis*.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Strand, Paul, “The artistic motivation in photography”, in Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), *Estética fotográfica*, Introducción, p. 108.

⁸⁴ Quoted in “Edward Weston on Photography”, in Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph. Writing on Twentieth-Century Photography*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2006, p. 69.

⁸⁵ Emerson, Peter Henry, quoted in Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 143, our emphasizing.

⁸⁶ Freud, Sigmund, “The ‘Uncanny’”, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, translated by James Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1986, p. 352.

Real fiction versus fictional reality

To post-process or not to post-process, that is the question. At least it was, for the Purists. And it is still today, for their heirs. In other words, to alter or not to alter. “The founding members [of the f/64 group, our add.] – Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, John Paul Edwards, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke and Edward Weston – formulated an aesthetic that appears now, retrospectively, as dogmatical in its strict specifications: any photograph that it is not precisely sharp in every detail, that it is not printed on shiny black and white paper, that it is not framed onto a white surface, that discloses any manipulation or that eludes the reality in what regards its theme, it will be considered ‘impure’.”⁸⁷ With such relentless criteria, post processing – that was also available back then, even if it was not so convenient and sophisticated as it is today, thanks to the advanced post processing computer software, such as Photoshop – was obviously a crime.



Darius Koehli - *What's true?* (This picture is the first of a series with the same title and invites the viewer “to enter a game about what is *true* and what is *added* in any photograph. It must be clearly understood that we are in front of ‘pure’ photographs, that are not faked or manipulated”⁸⁸. While a pure photograph may look this way, the discussion about the ability of pure photography to depict the real becomes futile...)

⁸⁷ Newhall, Beaumont, *Historia de la fotografía*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002, our translation, p. 188-192.

⁸⁸ *Primavera Fotográfica* 2002, Departament de la Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, p.282, our translation.

Real and *reality* was the name of the game, only that *reality* had such a modest meaning, so superficial in its vision and so empirically-limited. What is real? What the camera sees, what the human sees, or what exists out there, independent of the seeing? How do you decide what are the most appropriate settings for the controls of the camera, in order for it to accurately represent the reality? A slow shutter speed makes the running water look like a foam, a fast shutter speed makes it look frozen in the moment. The eye adapted itself to see it simply as running water, in its processuality, regardless of how correct or precise is this view compared to the factuality of the water *running*. But is there a way in which water runs *actually*? Therefore, if an image differs from how the eye normally perceives it, but it is nonetheless a *correctly* obtained image, a.k.a. straight photograph, is it acceptable to say that it represents the reality? And if yes, why? Only because it was not manipulated? And if no, why? Only because there is someone who can decide upon the *right* controls of the camera and the *right* utilization of it, in order to obtain *realistic* photographs? Is the microscope-obtained image the most accurate and representative of reality – because scientifically speaking it shows things *as they are* –, or are there other and other layers of the real that can be deconstructed indefinitely, while each of them represents the reality in a certain amount. Or you could say that all of them are equally realistic, but then you would have a trillion different images that all represent the same portion of reality, but neither one is similar to the other. But if there was some dust on my lens when I took the picture, and then I remove it during post-processing, just to present the things as they *really* were – cause obviously the immortalized fragment of reality wasn't dusted – does this equal to an alteration of the reality? The truth is that there *was* some dust on the lens, and the dusty image reflects as a matter of fact a certain reality, but if I wouldn't have been there, taking that picture, the reality outside my camera didn't contain dust at all, or at least not displayed in that manner, all over it, as some obnoxious little particles obstructing my view. Unless I have some dust in my eyes, and this would make me see the reality in a different way – a dusty way... But this would be my way of seeing it; this would not change the way it really is. Or would it? Because the thing is that sometimes altering the picture equals to not altering the reality, and vice versa.

And what matters most, to present reality – in the sense of what really exists – or to take correct photographs? Because I can invent a non-existent entity or situation and record it *correctly* using the camera –without falsifying the photograph in any way –, but would this entity be real? We can say that it is a *real fiction*, if we want to follow the Purist dogma. That means that even it is an imaginary construction, due to the honest and straight way of being shot, it is nonetheless, somehow, real. In 1997, the photographer and photography theoretician Joan Fontcuberta created an ingenious story, that he *documented* with pictures and interviews and short films, story accordingly to which a certain Soviet astronaut, Ivan Istoichnikov, had disappeared during a space mission and had been erased from all official documents. Fontcuberta’s project, titled “Sputnik, the Odyssey of Soyuz 2”⁸⁹, is so well constructed and so cleverly presented that it bears all the prerogatives of reality – or at least of what we believe we know about reality – and one picture of him, actually, dressed as Soviet pilot, raises this very question: what’s real? If some silly secret agent would investigate such a picture, using only basic knowledge about forging, and he would see that the picture is completely *straight*, wouldn’t he decide – and rightly so – that the picture represents a reality in its own right?



Joan Fontcuberta’s “real fiction” – *Sputnik project*

⁸⁹ <http://www.fundacion.telefonica.com/at/sputnik.html>

However, Purists' idealized conception about reality does not ponder with such questions. Weston was a believer in "the camera's innate honesty"⁹⁰ and felt that this honesty "provides the photographer with a means of looking deeply into the nature of things, and presenting his subjects in terms of their basic reality."⁹¹ But when Cartier-Bresson, for example, was shooting one of his famous "decisive moment" photographs, completely pure of any post processing of the image and of any orchestration of the scene – supposedly – , wasn't he inexorably trimming off some slice from the whole reality available in front of his camera? Not with the intention of maneuvering the reality, but just because he was paying attention to his *mind eye*, that exceptional eye that tells you what's important and what's not, what's *decisive* and what's not, that eye that makes you manipulate the reality without even knowing it.



A few of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "fictional realities"

Why would that eye try to delude you? Simply because he has his own agenda and he's paying attention to the unconscious thoughts and desires and motives. If at the same moment a wedding and a funeral happen, which one will you choose to shoot? If it's the wedding of an anonymous person and the funeral of a celebrity, most probably you will choose the funeral. But for the relatives of the bride, the wedding is far more important. Or you may choose to shoot the wedding because you are afraid of death, or vice versa,

⁹⁰ Weston, Edward, "Seeing photographically", in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, 2006, p. 107.

⁹¹ Idem.

choose to shoot the funeral because you are afraid of commitment. Whatever you choose, consciously or not, you choose it because it is important to *you*.

Therefore, what's important to one person may be completely insignificant to another one, and when choosing to present a partial and limited amount of reality one consciously chooses to create his own fiction, regardless of the fact that it did happen, so it is real, generally speaking. That partial and limited amount of reality chosen is a *fictional reality*: a piece of reality that plays a role, that started to exist, in a sense, after the photographer released it, after he made it known and maybe even famous – or, as Benjamin puts it, talking about the all-pervading presence of photography nowadays: if it wouldn't have been shot, we could say that it didn't even happen.

Processing and fore-pleasure



Joan Fontcuberta, 1976

Looking at a manipulated picture that depicts an unfamiliar or even absurd situation, we experience different feelings – much stronger – than looking at a drawing or painting – however accurate – that depicts the same situation. This “amputated” man on his bicycle, surgically operated by Joan Fontcuberta, captivates the stares. Why? It's not only the fact that the photograph is way more explicit and unambiguous than a drawing with a similar subject could ever be, but it's also the fact that we *know* it was processed and we know it was different before – we know that there was a *before* and we know that

someone took the liberty to alter it, even if we like it or not. We may resent it as an impunity and may want to react, but we are also fascinated. It's the type of fascination that Freud is referring to when talking about the concept of fore-pleasure. Art in general is meant to offer us this specific pleasure, that is called like that because it comes *before* the very act: it is the pleasure that the writing style of a writer or the painting style of a painter occasion, before us getting to the very act of digesting the content of the work of art, its sense(s). Before this sense, there is a *sensibilization*. "The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name *incentive bonus* or *fore-pleasure* to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources."⁹² Operating changes upon the image of a man in a picture, a man that exists in reality, not only in imagination, it is almost like operating changes upon a real body. We may feel suspicious, we may feel surprised, or we may even want to protest to the ingratitude of dismembering a person.

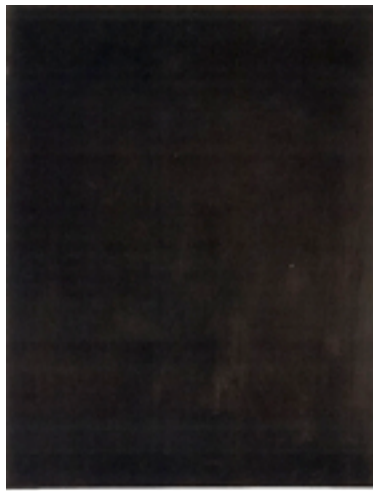
For that reason, manipulating photos is by no means "a confession of limitations", but a mesmerizing and powerful phantasmatic activity, an activity that allows the photographer to intervene upon an already existent material, to "deconstruct" it. It is somehow the reverse of both painting and sculpture, that are constructing something – painting starting from "nothing" and sculpture revealing the potential form, as Aristotle said. When the photographer intervenes upon the photographic material, for him it's like playing a game, and for the viewer is an invitation to enter the game.

Voyeurism and disbelief

Pure or straight or simply documentary photography, whatever one calls it, is occupying profusely the space available in all types of media today, as if there is a huge

⁹² Freud, Sigmund, "Writers and day-dreaming", in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, translated by James Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1986, p. 141.

demand for it, that never gets to be satiated. The photo-blogs multiply day after day, and everybody want to see pictures, more pictures, real-life pictures, real-life shows, real-life everything. The reality does exist out there, is fully available, then why this intense desire to see more and more photographs depicting it? Maybe photography does create a fictional reality, more attractive than the one happening in front of our own eyes.⁹³ But there is also the luxury to sit and stare, that photography allows and that is more or less banned in the world next door. That luxury means the luxury to indulge in our own voyeuristic need to see, to look, to watch. In a sense, this specific request of being offered only what's unmanipulated, what's purely out of the camera, responds to the craving of consuming reality, of devouring it as a forbidden fruit.



Si no lo veo, no lo creo

Si no lo veo, no lo creo – Jordi Bernadó and Martí Llorens

But voyeurism means also passivity, it's the counterpart of the active desire to show – the exhibitionism. However, it could hardly be said about the photographer that he shows/exhibits the merchandise that gets to be consumed by the passive voyeurist. It

⁹³ Maybe *seeing photographically*, the marvelous sintagm coined by Weston, can be also seen reversely, and that could be one of the multiple possible explanations of the contemporary discontent with the *real world*. It could be that photography distorted somehow the way we see, the way we watch the world around us, trying to find those features encountered in the photographs. Seeing photographically may have been an useful technique for the photographers at its beginning, but it seems to have been converted itself into a deviation, a perversity of the view. We fetishistly look around searching for something, that *photographic* something.

would be a simple economic relation of demand and offer. The photographer is more likely hiding behind his camera, as if hiding behind an excuse to watch, to satisfy his voyeurism in a more direct, *live* mode. This pretension of the spectator to be fed pure photography is clearly related to the voyeuristic need to see. The alleged disbelief about processing and manipulation is not really tied up with the moral scruples, or with the humanly understandable desire of not being lied to, but with the stringent need of being sure that what one watches is a *fact* that can be consumed and fully enjoyed. Phantasies and inventions are not for the voyeur, they are too flimsy and they do not respond to his inner yearning. Voyeurism feeds itself with reality, or with what we consider to be real – the hot topics, the outrageous incident, the vulgar, the crude, the improper, the peculiar, the funny, the ugly, the fictional realities that each of us, at our turn, are nurturing in fact.

Seeing may be different than watching, seeing can be, sometimes, the same with inventing, with imagining. *Seeing* may mean *looking* at the same thing that everybody is *watching* and still noticing something else. “Looking deeply into the nature of things”, as Weston said, could signify rather that, than respecting reality religiously, treating it as a sacred substance not to be impurified.

Four. The dismissal reaction of the digital photography as a contemporary mutation of the Purism

A few introductory notes

The end of the twentieth century brings with it a technological novelty that provokes a serious quake in the photographic environment: the invention of the digital cameras and soon, the large availability of this new gadget to wide audiences. Suddenly, photography turns into a most accessible hobby, serving all kind of purposes, from the most innocent to the most perverted. It's true that photography already was a hobby, but now the simplicity of the entire process transforms it into a "pagan" leisure, with the worst consequences, in some's opinion. William J. Mitchell, professor of architecture and media arts and sciences at MIT, utters nothing less than the death of photography as we know it: "From the moment of its sesquicentennial in 1989 photography was dead – or, more precisely, radically and permanently displaced – as was painting 150 years before"⁹⁴.

Soon to be, this apparent disaster is followed by another one: the development of professional computer programs and applications that are used along with the digital photography – and often offered as an annex tool, for the fun of the consumer – , programs meant to make possible the easy processing, montaging and "falsifying" of the photos. "Recognizing a growth market, software developers and publishers produced a widening repertoire of paint and image-processing systems for personal computers. This software soon became astonishingly sophisticated – making widely available, at low cost, capabilities hitherto accessible only to scientists working with laboratory image-processing systems or graphics professionals working with advanced digital prepress systems. [...] It became possible for anybody with a personal computer to *fake* photographs."⁹⁵ The evil is now complete and waiting to take its toll.

⁹⁴ William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye. Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, The MIT Press, fourth printing, 2001, first edition 1994, p. 20.

⁹⁵ William J. Mitchell, op.cit., p. 18-19 (our italics).

However, this is only the shallow part of the iceberg. The depth of it is apple of discord for the scholars, while the profanes are obviously just happy to go with it (not to mention the manufacturers, such as Canon, Nikon, Fuji etc.). But why is the digital a “pariah”? What are the reasons that undergo its wide – but not unanimous – dismissal from the part of the theoreticians in the field of photography? The list of arguments is sizeable, but somehow revolves around a few recurring items: the obliteration of the indexicality – inherent to the relation between the object and the picture, in the case of the analogical photography; the radical ontological and material discrepancy between the “portion of reality” and the image obtained in the case of the digital photos – discrepancy nonexistent, seemingly, in the case of the analogical; the drastic difference in the manners of correcting or adjusting the pictures in the case of the analogical and of the digital photography; the threat that represents the ease of digital processing and digital replication of photos, with the apocalyptic array of consequences with regard to the aesthetic, journalistic, social and political truth.

The loss of the indexicality

Let’s discuss the indexicality first. The concept of index is taken from Charles Peirce’s semiotic theory, and is part of the three sign typology, which includes nine nonexclusive categories: qualisign, sinsign, legisign, icon, index, symbol, rheme, decisign, and argument. “An «index» is a sign connected to its referent along a physical axis, such as a thumbprint or a footprint, offering a one-to-one correspondence with the thing it represents.”⁹⁶ In the case of the analogical photography, that which is being photographed reflects itself onto the photosensitive surface (the film treated with silver or platinum salts...), through the mediation of light, and what remains on the film surface is an alike copy of what exists out there. This process of reflection mediated by light provides the “indexicality”, the connection between the object and the sign. Since in the case of the digital photography this situation changes dramatically, and what is being

⁹⁶ Sabine T. Kriebel, “Theories of Photography, A Short History”, in James Elkins (ed.), *Photography Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 26.

photographed is registered as digits, as “information” on a memory card, that virtually do not exist until it is downloaded into a computer, this relation of indexicality appears to be lost.

This issue of indexicality makes a lot of rumor among the theoreticians of photography. Peirce himself pointed out the fact that a photo is “both an index *and* an icon, which establishes meaning through the effect of resemblance”⁹⁷. One of the “iconic” personalities involved in the contemporary discussions about photography, Rosalind Krauss, underlines the fact that “the photograph is thus a type of icon or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relation to its object”⁹⁸. For some, the deterioration of this connection seems unavoidable and sorrowful in the digital era: “Given the virtually indistinguishable appearance of digital and conventional photographs, the indexical qualities traditionally associated with photography for over a century and a half fall away.”⁹⁹

Joan Fontcuberta, photographer, curator and professor of visual communication, puts this problem in a very eloquent manner: “In the electronic age, photography suffered a *desindexilization* process. The new scenery gives to the image the linearity of the writing. Photography liberates itself from the memory, the object is missing, the index vanishes.”¹⁰⁰ This way of putting the things cast a light upon the possible latent scenario that stands behind all this anxiety around “losing the indexicality”. Practically, the indexicality is the “canal” that connects the photographer with the “thing”, with that which is being photographed. When photography turns digital, this “canal” disappears, and it is like the possibilities of narcissistic investment are cut out. That fluid flow of the libido, from a Freudian perspective, between the object and the subject is drastically

⁹⁷ Sabine T. Kriebel, op.cit., p. 26.

⁹⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 1”, in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1985, p. 203.

⁹⁹ Anne Collins Goodyear, “The Portrait, the Photograph, and the Index”, in James Elkins (ed.), *Photography Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 213.

¹⁰⁰ Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), “Prólogo”, in *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, Barcelona, 2003, primera edición, 1984, p. 12 (our translation).

altered, situation that creates an understandable panic in the unconscious. The concept of *cathexis*, developed by Freud¹⁰¹, is defined as the process of investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea, and more specifically, in psychoanalysis, as libido's charge of energy. When the discharge of the libido is hindered, the energies build up and eventually find a different outlet, or, for worse, regress to an earlier stage of the development of the ego (for example to the anal stage, for which the denomination of "anal-ogical" photography offers a funny and striking correlation).

It's remarkable the insight with which Elkins appreciate this state of things, as if he "feels" there is something else at stake here: "For me at least, what's really going on with the index is some hope people have about the real word; I don't think the issue there is photography."¹⁰²

Different ontological statuses?

A second matter of contention in the dispute between analogical and digital is that of the alleged discrepancy between the "photographed" and the "photograph". William Mitchell – whose repudiation of the digital domain is so extreme that he came to denominate as "photographs" only the analogical ones, and for whom the digital photographs are just "images", as dull as it may sound – affirms: "A photograph is an analog representation of the differentiation of space in a scene: it varies continuously, both spatially and tonally. [...] But images are encoded digitally by uniformly subdividing the picture plane into a finite Cartesian grid of cells (known as *pixels*) and specifying the intensity or color of each cell by means of an integer number drawn from some limited range."¹⁰³ He insists upon the fact that the analogical photo represents a

¹⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XIV, London, The Hogarth Press, 1957.

¹⁰² James Elkins (ed.), "The Art Seminar", *Photography Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 201.

¹⁰³ William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye. Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, The MIT Press, fourth printing, 2001, first edition 1994, p. 4-5.

precise copy of the reality, just because when enlarged, it reveals itself to be an “unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradations from black to white”, as Edward Weston put it, before the digital cameras even existed. Mitchell also quotes another fore-speaker, Edgar Allen Poe, who was saying, in an article from 1840 (!), that “if we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear”, relating this case to the case of the digital images, that reveals only the discrete pixels when are magnified.

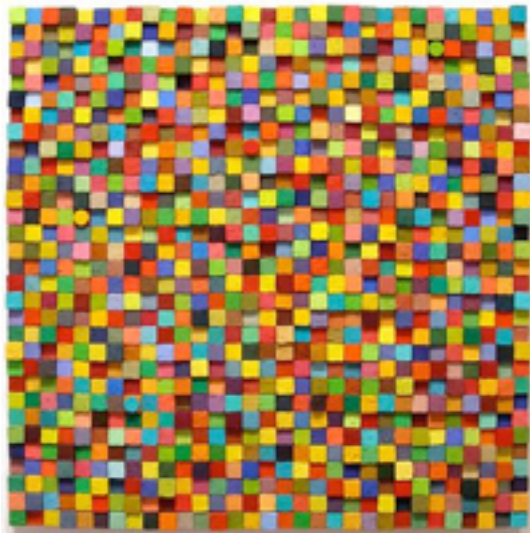
Let alone the fact that the case nowadays is completely different – Lev Manovich, ex-graphic designer and presently professor of new media, argues that today’s technical novelties, especially in what concerns the resolution of the images, make it possible for such an image to offer a far richer content: “So while a digitally stored image is still comprised of a finite number of pixels, at such resolution it can contain much finer detail than was ever possible with traditional photography. [...] By the end of new media’s first decade, technology had already reached the point where a digital image could easily contain much more information than anyone would ever want”¹⁰⁴ and that the pixel “no longer is the final frontier” – my first question is how do we know that the nature of reality is continuous, in order to be able to assert that analogical images are “analogous” to reality by virtue of their quality of continuity. The current state of the physics still implies a double nature of “the nature” – the wave-particle duality – which contradicts this naïve pretense that real world is as continuous and plain as a line. Moreover, when a “piece of nature” is studied on the microscope, it reveals its “granular” content: the cells, the electrons, the genes etc., much like the pixels, in a certain manner. Just because the film doesn’t exist in digital photography and because the information “first exists as mathematical data”¹⁰⁵, that does not makes the information “inexistent”. It exists as energy bits on a memory card, and the fact that it is not visible until it is downloaded in a computer does not change its existence status. DNA is not visible without a microscope, but if you collect some of it from a living being, you can recompose him/her from it,

¹⁰⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Gordon Baldwin, *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms*, Los Angeles, John Paul Getty Museum and the British Museum Press, 1991, p. 37-38.

much the way digital photography works. Maybe one just needs more metaphysical qualities to seize that...

Therefore, just because digital photography is “abstracting” the information, it does not mean that the way analogical photography is subtracting is the way it must be. The defenders of the analogical are funding their views on the “eye’s view”, but this can be a deceptive premise. The “essence” of reality might not be implied by the continuity of lines, but could be closer to the “landscape” of pixels. Again, the unconditional character of the digital repudiation makes one wonder if there is not something else here “hiding in the bushes”. The way Joan Fontcuberta describes what happened at the dawn of the digital puts things in an interesting perspective: “The digital technology dematerialized photography, that today becomes pure information, content without matter, whose fascination power will be ruled by new factors.”¹⁰⁶ This dematerialization could equal, for the unconscious, to a disintegration of the personality, a severe condition that occurs in cases of extreme psychopathology.



Dona Clara, 2005 – Pixels recreated and ironically turn into an artwork

Moreover, the already fragile existence of an “original” in analogic photography is practically abolished in the time of the digital. While philosopher Walter Benjamin was

¹⁰⁶ Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), “Prólogo”, in *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, Barcelona, 2003, primera edición, 1984, p. 12 (our translation).

arguing, back in 1936, about the fact that the work of art lost its aura in the time of mechanical reproduction, photography still had a chance to reclaim an original, at least metaphorically speaking. In fact, this is what Joan Fontcuberta implies when stating that Ansel Adam's negatives were so marvelous "that were converting the photographic print in an artistic object"¹⁰⁷. Well, in digital photography there is no negative, whatsoever, and from this it is easy to appreciate what follows – photography loses completely its *aura*, its chance to request an artistic status and, finally, its identity.

Re-making pictures

Another argument brought to the discussion is that of the difference of processing the photos (the post-production), in the cases of analog and digital. For many reasons, to the defenders of the "new" Purist position, it seems that the ease, the speed and the amazingly credible results of "manipulating" the digital photos are a counter-argument for using them, an intrinsic flaw of these images. On this point, Michael Rush, a renowned artist, filmmaker and critic, says: "For some critics, computer based art lacks the depth of interest they associate with, for example, abstract painting. They find it boring, or like holography, too superficial in its trickery."¹⁰⁸

Defending the idea of the scarcity of manipulation in analogical photography, Mitchell invokes Paul Strand, noting that "photo manipulation of any sort was not only difficult, but also unphotographic and fundamentally undesirable".¹⁰⁹ What we have here is actually a transformation into contrary, a well known concept in psychoanalysis and actually the very basis of the Christian morale, as Nietzsche exposes it – in other words, because it's difficult, because it's tough, because it's unattainable, it means it's valuable, it's moral, it's good. Mitchell ascribes even more qualities to analogical photography,

¹⁰⁷ Joan Fontcuberta, *Fotografía: Conceptos y procedimientos, una propuesta metodológica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1990, p. 168.

¹⁰⁸ Michael Rush, *New Media in late 20th-Century Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ William J. Mitchell, op.cit., p. 7.

solely on the basis of their “fragility”: “here photography and digital imaging diverge strikingly, for the stored array of integers has none of the fragility and recalcitrance of the photograph’s emulsion-coated surface.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, the defense of the analogical and the repudiation of the digital takes the tremendous dimensions of a megalomaniacal crusade for the protection of the lost values of the humanities: “The variations of the shade and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspective [in the case of analogical photography, our addition], are those of the truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection”¹¹¹.

Scrutinizing the approach of these questions, we can easily perceive the same type of arguments that are to be found in the arguments of the Purists, a species apparently extinct in the world of photography nowadays – with the exception of the cohorts of amateurs, who still declare, from time to time, their affiliation to one direction or another, unaware of the current state of the new media (photography included). We are dealing with the same blind attachment to the concept of truth as paradoxical molding structure of the aesthetic judgment, the same inflexibility and skepticism as to the possibility of the aesthetic emotion and the same normative treatment of the context of the relations between image, proceedings, object and outside intervention (or relation between the participants to the semiotic relationship).

Since now there is more tolerance toward the practice of adjusting the photos, the Purist attitude finds venting in the brand new debate of the antagonism between analogical and digital, as an opportunity to express its authoritarian view of the world, deep-rooted in a primary narcissism. The unconscious motivations that lurk beneath are rationalized in the form of aesthetic and moral reasoning, however its conflicting nature reveals itself in the impossibility to produce a solid explanation and argumentation for the exclusion or the neutralization of the criticized practices.

¹¹⁰ William J. Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Edgar Allen Poe, quoted by Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

The threat of the technological Other

Furthermore, there is an almost palpable apprehension at the idea of a medium that allegedly does not respect the nature of “the nature”, that is in some way “too” technologically different, too advanced and too “cold”. The digital, computerized camera is regarded as being an “Other”, in the Lacanian understanding of the term as the big Other. Michelle Henning gives us a very clear vision of what it is perceived like the camera, as technological device: “The camera is one of a number of machines (including telephones and computers), which appear to be like prosthetics in that we treat them as extensions of our own bodies but which change the ways we physically engage with the world. The very presence of the camera transforms the scene, it *intervenes* in reality. The camera threatens to take over and displace the eye [...]”¹¹² This terrible fear and refusal of the technological progress seems to point to an equally terrible camouflaged Narcissism: an analogy would be the case of someone that today would refuse to take the plane and would hope and try to fly by himself, with wooden wings, simply because he would feel that he can do it, just like that.

This intention to exclude the digital medium takes such a paranoid shape, that it goes so far as to equal this medium to an universal deceit: “with the end of truth in photography has come a corresponding loss of trust [...] every image, every representation is now a potential fraud”¹¹³. This strange, but somehow comprehensible fear of technology is, at a closer look, inconsistent, because the camera “takes” photos, the computer “processes” them, the printer “prints” them, but behind all these is still the man. When William J. Mitchell ostentatiously articulates “How pictures do things with us”, he sounds very eloquent, but he ascribes to man a blatantly passive role, coincidentally or not, the same passive attitude that epitomize the anal phase of the ego’s development in psychoanalysis. More common sense and, why not, optimism regarding the future of manhood *along with* that of technology can offer, I am sure, a much more

¹¹² Michelle Henning, “The subject as object: Photography and the human body”, in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, third edition, Routledge, 2004, p. 183.

¹¹³ Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher, about their project *The Dystopia Series*, quoted in Michael Rush, op.cit., p. 186.

productive and healthy perspective over the art realm today. As Michael Rush puts it, “the most dynamic work occurs when the technology catches up with the visions of the artists, or, conversely, the artists catch up with the technology.”¹¹⁴

Fortunately, there are contemporary perspectives that can decant the good part from the ‘bad’ one, such as that of London-based curator and writer Susan Bright, who’s observing that “the digital revolution had an incredible impact, only a short while ago, reaching the point that some already don’t ask themselves if photography is art, but if it’s photography. But the dynamism and volatility that characterize the photographic practice are not the final blow to the medium, as many Purists are thinking, because these are rather fundamental improvements, of big importance for its existence.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Michael Rush, *op.cit.*, p. 192.

¹¹⁵ Bright, Susan, *Fotografía hoy*, Nerea, San Sebastián, 2005, p. 8, our translation.

Five. What happened to Purism? What happened to Narcissus?

An historical overview.

From the New Vision to the New Subjectivity

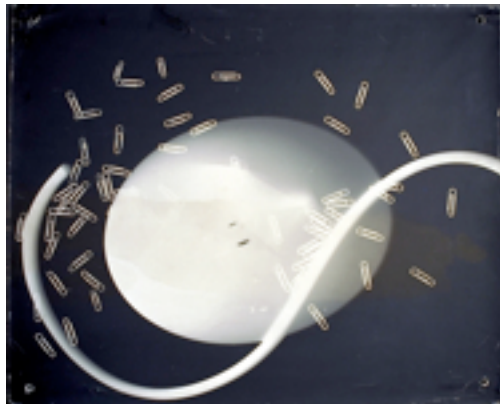
After such heated debates between the two factions, Purism started to fade as a movement, both in its theoretical approaches and in its manifest deeds. As Joan Fontcuberta says, “at such a level of consensus, Purism started to convert itself into an extremely vague concept. The photographers that were militating for this tendency started to separate in different stylistic directions.”¹¹⁶ Following the resolute photographic principles of the supporters of the New Objectivity, with their unbiased pursuit of the crisp and brittle reality, the world of photography relaxes as after a dictatorship. From the ashes of all the fiery contentions, it emerges the serene genius of the New Vision, the Hungarian painter and Bauhaus professor Moholy-Nagy. His generous renaissance view upon the world of the photographic gives this artistic practice a new meaning. “The enemy of photography is the convention”, said Moholy-Nagy, “its salvation comes from the experimenter that dares to call ‘photography’ anything obtained by photographic means, with or without a camera.”¹¹⁷

He talks about this “new vision” in an essay titled “A new instrument of vision” (1932), speaking about photography as never before and bringing about that *je ne sais pas quoi*, that this “sublimated technique” has: “Today it is in a fair way to bringing (optically) something entirely new into the world. The specific elements of photography can be isolated from their attendant complications, not only theoretically, but tangibly, and in their manifest reality. [...] Indeed, this advance in technique almost amounts to a psychological transformation of our eyesight [...] In photography we must learn to seek, not the ‘picture’, not the aesthetic of tradition, but the ideal instrument of expression

¹¹⁶ Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), “Introducción”, in *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, Barcelona, 2003, primera edición, 1984, p. 37 (our translation).

¹¹⁷ Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo, quoted in Joan Fontcuberta, *Fotografía: Conceptos y procedimientos, una propuesta metodológica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1990, p. 53.

[...]”¹¹⁸ Undeniably, we are very far from the naïve Purist conception about sight, and also about nature, because, as Molly Nesbit, theoretician of photography, says, “for him, nature was only a brute material made available for art, a material that should be regarded by means of a photographic camera, that should be toiled and converted into the new vision.”¹¹⁹ In her opinion, the phenomenon Moholy-Nagy is very much related to the Bauhaus movement: “Just as Bauhaus was concentrating the total amount of its energy on constructing and furnishing buildings (*Bau*), Moholy-Nagy situated the Bauhaus photography amidst a greater problematique, that of the place of the image in the modern industrial culture, that of the necessary transformations and of the functions of the new image.”¹²⁰



Photograms by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy

and Man Ray

Moholy-Nagy was not a stranger from the Russian constructivism and from the Dada movement, and together with another photographer, the American Man Ray, shares

¹¹⁸ Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo, “A new instrument of vision”, in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, 2006, p. 92-95.

¹¹⁹ Molly Nesbit, “Photographie, art et modernité (1910-1930)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 116.

¹²⁰ Molly Nesbit, “Photographie, art et modernité (1910-1930)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 115.

a common passion for the photogram¹²¹ – that Man Ray calls rayogram – and with them probably begin the photographic manifestations specific to the Surrealism. Actually, the photogram was a favorite surrealist technique, but it was also approved of other *isms* of the time: “If the Surrealists saw in the photogram a path of access to a certain unconscious of the reality, to its occult dimension, the artists related to Constructivism and other derived ‘isms’ (Russian suprematism, Dutch neoplasticism etc.) were interested in its formalist aspect – that was to be applied in design and publishing and advertising graphics – and, above all, as a broadening of the sensible experience, as an enrichment of the visual reality.”¹²²

At that very moment, lots of artists come to Paris, joining those already performing there, as if just to coagulate and coalesce into a fresh new *ars mundi*: Atget (who was to remain unknown until after his death), Man Ray, Lee Miller (at first Ray’s assistant), Andre Kertesz, Germaine Krull, Emmanuel Sougez, Berenice Abbott, Paul Outerbridge, Dali, Brassai, Bill Brandt... It is like the photographic world suddenly expanded – not spatially, although this also happened, but in its pervasive and all-encompassing viewpoint – , these circumstances manifesting just like an astronomical effect, materialized at a more down-to-earth level, within the context of a young and ambitious art field (or wanna-be art field). All of a sudden, the ideas multiply, the visions permeate each other, new and not-so-new practices begin to flourish, as if someone inadvertently had been pressed a magic button. Everything seems to change, and the ex-Purist candid views are constantly discarded and fought to, while all their old taboo are infringed and trespassed over and over again, and with great success. “What appeals to the photographer”, Brassai uttered, “is exactly this possibility to penetrate the phenomena, to reap their forms. Oh! This impersonal presence! This perpetual incognito!”¹²³ The Purism, however, is not an extinct species: “The surrealists were attracted by the direct

¹²¹ See footnote 3, p. 3.

¹²² Joan Fontcuberta, *Fotografia: Conceptos y procedimientos, una propuesta metodológica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1990, p. 62-63.

¹²³ Brassai, *Images Latentes, L’Intransigent* (15 novembre 1932), p.6, quoted in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 122.

engraving and the mechanical reproduction specific to photography. But other groups of the Parisian avant-garde, the Purists, for example, were also interested in photography.”¹²⁴ Still, the realm of the real will never be the same – the theories that explain and envision it already went beyond any acceptable limit for the Purism and it seems there is no way back, because already “photography interprets and filters the real”.¹²⁵

The historical conditions cannot be ignored, whatsoever, and they do have their say in all this effervescence. Jean-Claude Lemagny, the editor of one of the most highly regarded history of photography written until today, observes the fact that right before the second world war, it existed that special moment when things were so promising in all fields of art, that everything was about to explode. Well, it exploded somehow, just not the right way. However, for photography there is no right way, not in this sense anyway. During the war(s), photography and photographers pulled everything that could be pulled – the moral probity or plain mercy didn’t matter anymore, because moral probity was looked on, in those days, as taking its referent somewhere else than in the context of morally acceptable acts, but instead in the same universe of discourse, that of photography. Therefore, moral probity meant loyalty to the photographic art.

Following the wars, documentary photo – a successful tacit prolongation of the Purism – gained a well-deserved fame, and it influenced imperceptibly upon the styles of the photographic craft. Photographers made famous by the wars, such as Robert Capa, Pere Catala Pic, Henri Cartier Bresson, Eugene Smith, became so influent that it is difficult not to consider their points of view and their discourse about the “integrity” that a photography must guarantee. Because of them, there is an sudden revival of the appeal of humane-straight-simple photography, as if world suddenly remembers what’s important in this war-devastated blatant reality. You can almost touch this striking consequence in Robert Doisneau’s sincere and beautiful images, “with his human

¹²⁴ Molly Nesbit, “Photographie, art et modernité (1910-1930)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 119.

¹²⁵ Colin Osman, “La photographie sûre d’elle-même (1930-1950)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 166.

understanding, tact and tenderness”¹²⁶. Colin Osman, editor-in-chief of the British magazine *Creative Camera*, places in fact Doisneau along the same blood-line of the Purist genealogy: “Doisneau joins the greatest moments of pure photography, pursuing the humble pathway of being thoughtful about the others.”¹²⁷

Fresh from the war zone, Edward Steichen is hired to be in charge of developing the new department of photography, founded by Beaumont Newhall. Obviously, he dwells the same area of postbelic-regenerated Purism, that extols the “beauty of humanity”, that states that “life is a marvelous thing”¹²⁸. He decides to commission an exhibition larger than life, just to shake up the humanity from its sleeping-beauty sleep. The exhibition was to be entitled “Family of Man”. Because of its ambitious all-inclusive intentions, it reminds us somehow of the fiasco Pictorialist composition realized way back in 1845 by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, although Steichen’s exhibition was a huge success. At least at its beginning. The central idea of the exhibition was to illustrate the fact that the essence of the humanity is the same all over the world, mission for which Steichen traveled indeed all over the world, reviewing millions of photos. In fact, Colin Osman establishes as possible starting moment of the modern or even contemporary photography the year 1955, the year of this exhibition at Moma, in New York. But despite being an American bestseller, the exhibition disturbs the sleep of someone who wasn’t beautifully sleeping: Roland Barthes. “The failure of photography”, replies Barthes, “seems to me flagrant in this case: literally repeating the death or the birth

¹²⁶ Colin Osman, “La photographie sûre d’elle-même (1930-1950)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 184.

¹²⁷ Colin Osman, “La photographie sûre d’elle-même (1930-1950)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 184.

¹²⁸ Steichen, Edward, quoted in Colin Osman, “La photographie sûre d’elle-même (1930-1950)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 184.

doesn't help us with anything, this does not eternize the human gestures, unless maybe to neutralize them.”¹²⁹

Yet another *vision* comes with Otto Steinert's New Subjectivity, that ultimately states the prominence of the subjective in all the photographic endeavors. “In fact”, Jean-Claude Lemagny paradoxically recounts, “for him what it's about is subjectively acknowledging the limits of photographic objectivity”¹³⁰. Under the tag *Subjektive Fotografie*, he runs three exhibitions in Germany, in 1951 and 1954 in Saarbrücken, and in 1959 in Koln. His intention was, for post-war German art, to get to know the avant-garde photography of the moment, but also to bring a new fresh breath to it. “The importance of Steinert's conception”, explains Petr Tausk in his history of the twentieth century photography, “consisted in the accent put on the personal interpretation of the reality, via the subjective imagination of the image, that springs from specific emotional experiences.”¹³¹

Inspired by these transfigurations that set free the imaginary, photographers like Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, in United States, start their own crusade “to show the object in a new manner that makes it more intense”¹³². The very personal itineraries burgeon, from Minor White's mystical take to Robert Frank's metaphysical one. The rule of the game is no longer photocopying reality, but turning it upside down, infusing it. For Minor White, photography functions “by way of certain privileged states of mind of the

¹²⁹ Barthes, Roland, quoted in Colin Osman, “La photographie sûre d'elle-même (1930-1950)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 185.

¹³⁰ Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “Les années cinquante: les fondateurs de la modernité”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 188.

¹³¹ Tausk, Petr, *Historia de la fotografía en el siglo XX*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1978, p. 136.

¹³² Callahan Harry, quoted in Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d'elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 189.

watcher-image maker”¹³³, while Frank delimits himself from pre-made concepts: “the essential must not come «from my movements, as the decisive moment, but from within myself»”¹³⁴. Does this mean that Purism lived its living? Rather not, it will make its way, undertaking all kinds of identities, as an immortal life form, that continuously metamorphoses itself, proving a most resilient conservatory instinct.

The postmodern and the contemporary

But the coup d'état comes with the Postmodernism. All that was postulated, all that was considered fixed or at least arguable, is out of the blue questioned, doubted, discarded, demolished and blasted. The Postmodernism, that owes the fame of its name to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, is like a quantum leap that ditches all the preexistent theories into the garbage bin of the history. Everything must be reexamined, everything is prone to be considered suspect, nothing is undisputable. From this point on, any possible intention to speak in the name of the Purism or of any other clear-cut artistic agenda and philosophy, however shy it would pronounce itself, is doomed. Postmodernism is like an anarchic Cartesian doubt, that does not take anything for granted and wants to review and revise any single theoretic and stereotypical construct. Actually, these are its major deeds: localizing and deconstructing stereotypes, brain-washing our *locus communis*, our fears and habits and boredom, removing yet another layer of lie, of tale, of the “big tale”. And, finally, pointing to all the tales – the narratives – in our history of thought.

Postmodernism abrogates the idea of the author, and so all the discussions about photography find here an unexpected and sometimes paradoxical resolution. The controversies about photography being or not being art, about the photographer being or

¹³³ Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 191.

¹³⁴ Frank, Robert, quoted in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 193.

not being an artist, about the nature of the medium, about the purity of it, about the index, about the import of the creator or his witness-like quality, all find their peace in the postmodern era. Even more, photography becomes the postmodern art by definition and all its minuses become pluses, as Fontcuberta profoundly notices it: “Photography converts itself into the postmodern art by excellence; the features that until now had been regarded as shortcomings get to be considered by now advantages, something that impels numerous artists that had built their careers using other languages shift their interest toward photography”¹³⁵. It comes to be viewed as the author-less art, the achievable collective-meaning construct, the *relational*¹³⁶ artistic product, the affordable and communitarian and transparent and disclosing art. Maybe it was not what the Purists wanted, but it’s what happened.

Postmodern photography was abundantly influenced by pop-art, by the proliferation of the artistic establishments – museums, art foundations, publications, galleries, educational institutions – , by the development of mass media, especially of the fashion media (Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Helmut Newton), by the publicity boom. Artists like Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, David Hockney, all put their imprint on the photographic journey. New advances in technology and science brought upon the good and the bad – the accessibility of photography and the *banalization* of it. Surprisingly, this wasn’t a hindrance – banality¹³⁷ became attractive, banality meant in fact salvation from preciousness. Then came the turn of conceptual art to intervene on the scene, but the

¹³⁵ Joan Fontcuberta (ed.), “Prólogo”, in *Estética fotográfica*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, Barcelona, 2003, primera edición, 1984, p. 10 (our translation).

¹³⁶ The adjective *relational* became currency in the aethetical debates thanks to French curator and theoretician Nicolas Bourriaud, who writes about a new form of artistic product, that is assembled by means of a joint action, that of the artist and of the public, basically. Therefore, it is due to the *relation* between them. This type of artistic expression is common to contemporary art practices, such as happening or performance.

¹³⁷ The attraction that the banal exercises in photography is the main idea of one recent motion picture, “One Hour Photo” – title that also points to the swiftness of getting pictures done today. The main character works at the photo-developing department of a local megastore. Little by little, he becomes obsessed with one family - his customers – and practically begins to get psychologically involved in their life. It’s not like they’re doing exceptional things, but he simply wants to have their life. It’s those little somethings, that when get to be photographed, virtually become something more, embroidering a texture and life of their own.

intervention was twofold – in truth, practically all relation between art forms and photography are from now on twofold, interplayed.

The *new* photographers are dipping in different waters: “Lewis Baltz (USA), Bernd and Hilla Becher (Germany) explored the act of looking, as well as topographic features”¹³⁸. Also now are put the foundations of Land Art, an art form where photography finds a surprisingly good niche, seeing that, as Liz Wells explains it, “here, the photograph is the record, and the final product of an engagement with or intervention within the rural. Works by British artists, such as Hamish Fulton, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, has become well known not through direct experience of the results of their investigations and interventions, but through their photographs. [...] Ultimately, only the picture remains.”¹³⁹

Purism as well finds a good niche, because the Vietnam war and all the political conflicts and complications of the time represent a sempiternal motive to reclaim forthright illustration. It is however a Purism in new clothes, since “the time of symbolic images of the great atemporal truths was terminated. By now, you could not solely abide by without judging.[...] It means catching, at the corner of the street, in the fleet of the moment, visual encounters of such perfection, that it evokes the thoughtfully elaborated compositions of a painting that liberated itself from the hazard of reality.”¹⁴⁰ It seems like a real impiety to talk about Purism mentioning the word “painting”, but nonetheless reasonable, because in Lemagny’s opinion, these are “the new ways of direct photography”. In fact, the issue of an obvious association of the two spheres – (plastic) art and photography – grows to be a familiar issue now, without anybody bringing up anymore the question of the Pictorialist evasion. Artist and writer Philippe Dubois dares

¹³⁸ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2006, third edition, edited by Liz Wells, p. 275.

¹³⁹ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2006, third edition, edited by Liz Wells, p. 276.

¹⁴⁰ Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 201.

to say more, that “they never stopped, from the very beginning and on both sides, to engage in inextricable relations, of attraction or rejection, of incorporation or repudiation.”¹⁴¹

The gaze through the photographic lens lives on its marvelous adventure, maybe because it was already impossible to undo what Postmodernism had done. Removing the “veil of ignorance” had liberating effects, that were so sanitizing for art. Somehow, the regress provoked by the second world war was settled up by the mind-blowing postmodern effect. The Purists’ fanatical relations with reality, even if it survives in confined photographic enclaves, loses its universality, since it no longer has enough batteries to energize anybody. “For a long time, photography was considered being something that could not detach itself from the immediate reality, that didn’t allow imagination to run free. Well, this contemporary photography significantly consecrates to overturn this old conviction and completely invalidate the situation.”¹⁴² Abyssal psychology blurs the confines of the once authoritative theory, coming into sight literally speaking. And so, reality gets to be doubled by the internal reality, and these two can live in conflict or in peace. Labeled as expressionist, the unique Diane Arbus talks in Kristeva¹⁴³-like terms and perceives the world in her very own terms: “The concentrated stare, materialized through photography, is precisely what «makes us recognize that which we never saw». But if it partakes to the real, to the faces, it does not depletes them. On the contrary, «because a photograph is a secret about a secret, and the more it says to you, the less you know about it».”¹⁴⁴ Japanese photography, for example, that meanwhile

¹⁴¹ Philippe Dubois, “La photographie et l’art contemporain”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 232.

¹⁴² Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 221.

¹⁴³ Reference to Julia Kristeva, the French-Bulgarian born psychoanalyst and feminist writer, that developped a very peculiar essayistic style, no doubt influenced by Lacan’s own distinctive style.

¹⁴⁴ Arbus, Diane, quoted in Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 206.

made its way up to the avant-scene, “seems to have been accepted from the start a certain stylization of the real”.¹⁴⁵

What happens in contemporary photography? Well, “any attempt to overview recent photo-based art”, declares Liz Wells, “is fraught with difficulty, not only because of diversity of form and subject-matter, but also because of the lack of the benefit of hindsight”¹⁴⁶. Nevertheless, it would seem that the lack of hindsight is the smallest of the problems in defining photography and photo-art right now. At present, some say that photography is no longer photography. Or that it is, but it is also something else, something more, or something less sometimes. We came to talk, nowadays, about post-photography. Or at least this is the name by which the influent writer Geoffrey Batchen baptized it. Have we already left behind photography as we know – or knew it – and arrived to a new species alive and well in today art-scape? Or is it just an artifice, skillfully devised to blow or minds once again and leave us in awe? Let’s check it out, so to speak. First of all, if we investigate just what contemporary photography means from the point of view of art history, we cannot ignore a peculiar bending – an appraisal of photography similar to the tense monitoring of a likely competitive advantage of this one: “The 80’s decisively confirmed photography due to the success of a group of artists that already didn’t use it just for documenting ephemeral or difficult to access works, but were making use of it as autonomous images. This involved the valuation of its qualities as object (coloring, texture, dimensions etc.), causing, on one hand, a concluding change of *status* of the photographers, that became artists, and, on the other hand, the absorption of the photographic technique by the world of art, that discovers the multiple possibilities offered by its hybridizing with other languages. [...] From that moment on, the

¹⁴⁵ Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 206-207.

¹⁴⁶ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2006, third edition, edited by Liz Wells, p. 285.

protagonism and versatility of photography in the art formula nowadays could not help but growing.”¹⁴⁷

This tension from the part of the art world may be perfectly justified, but it is nonetheless paralleled by a tense climate in the photographic contemporary world. The massive entrance of photography in the gallery encouraged it to metamorphose and renovate itself immensely, proving a genuine gift for *mirroring*, but in a deeper sense that anyone could have suspect it. Its multifaceted and chameleonic temperament simply couldn't refuse the chance to have it all – have the cookie and eat it too. It wasn't enough for it anymore that it was welcome in the gallery, she just wanted more: to undermine the top position of its old rival, the painting. And since it was there, why not undermine the sculpture too... “In a number of works by Mike and Doug Starn, for example, the photograph has been twisted and shaped into a sculptural element. *Yellow and Blue Raft of the Medusa* (1990-1991) turns a reproduction of Gericault's famous painting into a series of translucent planes that contemptuously curl off the wall to show us their edges. The photograph's thickness, the part of its existence that is usually thought of as mere support, is made one of its primary features. In similar fashion, Jennifer Bolande co-opts a strip of lurid landscape that one day rained down on her from a Kodak light box billboard above the Marriott Hotel in New York. Her *Orange photograph* (1987) is this same strip hung from the wall, cascading down across the floor to exhibit itself as a three-dimensional object (it folds, it bends, it occupies the gallery). Kodak's high-tech sublime is brought down to earth, and with it the equally overwrought rhetoric of photography. What was once thought to be a window onto the world is transformed into an opaque, resistant surface volumetrically unfolding in space. In each of these cases, we are forced to look at photography rather than through it.”¹⁴⁸ Another photographer, Alan Chasanoff, decides to defeat a major shortcoming of photography, its lack of three-dimensionality, painting over his photographs, on the object that he shots or on special transparent plates,

¹⁴⁷ Martínez, Amalia, *De Andy Warhol a Cindy Sherman. Arte del siglo XX*, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2000, p. 222, our translation.

¹⁴⁸ Batchen, Geoffrey, “Post-photography”, *Each Wild Idea*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 109-110.

that he interposes between the objects and the camera, and “in this way he recovers, for photography, one of the essential strengths of painting.”¹⁴⁹

Given this state of affairs, can be legitimately said about photography that *is* still photography? Contemplating the history of photography from its inception till today, things appear to have been complicated themselves a lot: “It used to be said that photography was tormented by the ghost of painting. Used to be said. For now photography is the one that is doing the haunting. Where once art photography was measured according to the conventions and aesthetic values of the painted image, today the situation is decidedly more complicated. Over the past two decades, the boundary between photography and other media like painting, sculpture, or performance has become increasingly porous. It would seem that each medium has absorbed the other, leaving the photographic residing everywhere, but nowhere in particular. A number of critics have also lamented the loss of photography’s ‘truth effect’ under the pressure of new photographic simulation technologies. These critics draw a distinction between photography as a direct inscription of a referent in the world and the photographic as a practice dependent on the recirculation of already existing codes and images. The suggestion is that a diminution of our collective faith in the photograph’s indexical relationship to the real will inevitably lead to the death of photography as an autonomous medium. The irony of this scenario is that photography as a separate entity might well be on the verge of disappearing forever, even as the photographic as a rich vocabulary of conventions and references lives on in ever-expanding splendor. In short, it appears we have already entered a «post-photography», that moment after but not yet beyond photography.”¹⁵⁰

So what’s left of the Purism after this massacre of the photographic realism? It’s obvious, it situated itself on the side of the faction – or it is even the vital force of this

¹⁴⁹ Lemagny, Jean-Claude, “La photographie inquiète d’elle même (1950-1980)”, in Lemagny, Jean-Claude et Rouillé, André (eds.), *Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, 1993, our translation, p. 226.

¹⁵⁰ Batchen, Geoffrey, “Post-photography”, *Each Wild Idea*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 109.

faction – that criticizes and condemns the current condition of photography, that deplores the loss of indexicality, the distortion of the nature of the medium, the contamination from the part of other practices, the extinction of the unadulterated straight shot, of spontaneity, of confidence, of certainty, of innocence... Well, it seems that photography lost its innocence. It simply grew up.

Was Narcissus murdered and buried? Or is still secretly cherished?

Unlike the other Greek hero, Œdipus – equally exploited by psychoanalysis – , that tragically and dignifyingly decided to take his own life, Narcissus seems to be a more resilient guy. He may look delicate and foolish, while vainly admires his *mirrored* face in the water, but deep down his frivolous shallow appearance lies a conservation instinct that would have prevented even the extinction of the dinosaurs. It's true, on the other hand, that neither Œdipus died, he just went blind. Well, too bad for him, maybe this is why Narcissus was considered more suitable for the photographer's job...

But after so much mirroring, even Narcissus can get bored sometimes. You cannot indefinitely watch the same thing, over and over, without at least dipping your finger in the water, make the image undulate, blur, multiply. What's bad in seeing more Narcissus than only one? The more, the better. It's just what photographers started to do after the golden era of Purism – the monopoly of Stieglitz, Weston, Adams and the others – began to lessen. The newcomers began stirring the water with the finger, at first, shyly, and then with more guts and more imagination. The avant-garde, with its open-minded "New Vision", the innovations of the Surrealist photographers, the desire to experiment and to infringe to frontiers, equals to a beautiful maturing of the Narcissus, who acknowledges the existence of other things beyond his own person, and realizes that sane and commonsensical differentiation between his ego and reality, externalizing reality and putting it where it was supposed to be – out there. Following this understanding, he also understands that reality can be manipulated, toyed with, handled, without anything bad happening to him. Because reality is not him.

The water muddles significantly in the Postmodern years. You could almost swear that the arrogant Narcissus was despicably murdered together with the declared death of the author, disseminated by Barthes and Foucault. An apparent altruism and selflessness, totally opposed to the egocentrism of the Narcissism, must be the reason for such generous display and sharing, right? The wild game goes even further and it is ascribed to the observer, to the consumer, the essential role in the arena of arts. “Given that one writes while reading”, emphasize Nicolas Bourriaud, resuming the sayings of Roland Barthes and Paul Valery, “and that a work of art is produced from the position of the observer, the receiver becomes the central figure of culture – detrimentally to the cult of the author.”¹⁵¹ But this is a crazy perspective, and Bourriaud puts the finger on it – “nevertheless, if the «open artwork», interactive or *participative*, such as a happening by Allan Kaprow, gives a certain freedom to the receiver, it does not allow him to do nothing more than reacting to the initial impulse submitted by the donor; partaking meant completing the proposed scheme.”¹⁵² The ironic comparison inherent in Barthes’s syntagma “God-author” reveals exactly what it says, namely the ominous and omnipotent self-image that the little child has about himself: he thinks he’s God, even if he doesn’t know who God is – and he doesn’t even need to, because it is supposed that this early feeling is the source of the idea of God, later externalized and projected onto a overpowering alien-like entity. So when Barthes and other revolutionary theorists of the time decide to kill the God-author, they are only unveiling the tremendous Narcissism that lurks in the postmodern author, Narcissism that already became unbearable and must be shaken off. But this crime is not a facile crime, and neither is desirable, because Narcissus must not be murdered, only tempered and tamed and taught the good manners, and killing him only results in a more ferocious resuscitation the first time he gets the chance to do it.

¹⁵¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Post producción. La cultura como escenario: modos en que el arte reprograma el mundo contemporáneo*, Adriana Hidalgo editora, p. 114.

¹⁵² Bourriaud, Nicolas, *ibid.*, p. 115.



Cindy Sherman – *Untitled Film Stills*

This resuscitation takes place in whatever it is that we call contemporary epoch – the literality of Narcissism, its plain factuality is puzzling and at the same time entertaining. After the guerilla combat of the Postmodernism, Narcissus makes his star-like appearance with no shame at all, rejuvenated and ready for the party. He went back to mirroring, just like that, but now he doesn't hide anymore, he does it in front of anybody and what's more, is that he wants to be seen and mirrored back. One of the most notorious examples is the work of photographer Cindy Sherman, who "only photographs herself", as curator and writer Susan Bright observes, "using the stereotyped appearance of a specific type of photography".¹⁵³ The underlying idea is to undermine the conventional of the construction of the "feminine" in contemporary society, by ridiculing these facets all too forced and artificial. The carrying out of this intention is admirable, Sherman proving to be both a versatile model and a resourceful photographer. But beyond this well-argued theory that constitutes the basis of this lengthy project, the question is why not using models? To that, she answers: "At some moment, I tried to use relatives or friends for the photographs, and once I hired an assistant. But I didn't feel comfortable [...] I also realized that I don't know either what I'm looking for in a photograph, so it is even more complicated to explain it to someone else. When I'm doing it, I use a mirror in order to reach to something that I don't know what it is until I see it."¹⁵⁴ But isn't it that this impossibility to work with someone else comes, on one

¹⁵³ Bright, Susan, *Fotografía hoy*, Nerea, San Sebastián, 2005, p 24, our translation.

¹⁵⁴ Sherman, Susan, quoted in Bright, Susan, *Fotografía hoy*, Nerea, San Sebastián, 2005, p 24, our translation.

hand, from the incapacity to empathize with another person, to identify with her, or at least to convey to the other her own vision, which basically means incapacity to accept the fact that there *are* other egos, the lack of interest in other egos, and on the other hand from the desire to always mirror herself and only herself?



Sam Taylor-Wood – *Self-portraits* (2004)

Sam Taylor-Wood portrays herself in her studio in postures that resemble levitation. “Her self-portraits often reflect important chapters in her life and are signals of change or progress. Together, they constitute an important autobiographical thread that integrates in her work.”¹⁵⁵ Elina Brotherus, like many other contemporary photographers, composes visual diaries of her life. In an interview, she was telling that she made the series *Wedding Portraits* (1997) when she got married, the series *Divorce Portraits* (1998) when she divorced and *I hate sex* (1998) when she felt that way.¹⁵⁶



Elina Brotherus – *Miroir* (2001)

¹⁵⁵ Bright, Susan, *Fotografía hoy*, Nerea, San Sebastián, 2005, p. 30, our translation.

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.futuropasado.com/?p=728>

Nikky S. Lee “transforms herself in members of different social and ethnic groups, transcending so the age, the social class, the race and the gender, performing very diverse roles. In her ‘projects’, she becomes a yuppie, a lesbian, a Hispanic and an old person”.¹⁵⁷ Sometimes, Nikki S. Lee isn’t even the one who takes the photos, this function can be performed by any other member of the “group”. Everything revolves around her person, concentrates on the essential – seeing and being seen. Or seeing *that* is being seen, when later she and the others can see her photos taken by someone else. One more detail: after making the photos, she cuts off the man in the image, leaving only a little clue that he has been there – usually the hand. Probably the supporting role must leave enough stage for the star.



Nikki S. Lee – *Parts* (2003)

Gillian Wearing’s disguises are going even further – she transcends the sex, the gender and the time. For her project *Album*, she realizes the incredible trickery of becoming, turn by turn, her mother, her father, her sister and her brother. The artist is at this moment *complete*, is androgynous, like God, actually. Obviously, a child looks, in a certain degree, like his mother, his father, his sister and his brother, so maybe it is not so hard to become them in disguise, but what is the reason of the desire to do it? Isn’t it in order to fulfill a childhood forgotten fantasy, where he/she imitates parent’s voices, tries

¹⁵⁷ Bright, Susan, *Fotografía hoy*, Nerea, San Sebastián, 2005, p. 40, our translation.

on their clothes, emulates their personalities, imagining eventually that he doesn't need them anymore, that he is self-sufficient.



Gillian Wearing – *Album* (2003)

Obviously, the self-portrait isn't and never was something new in photography, but the exhaustive manner in which is practiced today says something about the land conquered by the contemporary Narcissus: his prevalence, his acceptance, his normalization. Today, Narcissus is the norm.

All these self-portrait addicted photographers say the same thing – that those people in the pictures are not them, that they are assuming foreign identities, as if doing so, extracting themselves from the territory of the ego, they are distracting the attention away from themselves. But even if the ego is not there, the id is there, the unconscious, that confers the force of its libido to all these “foreign” identities and constructions. Unfortunately, this type of Narcissism is like a drug, it is never enough, and that first perfection, experienced in childhood, will never get to be re-experienced at the same ecstatic height.

On a more ironic, or sometimes nostalgic note, other contemporary photographers are teasing Narcissus with surprising installation and ideas. Columbian artist Oscar Muñoz “deposits on the floor of the exhibition room twelve or more glass trays, filled with water, over which he spills carbon powder through a silk screen onto which he previously copied, by means of a procedure similar to that used in serigraphy, his own id photo. The resulting image is, obviously, extremely precarious and instable: it is enough

that the tray containing it receive the slightest vibration for the image to alter. [...] The work, in this initial phase, has the obvious signification anticipated by the title. Just like any other Narcissus, the artist delivers himself to the fascination of seeing his own face reflected in the water. [...]



Oscar Muñoz's fading away carbon-made pictures

As the water in the trays end up by evaporating – at the end of a process that can take weeks and that, on the contrary of the photographic instant, has a specific and contingent duration, the work seems to close upon itself. On the bottom of the tray remains imprinted in carbon Muñoz's image, so basic and craggy, like a bad id photo. Just that its aspect is unusual and irremediably funereal. Seems to be the photo of a dead person and evokes both Roland Barthes' theory – that associates photography to the masks of archaic theater that represented the dead ones – and these disturbing verses of the poet Leopoldo Castilla: Cada calle es una foto / y el fotógrafo es la muerte/ La muerte o ese doble de la muerte que son los espectros. (Each road is a photograph / and the photographer is the death / The death or this double of the death, that is the specter)¹⁵⁸ Maybe an alternate idea, I think, would be to simply spill silver powder over the surface of the water in the glass trays, and so the visitors that would bow, eager to see what's in, would only see their own faces. This could mean two things: first, that each of us is in fact looking for himself when looking at a photograph, and that each of us see something else in a photograph.

¹⁵⁸ Jimenez, Carlos, from "Los pliegues del instante", Revista *Lápiz*, núm. 128 - 129, 1997, our translation.

Maybe the post-photography that Batchen is talking about – even if it threatens “genuine” photography with the extinction – could mean reaching also a *post-narcissistic* stage: due to its indiscriminating ability to migrate from one art form to another, from one practice to another, incorporating themes, ideas, maintaining a *living*, interactive relationship with the reality, it can counteract Narcissus’ self-absorption.

We can read, on the back cover of Jean-Claude Lemagny’s *History of Photography* that in a century and a half, photography conquered the world. Because the world enjoy looking at its reflection, apparently. Maybe the world enjoy more looking at its reflection than looking at itself, deep-down. Lewis Carroll, when he was making photographs, knew that people like to mirror themselves, and he also knew that they want more – they wanted to go beyond the mirror: it is for them that he wrote *Trough the Looking-Glass*, and it is why he didn’t call it a mirror: *because it is a looking glass*. Who knows, maybe Narcissus too was enjoying more his reflection in the water than he enjoyed his own self, while an entire world was accusing him that he likes to watch himself because he likes himself. Maybe he even hated himself, but he liked his reflection.

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