

Stephanie Schwartz

**Pictures, Again**

Alex Klein, ed. *Words without Pictures*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009. 512 pp., no ills. \$30 paper, \$24 digital

In the opening essay of *Words without Pictures*, “Qualifying Photography as Art, or, Is Photography All It Can Be?” the curator Christopher Bedford summarily takes stock of the field of photography studies. “Generally speaking,” Bedford writes, “the nuances of the photographic process are poorly understood in the art critical community—the present author included—and this shortfall radically limits discourse” (7–8). This is surely an inauspicious beginning. In one sentence—in twenty-seven words—Bedford simply levels the field. Photography, it seems, may be all it can be; unfortunately, according to Bedford, its historians and critics are coming up short.

Bedford’s essay opens and organizes *Words without Pictures*, a book and a digital download derived from a yearlong project prepared by Alex Klein, a Los Angeles-based artist, and Charlotte Cotton, then curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Department of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, to create “spaces where thoughtful and urgent discourse around very current issues for photography could happen” (1). The project’s main space was [www.wordswithoutpictures.org](http://www.wordswithoutpictures.org), a website that posted twelve short, unillustrated essays on new aspects of photography or aspects of the medium that were—according to the twelve curators, artists, art historians, and critics commissioned to sign on—“in the process of being rephrased” (1). Posted monthly,

beginning with Bedford's challenge to his soon-to-be interlocutors, including Walead Beshty, Sze Tsung Leong, George Baker, Charlie White, Jason Evans, Darius Himes, and Mark Wyse, the essays ranged in subject from the customary—repetition and abstraction—to the contemporary—the precarious state of the printed book and digital visual culture. Available online for the duration of the project, each essay was open for its first month to both solicited and unsolicited responses.

For those who never logged on or who did so intermittently, *Words without Pictures* reprints the twelve essays and selected responses, as well as partial transcripts from three ancillary spaces of debate: public panel discussions, conversations among artists that took place at LACMA, and a formal questionnaire, which circulated among artists, bloggers, publishers and critics. *Words without Pictures* is nothing short of a tome. It gathers ninety-four voices in 502 pages to weigh in on the state of photography today. Though many of the contributors, predominately Los Angeles-based artists, reiterate Bedford's admission that the current critical discourse on photography is wanting, *Words without Pictures* amounts to much more than a gloomy appraisal of a once-vibrant discourse. By gathering the words of over seventy artists working with or using photography today, the book neatly underscores the disparity between the stagnancy of critical thinking about photography and contemporary art's deep engagement with the medium.

It is worth noting, at the outset, that engaging rigorous critical debate about photography's role in contemporary artistic practices is not without precedent. This phenomenon is the subject of another recent tome—namely, Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. If Fried's insistence that photography

matters *now* echoes throughout *Words without Pictures*, as I will address below, Fried, the art historian and critic, was not invited to participate in the *Words without Pictures* program, though he did give a talk at LACMA during the year.<sup>1</sup> Nor do we hear directly from the generation of scholars who organized photography as a field of critical study—Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, Benjamin Buchloh, and Douglas Crimp.<sup>2</sup> While they are present only as specters of photography’s past, as the authors of histories and theories to be contended with, their words remain, as Klein put it, on the “yellowing” pages of Richard Bolton’s 1986 anthology *The Contest of Meaning* (22).<sup>3</sup> *Words without Pictures*, thus, is served up as the critical history for a new generation of scholars. Born on the web and memorialized in print, the project addresses the issues raised by this generation’s art—specifically, the impact of the digital revolution on the practice, collecting, curating, and teaching of photography. After the “death of photography,” is photography now ripe for reuse? For those trained by and with the words of the historians of the analogue generation, and teaching students who are fully equipped for and invested in the digital age, *Words without Pictures* will surely be a valuable primer.

As the history of modernism has taught us, every attempt to stake out or a stage a new history is necessarily mired in its past. The impact of photography’s digitalization may just be, as Fried’s latest incarnation of his long history of modernist painting suggests, the realization of modernism’s proclivity for returns. A case in point is Bedford’s essay; his accusation that the historians of photography are coming up short is directed at none other than Fried. To be more exact, “Qualifying Photography as Art . . .” is a pointed response to Fried’s 2005 essay “Without a Trace (On Thomas Demand).” Establishing the argument presented in the recently published book, Fried situated

Demand's photographic practice within a history of modernist painting's resistance to theatricality.<sup>4</sup> Bedford's critique is simple: to write Demand's photographs into a history of modernist painting is to write off photography. As he explains, "Photographers who have been greeted with the most emphatic critical endorsements—Wall and Demand, for example—have, generally speaking achieved notoriety by folding into their photographic programs additional processes that mitigate the necessity to evaluate their photographs alone" (9). Thus, Fried is at fault not merely for failing to address "the nuances of the photographic process," but for directing the field of photography studies away from "real" photographs, from what Bedford describes as the "observe and record" model of photography (10).

Given Bedford's insistence on rescuing documents from their contamination by art, his next move is most curious. To defend photography from Fried's modernism, Bedford unleashes modernism's *ur*-text: Clement Greenberg's 1960 manifesto "Modernist Painting." Despite the fact, as Bedford contends at the outset, that medium-specificity is "passé," the critical discourse on photography, he insists, needs, to quote Greenberg, "entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (8). As if taking a page from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, from Barthes's desire to locate photography's "genius," Bedford calls for the organization of photography's "fundamental ontology" (4).<sup>5</sup> This call is not (or not merely) passé; it is counterproductive. This is not simply because an ontology of photography never arrives—there is no "*this has been*." It is because, like Fried, Bedford's concern is not photography. To return to Greenberg is not simply to return to the search for the universal form; it is to measure photography according to the fundamentals of art and its histories. As a number of the participants in

*Words without Pictures* rightly note, the urgent impulse to revive the boundaries of the medium is never simply nostalgic. Said differently, a reinvestment in medium-specificity is not necessarily a reinvestment in photography. It is, to quote Beshty, a sign that “the prominence of photographic discourse in contemporary art has receded” (292).

Bedford’s confusion does not go unnoted, particularly in the “Discussion Forum” that immediately follows. In the wake of the digital revolution and the “post-medium” era, his seven respondents more or less collectively ask, can we simply return to a critical discourse on media and materiality? Again, the point here is not that medium-specificity is passé or has been thoroughly debunked by the generation of scholars responsible for writing photography’s critical discourse. The real question, posed by the Milwaukee-based artist Nicholas Grider, is whether the medium of photography should aspire to the givens of art (23). It is this old but still-current question that resounds throughout the remainder of the book. It is the subject of the first panel discussion, appropriately titled “Is Photography Really Art?” as well as the book’s fifth essay, Klein’s “Remembering and Forgetting Conceptual Art.” It is here that Klein reveals the project’s *ur-text*—Jeff Wall’s 1995 essay “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art”—and addresses why we are reading and writing about “pictures,” not photographs.<sup>6</sup>

Opening her essay with a nod to Ursula Meyer’s 1972 compendium *Conceptual Art*, Klein first reveals the genesis of the present book’s graphics. The book’s stripped-down, black-and-white cover is a version of Meyer’s appeal to serial repetition and bureaucracy. *Conceptual Art* repeated its title seventeen times on the cover, allowing it to bleed from top to bottom as if ad infinitum (120). If Meyer’s volume gives *Words without*

*Pictures* its approach to graphics, it is Wall's seminal essay that gives the overall project its title and scope. Attending to Wall's insight that Conceptual artists detached photographic depiction from representation, Klein explains: "It is precisely because they [Conceptual artist's images] are produced outside of the 'History of Photography' that they distill the medium of its essence, thus opening the door for the reintroduction of picture making in or around 1974" (123; added). Thus, it seems, to assess photography now is not to assess photography at all. As Crimp proposed in his 1977 catalogue essay to the legendary Artists Space exhibition that helped launch the careers of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, et alia, pictures are not photographs; bound to no medium, they are representations of representations. Is Bedford correct? Is the current critical discourse on photography not really about photography?

Not surprisingly, several of Klein's respondents wonder as well if pictures are not now altogether obsolete. In other words, aren't we also "post-pictures"? It seems that even Klein would have to agree: after all, to call for a reinvestigation of the medium of photography, as the LACMA project does, is to adopt a critical position that is fundamentally "post-pictures." To quote Crimp, "Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture."<sup>7</sup> Thus, to talk about pictures is to contest meaning; it is to push aside modernism's concern with ontology to address the multivalent and often contradictory ways in which photographs operate within, alongside, and at odds with other processes of modernization. Fortunately for the reader, three of the twelve essays in the book implicitly address the slippage at the center of *Words without Pictures*: the slippage between pictures and photographs, between art and photography. These essays address

contemporary photography's return to form or, to borrow the title of the curator and photo scholar Kevin Moore's essay on the issue, to "foRm." The subtlety of Moore's type treatment might in fact provide the book with its critical turn. Moore transforms his word into a picture, providing a metacritical analysis of what Beshty, in his essay on abstraction, refers to as the source of these returns—the assumption that the photograph is nothing more than signification, nothing more than a picture.<sup>8</sup> Form and its returns are also at the center of the critical debates about the work of many of book's participants, including Beshty, James Welling, Anthony Pearson, and Eileen Quinlan. Perhaps, and this is the book's import, the significance of this return, the fact that it has generated extended critical discussion, is only made real when these essays are read together and along with a medley of critical responses.

Beshty opens his essay, "Abstracting Photography," with an indirect nod to Bedford. The "fuzziness" that has descended over what photography is or might be surely warrants, he contends, a reinvestigation of its identity (293). Beshty stages this reinvestigation by responding to a text that he deems partly responsible for the current confusion: George Baker's 2005 essay "Photography in the Expanded Field." Beshty not only takes Baker to task for returning to Krauss's semiotics, a methodology that Beshty suggests corresponded to its subject, the semiotics of post-Minimal production, and not contemporary art's (or his art's) materialist concerns; he also chides Baker for simply reenacting, as opposed to attending to, photography's identity crisis. "In the wake of his argument," Beshty writes, "we are left with only the rupture, the gap" (297). The antidote to this confusion, Beshty suggests, cannot be found in the writing of Krauss, or, for that matter, Buchloh, Craig Owens, or Crimp. Photography's fuzziness warrants a return to

histories of photography. Beshty anchors his reinvestigation in the words of the nineteenth-century polymath Oliver Wendell Holmes, not an art historian. Taking Holmes's celebration of photography's ability to "divorce form from matter," Beshty argues for a return to the material, for recognizing that the photograph is both an object and an image. "The term 'image,'" he explains, "is not an ontological umbrella under which a photograph can be classified. . . . Perhaps this confusion of photographic theory for an analysis of images is why a discourse on photography shifted from a focus on its instrumentality to a concern that photography no longer truly exists" (304–5). The limits of the discourse on photography have everything to do, Beshty concludes, with our obsession with images, with our inability to see past the picture.

Beshty's essay stands out from the myriad texts not merely because it squarely confronts the project at hand—reading pictures, mourning the loss of photographs—but also because it is the one place in the book where the reader is awarded a rebuttal. *Words without Pictures* is most rewarding when it realizes its own modality, its relationship to a conversation that happened in real time. In his "Photography and Abstraction," Baker responds to Beshty's critique by appropriately staging another return. Reminding Beshty that his 2005 essay was a heuristic exercise, Baker insists that theory did not abstract photography, but that all photographs are already abstractions (359). In turn, Baker suggests that photography today is simply caught in a new manifestation of the dialectical play between object and image, realism and abstraction. Taking as examples the work of Zoe Leonard and Sharon Lockhart (one of the book's contributors), he argues that contemporary photography is caught between abstraction and atavism, i.e., the act of returning. Atavism, Baker argues, is a return of a higher power, as it allows abstraction to



touch what it has officially eradicated—history. Though he rightly concludes that this is simply a new way of staging a very old debate, the question remains whether this is a debate enacted specifically by photography or modern art more broadly.

Perhaps the decision not to differentiate between these parallel histories is what hampers the current critical discourse on photography. At least this decision might explain why *Words without Pictures* elides one of the most charged critical issues in photography studies now—photography’s status in the media. But for Hito Steyerl’s short response to Baker in which she mentions photography’s role in establishing the media’s “false concreteness” and Harrell Fletcher’s discussion of his project *The American War*, debate about photography’s almost hallowed place in the organization, dissemination, and production of news and information is all but absent from *Words without Pictures* (383 and 399). I am thinking, for example, of the continued responses to Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* in studies such as Ariella Azoulay’s *The Civil Contract of Photography* or even Trevor Paglen’s photographs of and writings on CIA “black” sites.<sup>9</sup> Yet one has only to look as far as the responses of those who participated in the questionnaire to see the import of such issues. When asked “What are some of the current topics among you and your students?” many of respondents answered with something resembling the answer provided by Natalie Bookchin: “The environment, the Iraq war, the elections, globalization of the image and the imaging of globalization, surveillance for control and entertainment, and its opposite—monitoring the monitors, the YouTubing and blogging of life” (248). References to photography’s role in the media seep into the pages of *Words without Pictures*, but the book keeps at bay concerns about how

photography's place in the construction of current media practices might shape both critical discourse and artistic production.

*Words without Pictures* does not seek to address the larger stakes or state of photography and its criticism today; it seeks to provide the medium of photography with a more central role in the history of modern art. To read this move as simply nostalgic is to miss the point. It is a motivated choice about how to write the history of a medium. The entire LACMA project grounds its discourse on photography in a history of Conceptual art and in a critical discourse on or against medium-specificity, not in science, entertainment, or imperialism, the technology's discursive origins. Surely, the history of Conceptual art is central to coming to terms with why photography matters so much now. Yet are those lessons, as Klein suggests, necessarily produced "outside the History of Photography"? If much of Conceptual art situated itself outside the conventions of art photography as well as the traditions of documentary photography, didn't it simultaneously wed art to photography's status as a means for dissemination or distribution—to media? The antidote to today's crisis may just be a fundamental ontology of photography, though perhaps one that returns to the history of photography's *ur-text*—Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay "A Short History of Photography." There, Benjamin instructs us to think historically. He not only teaches us that by the 1850s photography was already outmoded, no longer on par with its instrument, he also warns us against seeking to legitimate photography before the tribunal that it was in the process of overturning: art. The photograph, Benjamin explained, is never specific or autonomous; it is contingent and contextualized—wedded to its caption.

To conclude, the disparity driving *Words without Pictures* is not simply that between the recent expansion of photographic practice and the limited critical discourse on photography. It is the continued insistence on wedding photography criticism to the history of art, the methodologies of art history. As Steyerl and others suggest, the recent return to abstraction reveals much more than a return to form or “foRm.” The “urge to represent the unrepresentable” is inseparable from the media’s success at assigning photography that charge (383).

### **Bio**

Stephanie Schwartz is the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She is currently writing *Cuba Per Diem: Walker Evans and American Photographs*, a book-length study of Evans’s 1933 Cuba Portfolio, as well as developing a new project on contemporary Cuban photography.

### **Notes**

1. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Although Fried’s book was not published until after Cotton and Klein launched the project, parts of the Fried’s study had been in print since 2005. Another collection worth citing in reference to the compulsion to rethink photography now is *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
2. Sekula did participate in a conversation with the artist Walid Raad, but it was not included in the book.

3. Richard Bolton, ed. *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (1986; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
4. Michael Fried, "Without a Trace (On Thomas Demand)," *Artforum* 43 (March 2005): 199–203.
5. The opening page of Barthes's book reads: "I was overcome by an 'ontological' desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself,' by what essential features it was to be distinguished from the community of images. . . . I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a 'genius' of its own." Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.
6. Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 266.
7. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88, 87
8. To be exact, Moore's title is not the book's only graphic. In addition to the website at [www.wordswithoutpictures.org](http://www.wordswithoutpictures.org), the project produced a mirror website, [www.pictureswithoutwords.org](http://www.pictureswithoutwords.org), which used a computer program to transpose the words on the original website into pictures. Versions of these pictures are reproduced in the book following the questionnaires.
9. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); and Trevor Paglen, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights* (New York: Melville

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Publishing House, 2006), and *Black Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2009).