What is real ih hyperrealism?

Pictorial representation and layers of the visible

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Abstract: American hyperrealist painting is one of the most famous phenomena of American culture in general, but also one of the most difficult to fit into the art-historical canon. Hyperrealism causes difficulties in interpretation because it is placed between traditional mimetic painting skills and the imaginary of American popular culture. In this article, we will suggest that hyperrealism may be evaluated as primarily a philosophical problem of the understanding of reality and its transformation into a pictorial surface. We will try to foreground the neglected possibility that the "excess of the real" in a painting can be in some allegorical function: as the opposite of reality, in other words, as an absence rather than a presence. Moreover, we will point out the twofold contingency of the hyperrealist pictures: as a philosophical platform for the study of pictorial representation on the one hand and as an evidence that there is no universal theory of pictorial depiction that would establish a connection between extra-pictorial reality and representation on the other. The article will analyze why hyperrealism as an artistic style is not crucially defined by the problem of mimesis, but rather by the problem of (dis)continuity in regard to reality. Instead of asking why hyperrealist paintings are so close to human perception of the world, we try to unveil consequences of its playing on the edges of complex systems such as representation, depiction, similarity, imagination, simulation and recognition. Referring to the aspects of reality in painting, photography and conceptual art we will consider to what extent theory can influence a seemingly straightforward artistic phenomenon to gain a different kind of relevance, while providing insights into the possibilities of viewing hyperrealist paintings as both part of the cultural imaginary and philosophical objects.

Keywords: hyperrealism, depiction, naturalisation of perception, intensities of reality

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1.

The etymology of the term *hyperrealism* hides an insoluble contradiction: that some human activity can lead to the creation of a reality that can be – or is – even more real than reality itself and that such activity is specific to art[1]. However, in the history of Western philosophy – from Plato through the iconoclastic disputes during the Middle Ages and the conclusions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council held in 787 in Nicea all the way to the invention of photography and film in the 19th and 20th centuries – realism, as a generic term for a specific type of figurative artistic practice, could never be in a fundamental relationship with reality, regardless of the changing status it had in certain historical periods. For Plato, it was a mere obsession; the iconoclasts forbade it because it disturbed the order of the divine and the earthly, and the iconophiles advocated it because they considered that only the representation, not *what* was shown, was realistic, i.e., truly visible; photography was based on chemical processes; and early

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[1] In order to resolve potential terminological confusions, *hyperrealism* is used here as a generic term for artistic tendencies in painting and sculpture in the second half of the 20th century adopted by individuals who used photographs in a distinct way as templates for their works or made extremely realistic, human-like sculptures, for example, John de Andrea and Duane Hanson. *Photorealism* will be used specifically for the artists who exhibited at Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972 (curated by Harald Szeeman) and who formed the core of that style: Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Don Eddy, Chuck Close, and Robert Cottingham. Linda Chase, in her pioneering publication *Hyperrealism* from 1973, called them «new realists» (including artists such as John Salt, Chris Cross, Malcolm Morley, Stephen Posen, Harold Gregor, Robert Bechtle, and others). Although Chase provided key insights into how the first hyperrealists used photographic templates for their paintings, she did not call them photorealists. See L. Chase, *Hyperrealism*, Rizzoli, New York 1975. Gregory Battcock's edited collection *Super Realism* contributed further to this terminological variety. See G. Battcock (ed.) *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology*, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York 1977. Adjectives or prefixes added to this realist style – hyper, photo, new or super – testify that there is a consensus about something «real» in it. However, questions raised as to what this reality refers to – whether physical actuality, photographs that serve as models or images themselves, the intensity of the reality depicted or its essence – are still being answered in ways that examine works of art while not taking into account the very concept of the image.

film was a technically produced representation of movement that would not have existed without a deliberately generated illusion. Although images are never what we see on them or in them, only objects or visual stimuli, humans interpret images as if they are in a direct causal relationship with reality, as if images themselves created it and are not just reflections of completely different states and activities external to them. This is why the two fundamental stylistic determinants of art history – realism and abstraction – were also established relationally in correspondence to reality and not to art: something is realistic if it approaches the conventional notion of reality and abstract if it departs from it.

The conventions of reality are much easier to establish and understand within everyday interactions than in the symbolic world of art, regardless of how close the latter may seem to the conventions of reality. Traditional art historical hermeneutics built its own system of conventions, i.e., stylistic analysis, which relied on observing the types and intensity of reality in works of art in relation to the era in which they were created. This enabled the discipline of Art History to establish a logical developmental sequence within which the works were simultaneously compared on a synchronic level – that is, in the context of the associated period, territory, or genre – and on a diachronic level – in relation to previous epochs. The methodological plausibility of this method was questioned at a time when modern technologies began to change more quickly and thoroughly the human relationship to reality itself and, what is especially important for us here, to the visual conventions of representing reality, as well as with the creation of new ones. The new reality of the 20th century brought different realisms that, even when they were created in the traditional medium of painting and seem to be in a direct causal relationship with reality, expose serious doubts about the nature of what they purport to show.

What kind of paradigm shift are we talking about here? First of all, we will try to point out that similarity, likeness, and imitation in the hyperrealism of the late 1960s and 1970s, which theorists of contemporary art tend to interpret as a retrograde phenomenon in the heyday of high modernism, can be «rehabilitated» and viewed in a different light. This article first recalls what kind of reality the painterly realism in the 19th century actually «imitated» and then what kind of relationship there is between painting and photography, i.e., what specific relationship hyperrealism establishes

between these two visual media. In the last part of the article, we propose an approach to hyperrealism as a kind of *conceptual reality* in which it is possible to recognize a meaning different from the one to which the etymological-stylistic determinants of a contestable artistic practice lead us.

2.

In her seminal 1971 work *Realism*, Linda Nochlin, almost in the manner of Alois Riegl's theses on *Kunstwollen*, explains that 19th-century realism as an artistic style is a reflection of the artist's perception of reality specific to that particular historical period. By expanding our insights into the formal characteristics of the style, Nochlin puts them in the context of an artist's ability to interpret social relations through increased sensitivity to historically unobtrusive aspects of life and their treatment of painterly surfaces and the pictorial «frame» as a result of the development of technical dispositives of the (re)production of pictures, primarily photographs. In the French painter Gustave Courbet's contention in *The Realist Manifesto* that «the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist» and that artists of one century were therefore «basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century»[2], she recognizes «moral implications of modernity»; the feeling of the realist for «now, today and the present» is then transposed into «images of the random, the changing, the impermanent and unstable»[3].

What Nochlin calls an «isolated moment in time», already noticeable with the realists, she grasps to a greater extent in the fragmentary style of the impressionists in whose paintings the human figure is portrayed as «a body in pieces». She views visual representations as semiotically coded, as a form of metonymy or substitute for transferred meanings that do not arise from what the image narrates but from the way individual signifiers are structured[4]. Nochlin argues that the new way of framing – more precisely, everything that falls within the scope of the impressionist painters, such as Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, or Paul Cézanne – testifies to a new understanding of

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[2] G. Courbet, *The Realist Manifesto & Champfleury, Letter about Courbet*, in Linda Nochlin (ed.) *Realism & Tradition in Art, 1848-1900*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1966, pp. 33-45.
[3] L. Nochlin, *Realism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 28.
[4] L. Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, Thames & Hudson, New York 1994, pp. 23-38.

pictorial representation as a *convention*. What we do not see, because it remains outside the frame of the picture, has the same dramatic importance as what we do see since the reality of the picture testifies to the mere selection of a vast visual field and the fact that each representation is based on choosing only one among many possibilities. That realization, Nochlin argues, is at the core of the modernist scopic regime. For example, in Degas's 1875 painting *Place de la Concorde*, we do not see a single character in their physical integrity, nor do any of the characters communicate with the observer, which can be considered a method of fragmenting the unity of the frame and rejecting internal psychological connections[5].

According to Nochlin, the difference that the styles of the mid- to late 19th century brought to the depictions of movement is that the «Realist [and impressionist, *op. aut.*] motion is always motion captured as it is "now", as it is perceived in a flash of vision»[6], as if stopped at some point that sublimates the broader temporal context of the scene. In older art, time was never an utterly isolated moment but always implied what preceded and what would follow, thus relying on the continuity of the natural perception «condensed and stabilized by means of a significant kinetic summary»[7]. Nochlin's hypotheses can be instantiated by comparing Courbet's painting *The Wheat Sifters* of 1854 and Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* of 1603-1604. In these two paintings, what is relevant for us is not only the temporally different concepts of the *snapshot* (in filmic vocabulary, a *frame* separated from a visual narrative) but also the construction of the *mise en scène*, the dramatics of framing, and the communication with the observer. Caravaggio's motif is set in an unidentified gloomy space illuminated only by a direct light source from the left. The deposition in the grave is shown as the only visible and, indeed, the only possible event at that moment in time and space. The movement unfolds at a steady pace and extends from Mary of Clopas in the upper right corner to the dead Christ's hand in the lower left corner, enhancing the impression of the event's singularity. In the painting of Courbet, who also creates a snapshot, the movement is not isolated from some imagined course of events but scattered throughout the entire frame, and the characters are engaged in independent activities. Unlike

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[5] For more on this topic, see K. Purgar, *Iconic Bodies: Semiotics of Masculinity in Fashion Photography and Art History*, in Ž. Paić (ed.) *Fashion Theory and the Visual Semiotics of the Body*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2022, pp. 146-151.
[6] L. Nochlin, *Realism*, pp. 28-29.
[7] IbId.

Caravaggio, where the dark background makes the illuminated scene seem «cut out» and placed on a uniformly dark surface, Courbet's framing, which separates the displayed objects, clearly implies to the observer that the scene could have been part of a situation in real time and space. As much as Caravaggio is «more realistic» in portraying the human body, at least if we observe it in the tradition of the original notion of mimesis, Courbet's concept of realism affects the broader aspect of reality as a discontinuity, which means presenting existence that always includes or alludes to lateral events, as opposed to the idealized universal actuality of Caravaggio.

In the second half of the 19th century, the development and spread of photography began to influence visual culture, which until then had been based on the dialectic of the uniqueness of the original and the multiplicity of the graphic print. Painting and sculpture were considered art, while printing was intended for the masses as entertainment and information. Precisely because of this rooted dichotomy of high and low in visual culture, photography needed almost a century to come to terms with its own prospects, first as a technical medium and then to reach the full extent of its cultural agency. At a time when realism was the dominant artistic and literary style, photography found itself in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the physical transmission of light onto the photosensitive surface of what was actually in front of the camera allowed the represented scene to be a more authentic trace of reality than any painted scene, but on the other hand, the need for a long exposure prevented photography from showing movement either as a baroque «kinetic summary» or as a separated form of discontinuity, characteristic of painterly realism.

The consequences are easy to grasp if we consider typically static photographic compositions from the era of painterly realism, such as those of Édouard Baldus or Julia Margaret Cameron. Thus, the possibility of capturing the moment and focusing on the temporal dimension of events in the mid-19th century was enabled more by the new, intellectual, proto-filmic depictions represented in the old medium of oil on canvas than by the actual technical possibilities of photography. This was partly because the long-term exposure of light to the photographic plate made it impossible at the time to record movement (especially of a large number of people with rapid and frequent changes of movement direction), but particularly because the mediatic and cultural specificity of

the photographic *apparatus* or *dispositive* had not yet been established[8]. In other words, it was still not clear what the observer really saw in images created in this way, what ontological dimension the optically and chemically produced trace possessed, and, above all, in what way the image thus produced explained or perhaps redefined the social reality in which the observer partook.

In the early stage of the development of photography, when the observer believes that something is real and that it really happened in front of a seemingly neutral camera lens, they idealize the machine's objectivity and allow it to shape their subjectivity. In Eugène Atget's use of photography as an experimental medium at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, or later in the surrealist visualizations of Man Ray, it is evident that photographic representation is not only the material evidence, index, or trace of some event but enables a new cultural and anthropological phenomenon: the interiorization of pictorial information, which is crucially influenced by the intertwining of *subjective* actors and their completely different social roles – not a technical device. In this case, the *apparatus* is a set of ideological photographic practices and uses: first, as a means of differentiation between spaces of physical reality, institutions, and discursive power, and second, as an artistic practice aimed at overcoming the mere instrumental use of photography. That is why the manipulation of perception is at the core of the photographic media, especially if we deal with it as an artistic practice, as we always do with painterly realism. When used as a means of *transcending* reality (unlike its much more frequent *documentary* function), we cannot consider photography any more transparent than other artistic practices. Its ability to reproduce the situation in front of

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[8] The term *dispositif* (apparatus, dispositive, mechanism, or social practice in a broader sense) was first used by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to mean a set of institutional practices that condition social relations, primarily through systems of power, knowledge, regulation, and repression. Foucault described it as «a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions...». See M. Foucault, *The Confession of the Flesh,* in C. Gordon (ed. by), *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* Pantheon Books, New York 1980, pp. 194-195. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben later broadened the cultural implications of this Foucauldian term turning the concept of *apparatus* into a kind of metaphor of one's personal, interpersonal, and collective conditions: «Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself». See G. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, in Id., *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2009, p. 14.

the camera authentically, even in its very early days, surpassed that of painting, but the observer could not know then that «photographic truth» always depended on the unpredictable entanglement of the author's *intentions* to record precisely that scene and not some other, their *preferences* to frame the situation in a certain way, and, finally, their *manipulation* of the device itself. These aspects are related equally to the photograph's creator and the observer, who decides (even more today than before) what they want to see in it. However, the latter's role was considered inferior during the scopic regime of high modernism because the priorities of intentions, preferences, and especially manipulation then belonged to the author, not the observer.

3.

When members of new realism (or photorealism) began to work intensively with photographies as templates for paintings in the 1960s and 1970s, they faced the criticism that their manipulation of the seemingly objective representation of reality created redundant pictorial matter that parasitized the barren symbiosis of the objectively existing world and super-objective pictures of that world. The historical causes of such criticism were found in ideologically charged debates in high modernism's heyday, based on the belief that the medium has a specific dominant aspect of its own and that the work of art must always make evident what that dominant aspect is[9]. Art theory before postmodernism postulated that the specific feature of a photographic picture was its credibility vis-à-vis reality, while that of a painting consisted in its intrinsic artifactuality – that is, the complete rejection of causality between the image and reality. The technological progress of photography in the second half of the 20th century, just before the digital revolution, gave this medium the status

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[9] The American art historian Clement Greenberg consistently advocated this thesis. In his article "Towards a newer Laocoon" from 1940, he claimed that the disappearance of depth in abstract painting led to an emphasis on the meaning of the picture itself, its surface and plane as authentic sites on which art occurs. See C. Greenberg, *Towards a newer Laocoon*, in *Partisan Review*, 7, n. 4 (1940), pp. 296-310. Greenberg's insistence on the purity of the medium emerges particularly in his 1962 essay "After abstract expressionism" in which he claims that all the characteristics thought to be typical of modernism were, in fact, non-essential, except for two «constitutive conventions or norms»: «flatness» and the «delimitation of flatness». For him, noticing just these two features of the painterly medium is «enough for us to experience some object as a painting»; therefore, he considered any additional characterization of the pictorial plane superfluous, for example, the one that points to an extra-pictorial reality, or everything that we consider physical actuality. See C. Greenberg, *After Abstract Expressionism*, in "Art International", October (1962), p. 131.

of a «mirror of truth» like no other before it, but it also faced a new challenge – the *fallacy of transparency* and the ensuing *fallacy of reality*. This had an enormous impact on attempts at understanding the most recent art, especially intermedia works using photography as a *Bildträger* that foregrounded the artificial construction of the pictorial reality, such as those of Thomas Demand and Andreas Gursky.

Before we propose an interpretation of hyperrealism beyond the critical angles of high modernism, it is necessary to recall the key theoretical canons that led to them. In "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America", published in two parts in the *October* journal in 1977, Rosalind Krauss discusses how contemporary artists use the poetics of leaving their own physical mark or generally indexing reality in a work of art, whether through photography, painting, drawing, or sculpture. She considers an index to be «that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples»[10] and generally divides indexical art into that which deals with the «registration of a sheer physical presence» and the one characterized by «more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions»[11]. In this author's reasoning, the index can be a highly potent artistic practice with the preconditions that the artist's subject is as depersonalized as possible and that the trace is as indirect as possible. As an early but distinct example of the index's overobjectification, Krauss mentions the photograms of Man Ray and claims that with this technique, the artist only took to the extreme what essentially determines *all* photographs:

> Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absolut[e]ness of this physical genesis, one that seem[s] to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings[12].

Previously, Krauss stated that what is actually imprinted on the photographic emulsion, and then on the photograph itself, is the «order of the natural world», which gives this medium a documentary character and undeniable truth: «But at the same time this veracity is beyond the reach of those possible internal adjustments which are the

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[10] R. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America: Part Two*, in "October", n. 4 (Autumn 1977), p. 59.
[11] R. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, in "October", n. 3 (Spring 1977), p. 81.
[12] Ibid., p. 75.

necessary property of language. The connective tissue binding the objects contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system»[13]. By insisting on the high-modernist purity of the medium on the one hand and the sophistication of the index on the other, Krauss notices the «deliberate short-circuiting of issues of style» in photorealism inasmuch as the artist gives up formally intervening in the creation of their own work due to the «overwhelming physical presence of the original object»[14] (in hyperrealist paintings from the 1970s, that «original object» is, of course, a photograph).

The above leads us to conclude that for this American theorist, photography is a kind of super-indexical medium that mirrors reality and does not contaminate it with language and culture because its absolute truthfulness does not allow symbolization, otherwise characteristic of painting and art in general. However, when it comes to painterly hyperrealism, the medium is beyond the symbolizing reach of language and culture in a twofold way: first, because it is based on the photographic picture; second, because the photograph is used to produce a double photographic-painterly index through the process of representational redundancy.

In Krauss' thesis, we find a continuation of Greenberg's attempt to delimit the high-modernist notion of the artistic medium (specifically, abstract painting), which is not understood here as being under the influence of various cultural processes but which – having its own specificity and independence – takes on a paradoxical power of producing a new culture from the spirit of an autonomous work of art. In her two-part article, Krauss invokes the French philosopher Roland Barthes intensively, especially his arguments concerning photography as a «message without a code», probably because she felt that his insights helped her attempt to expose the mechanisms of imprinting those elements that are not entirely under the author's control into the artwork. One of these elements was the proliferation of photographic pictures in the second half of the 20th century. The confusion stems from the fact that Barthes is not an art theorist under the influence of the idea of the purity of the medium but a cultural semiologist who believed that photography, though it cannot be coded like spoken languages, writing, or musical notes, does not abstain from meaning. For him, the «message without a code» is a technical term indicating two things: the cultural

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[13] Ibid., pp. 59-60.
[14] Ibid., p. 80.

conditionality and ontological specificity of photography. The photographic image is created independently of the pre-established system of conventions in that it arises first from iconic-indexical practice and only then by acquiring symbolic meaning. In other words, the photograph is born without a code but automatically establishes it by entering the cultural context. Unlike all other media, in which coding takes place by combining signifiers prior to the signification process, this process occurs in parallel in photography.

In his essay "Rhetoric of the Image", Barthes states that the first message that the photograph offers us is information – a «linguistic message» – and in order to understand it, we need knowledge of a specific cultural code with which the linguistic message is established precisely for the image in question. However, even if we do not know the linguistic code(s), we still have the same picture in front of us. In that case, it will not bring us a linguistic code but two simultaneously present and inseparable «iconic messages»; the first is coded, and the second is not. As Barthes explains, «If all [the] signs are removed from the image, we are still left with a certain informational matter; deprived of all knowledge, I continue to "read" the image, to "understand" that it assembles in a common space a number of identifiable (nameable) objects, not merely shapes and colours»[15]. Therefore, the state of a photographic image as an un-coded entity, on which Krauss based her arguments, is a kind of raw, ontological condition of the photographic picture as a highly transparent medium, not the common situation in which we encounter photographs in everyday communication.

According to Barthes, «We never encounter (at least in advertising [and especially in art, *op. aut*.]) a literal image in a pure state. Even if a totally naive image were to be achieved, it would immediately join the sign of naivety and be completed by a third – symbolic message»[16]. For Barthes, the cultural conditioning of perception is crucial, i.e., the difference between pure visual information and the meaningful aspect of the image, or, as he puts it in a semiotic key, «The literal image is *denoted* and the symbolic image is *connoted*»[17]. Furthermore, when he talks about the «message without a code», he does so in order to explain what it means to «encode» a photo and what kind of

[15] R. Barthes, *Rhetoric of the image*, in Id. *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, Hill and Wang, New York 1977, p. 35.
[16] Ibid., p. 43.
[17] Ibid., p. 37.

information coding brings into the photographic process, not because he believes that uncoded photos can exist independently in the chain of communication. Finally, as he claims, «Only the opposition of the cultural code and the natural non-code can, it seems, account for the specific character of the photograph and allow the assessment of the anthropological revolution it represents in man's history»[18].

Comprehending contemporary photography is heavily dependent on Barthes' concept of mythical signifiers, which is essentially postmodernist and allusive and refers to what is always already obsolete, and this especially applies to post-indexical visualizations in the age of digital technologies. Unlike Krauss, the American theorist Susan Sontag understands this very well when she claims that contradiction was always immanent to photography: on the one hand, it possessed the built-in property of objectivity, but on the other, it always uncovered someone's point of view. Its essence moves between the undeniable imprint of reality created by a machine, not the person behind it, and the fact that someone always had to witness the event[19]. Our following argumentation will be based precisely on the insights by means of which the hyperrealist painting of the 1970s can be interpreted as a kind of metamedia that uses the presumable objectivity of photography only to disavow it. In other words, we will try to show that manipulations of the extra-pictorial world in hyperrealism are not primarily related to reality, art, skill, copying, or style but are invitations to discuss the fundamental *relationship* between image and reality.

4.

When, at the very beginning of the 1980s (therefore, at a relatively early stage of hyperrealism), the French art historian Jean-Claude Lebensztejn referred to the opinions that then prevailed in French cultural circles about the novelty coming from America, he described them as a long-awaited relief for all those who had never been able to accept Kazimir Malevich, Barnett Newman, or any abstraction, who did not understand what kind of art may interpret another kind of art, and who could not bear that there were simply no guarantees for understanding contemporary art. Lebensztejn was entirely correct when he said,

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[18] Ibid., p. 45.
[19] S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York 2003, p. 26.

The hyperrealists seemed to have abandoned most of the old questions which had preoccupied painting since Cézanne: of tradition, of perspective, of discourse, of representation, of figure, of frame, of design, of «painting», of art, of its status, of its space. They made easel-pictures, clean, overpolished, framed, representing scenes recognizable to the fact, or sculptures which you may have taken for their models[20].

Like photographs, which photorealists normally used as the special kind of reality they wanted to refer to, they shared another feature with this medium – ambivalence. As we have seen, for Barthes and Sontag, the photograph was not created by codification, nor could it avoid it; it *is* and is *not* an objective picture of the world. The photograph is a trace of reality, but it is also a symbolic construction at the same time. By ascertaining that hyperrealism offers both «the greatest proximity of object and sign, and the greatest difference between them» and understanding that it is characterized by both «absolute flatness and spatial illusionism»[21], we almost hear the echoes of a discussion on a double nature of photography. However, such conceptual connections of two seemingly divergent media do not exhaust their dialectical nature and ability to intervene in the concept of representation.

Lebensztejn recognized this when he said photorealism revealed «coldness, absence, no expressionism, rejection of all figurative hierarchy [...] no texture, no movement, no emotion, no life, especially no style»[22], almost as if it originated from the radical monochromes of Ad Reinhardt[23]. Indeed, if we compare this intransigent abstract painter's so-called *Black Paintings* from the 1960s with, for example, *Downtown* or *Rappaport Pharmacy* by Richard Estes, created ten years later, it is easy to notice that they are utterly distinct when it comes to showing the visible reality, the relationship of abstract and figurative, «empty» and «full». However, most of the characteristics that the French art historian attributes to hyperrealism may be applied to Reinhard's abstraction. How is that possible? Can a completely black canvas really have so many characteristics similar to paintings containing so many minute, realistic details,

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[20] J.-C. Lebensztejn, *Photorealism, Kitsch and Venturi* (trans. K. Cooper), in "SubStance" 10, n. 2, issue 31 (1981): *The Thing USA: Views of American Objects*, p. 80.
[21] IbId. p. 81.
[22] Ivi.
[23] On this, see A. Reinhardt, *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, in "Art News", May 1957, quoted in Lebensztejn, ivi.

important to art historians, painted with the intention of looking like photographs while still being different from them? What is it, ultimately, that connects the photo, hyperrealism, and abstraction? Does anything at all? Before responding to these key issues, we must consider some additional fundamental insights about hyperrealistic painting.

In her essay "Realism Now" from 1968, Nochlin argues that it is wrong to view the new realists of the 20th like those of the 19th century because the reality the former want to portray is not a list of contradictions within the social system but the specifics of different principles of visual representation: one medium in relation to others, i.e., painting in relation to photography. In that respect, the paintings of photorealists should be evaluated in accordance with high-modernist self-referentiality, not with the ideological or political content so characteristic of Courbet[24]. Nochlin believes that photorealists did not succumb to formal conventions such as Pop Art or modernist abstraction and that they demonstrated how Greenberg's idea of the purity of the medium becomes irrelevant in modern times when the observer's perception becomes increasingly discontinuous[25].

In his recapitulation of numerous ambivalences that accompanied hyperrealism and contributed to its interpretation from diametrically opposed positions, Craig J. Peariso points to a contradiction between the old and the new and the political and apolitical[26]. In his opinion, both of these aporias, at least when they were immediately relevant, were detrimental to this style. On the one hand, hyperrealism could not be considered truly new within the modernist art-historical teleology of continuous progress. On the other hand, it was discredited by the self-proclaimed withdrawal of its members from social engagement precisely at the peak of class, gender, racial, and geopolitical turbulence[27]. Dieter Roelstraete offered an interesting interpretation of the unpopularity of hyperrealism today when he contended that a problematic position of this style in our time may lie in the fact that it always implies diligence and focus, i.e., the classic work ethic with its precisely determined place of work and the belief that the time spent on

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[24] L. Nochlin, *Realism Now*, in *Realism Now Catalogue*, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY 1968, quoted in G. Battcock, *Super Realism*, p. 122.
[25] Ibid., p. 116.
[26] C.J. Peariso, *Styleless Style? What Photorealism Can Tell Us About "The Sixties"*, in "Journal of American Studies" 47, n. 3 (August 2013), p. 745.
[27] On this, see the conversations with Chuck Close and Richard Estes: *Interview with Linda Chase and Ted McBurnett* in "Art in America" 60 (1972), pp. 76-80.

work is equivalent to the result of that work. Thus, contrary to the contemporary digital logic of precariousness and displacement, work no longer has its fixed time and place, and material goods are no longer added but multiplied exponentially[28].

Linda Chase's book *Hyperrealism* offers fundamental information on the methodological procedures of the first photorealists and, thus, the preparation for later theoretical analysis and assessment of the aesthetic reach of these artists[29]. As the most prominent element in photorealists, Chase highlights new realists' use of photography as source material, suggesting that we are dealing here with a conceptual act that points to the relationship between photography, painting, and reality. Consequently, the focus of her interest, and a kind of «instruction for use», is not the celebration of the painter's skill. In making such arguments, Chase has already made her contentions future-proof in one of the first critical reviews of hyperrealism, but her opinions had too weak an influence on traditional art historians who have always seen in this style a mere formalist relapse of the «original», socially sensitive realism of Gustave Courbet or, worse, a de-subjectivized version of Edward Hopper's mystique. It follows that photorealism converts painterly shapes into contingent forms that can stimulate discussion on the layers of the visible in an image since these artists' figurative, «photographic» form encourages relational entanglements with different media, iconic spaces, modes of depiction, and the concept of representation itself.

Although connected by a general convention of hyperrealistic style, Chase notices a programmatic bond in the variations of painterly methods (she does not mention the term «technique») used by Richard Estes, Stephen Posen, and Chuck Close – and this is not a similarity to reality, nor the faithful reproduction of photography, nor the apotheosis of the precise style of filigree[30]. Chase draws our attention to the fact that Estes does not make correct copies of one photo in his paintings but manipulates many of them, omits the inclusion of the human figure (even when it is present in the photo), creates a shining surface that does not exist on the original template, and uses a continuous depth of field that cannot be achieved in either photos or human perception. In his portraits, Close imitates the graphic reproduction of a tricolor separation, not a

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[28] See more on this in D. Roelstraete, *Modernism, Postmodernism and Gleam: On the Photorealist Work Ethic*, in "Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry" 24 (Summer 2010), pp. 8-9.
[29] L. Chase, op cit. French language edition: L. Chase, *Les Hyperréalistes Américains*, Editions Filipacchi, Paris 1973.
[30] L. Chase, op cit., pp. 8-13.

photographic emulsion, and because of their oversized formats, they cannot really be considered hyperrealistic, neither in relation to a photographic model nor in reference to reality. As Chase says, «Close denies any humanist intention in his use of the face. He represents, in its purest or most extreme form, the use of the photograph as subject». On the other hand, with brilliant colors and a sharpness that no photograph can convey, Ralph Goings and Don Eddy show the interior *behind* the window glass or the exterior *through* the window glass as unique and, therefore, the unbelievably illuminated space. Stephen Posen does not even use a photo but makes three-dimensional full-size sculptures (different versions of boxes covered with fabric), which are then accurately transferred onto canvas. In Posen's method, his sculpture/installation is treated as if it were a neutral, de-subjectivized photographic image[31].

If, therefore, a hyperrealist artist «separates himself from the concerns of classical representational painting» and «redefines painting in relation to the photograph» in order to deal with «second-hand reality»[32], then we can propose the thesis that what is particularly relevant in their art goes beyond the framework of artistic form, genealogy of painterly style, originality and non-originality, camp or kitsch and enters the domain of representation theory or, more precisely, image theory. What do we mean by that, and how can we even differentiate the interpretation of an object as a work of art on the one hand and as a theoretical object on the other when we know that it is one and the same subject or idea? If we leave aside the simplistic argument that art transcends and thereby reshapes reality while theory explains it and thereby institutionalizes it, we may point out a third possibility, which is to see the work of art as a kind of *conceptual reality*, as a material fact that is able to indicate the existence of different layers of the visible or intensities of reality in images. In such an understanding, those works of art that experiment with modalities of representation and always already have social conventions of looking and evaluation built into them and essentially deal with naturalized forms of perception play a critical role. An open space of conceptual realities thus emerges before us in the cracks of convention, naturalization, and perception.

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[31] Ibid. p. 10.
[32] Ibid. p. 9.

The adaptability of perception, in relation first to the medium by means of which we get visual information on the one hand and then to the surface that contains pictorial information on the other, enables the observer to see *something* in *something*; for example, a car in a photograph, a flower in a lithograph, a forest in a drawing, or a kitchen interior on a movie screen. If we did not know the conventions of the media, i.e., the ways in which they naturalize our perception and adapt it to see something in something, then we would not know the relationship between pictorial information and the real or imaginary situation that we see in a painting, photograph, film, etc. The naturalization of expectations we have from visual media ensures that we do not recognize the real Dürer in Dürer's self-portrait, strike up a conversation with him, or invite him to the movies as if the person who lived in Nuremberg in the 16th century is here with us now, no matter how realistic the portrait. By the same mechanism, we do not recognize the tunnel interior or the unlit basement in Reinhardt's *Black Paintings* but simply observe them as a delimited black pictorial surface on the museum wall.

Let us consider Stephen Shore's photograph *Mineral Wells, Texas* from his *American Surfaces* series from 1972 and Don Eddy's *Cadillac Showroom Window* from the same year. When we look at these two works individually, that is, the former as a photograph in one viewing situation and the latter as a painting on canvas created according to a photographic model in another viewing situation, our perception adapts to the conventions of the medium currently before us. These conventions dictate that when we know we are looking at a photograph, we almost by definition seek a more credible imprint of reality from it than we would expect from a painting. The difference in our understanding of these two pictorial media is conditioned by the naturalization of our perception and our consequent ability to perceive layers of the visible (reality, truthfulness, cultural inflections, etc.). We stated earlier that photography cannot be considered more transparent than other media, and now we see why this is so: the intensity of reality in the image does not depend on some absolute relationship between the image and reality but on the observer's expectations in relation to the medium of representation. When Shore photographs the motif of a gas station in Mineral Wells, Texas, he does so by relying on the indexical nature of the photographic device, allowing him to use the neutral mechanism of letting a light leave a trace on a

photosensitive emulsion to create visual information without using, as Barthes explained, a semiotic code. Shore *denoted* the spatial situation within the limits of the photographic frame by using a technical appliance and a chemical process. Only after the photograph was developed could the visual information on the photo-paper enter the semiotic cycle of artistic, social, communication, and any other *connotation*.

When considering the method Eddy used in making a painting of a Cadillac showroom window according to a previously made photographic picture, whether his painting is a credible reflection of a photographic or physical reality – and, if so, to what extent it is – is not especially important. More significant is that he, unlike Shore, had to choose a semiotic code in line with the observer's naturalized perception when in front of the painting. The criticisms that can be leveled at this insight, for example, that Shore influenced what the photo would look like by choosing a particular frame and length of exposure – in other words, that he codified it by making his own decisions – would not be justified, simply because these two media have naturalized the observer's perception in an incomparable way since the beginning of the 19th century. In addition, in hyperrealism, the social, technical, and aesthetic connoting of the photograph is a condition without which the painter's denotation of the photographic motif(s) simply would not be possible; in other words, it is impossible to convey on the canvas a photograph that never meant anything at any moment to anybody.

The differences between these two media and semiotic systems have deepened even more over time. The changes brought by digital technology have shaken the nature of photographic truth and introduced hyperrealism into a new and different critical and theoretical context. For example, the German theorist Johannes Völz, when he writes about realism in Richard Estes and the visual artist Andreas Gursky, highlights the epochal change in the «culturally saturated imagination» at the beginning of the 21st century, a change which deprived photography, especially «artistic» photography, of any claims to truth. Völz compares Estes' manipulation of photographic motifs when he transfers it to a canvas with the digital manipulation by which Gursky creates works characterized by the «post-indexical, "dubitative" condition of the image»[33]. With this approach, Gursky adopts a non-committal strategy of abstraction despite presenting in

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[33] J. Völz, *The Index and Its Vicissitudes: Hyperrealism from Richard Estes to Andreas Gursky*, in "Amerikastudien / American Studies" 52, n. 1 (2007), thematic issue: *Transatlantic Perspectives on American Visual Culture*, p. 99.

his works a seemingly veridical view of a situation that could have looked just like the one in front of the camera lens. Völz concludes,

> In its course from Estes to Gursky, then, hyperrealism has burdened itself with a gigantic task. It is no longer an aberration of photographic realism, capable of making us feel a truth that lies beyond the scope of the camera. Rather, hyperrealism now poses as the only believable realism in an age in which the photographic protocols of realism are in the process of being shattered[34].

For the theory of pictorial representation, the importance of artworks from an early period of hyperrealism is not in these works being crucially defined by a distinct mimetic form, much less in uncovering the author's exceptional skill, but in creating a new kind of sensitivity in the observer toward *layers of the visible* and *intensities of reality*, thus disrupting the conventions of the pictorial visualizations. In hyperrealist painting, we are talking about a border case of representation since the conceptual intervention of the artist deliberately de-conventionalizes the expectation of the observer, which means that it is in the conceptual premise, not a mimetic practice, that the meaning of this art should be sought. If the photograph and painting were absolutely the same, either as pure visual information or as a technical dispositive, we could disregard hyperrealism as utterly nonessential and meaningless, just as, for example, conceptual art would be pointless if its tautological propositions completely coincided through idea, text, and image.

Joseph Kosuth, the central figure of the original New York school of conceptual art, thought his works had reached exactly such a condition. In his text "Art after Philosophy" from 1969, he claimed that traditional artistic media could not question the nature of art since, for example, painting is always predetermined to be only a «kind of art», and as such, it is always already conventionalized. He believes that the conceptual dimension of art is much more important than the formal dimension and therefore proposes that artistic morphology be replaced by «analytical propositions», that is, that a work of art must describe what it shows or, *mutatis mutandis*, that it should only show

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[34] IbId.

what it is able to describe[35]. However, if we consider some of Kosuth's works that exemplify his tautological-propositional method, it is easy to see that in visual arts – and we must still consider conceptual art to be visual[36] – it is impossible to convey the textual or conceptual into the visible without creating at least some surplus of meaning. When we transfer traces of mental structures created in the mind to a physical medium, they cannot be either semantically redundant or formally neutral because, for example, Kosuth's neon letters in *Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Yellow Eight* of 1965, due to its objecthood and materiality, do not convey thought in a pure, unadulterated state, so the proposition in its physical incarnation is always already contaminated with «unwanted» or nomadic signifiers[37].

Even a superficial glance at the paintings of early photorealists (it is important to reiterate that these are artists who used classic painterly techniques and airbrush) will show that they cannot be confused with photos. They were not imperfect copies of photographs because Ralph Goings, Don Eddy, Chuck Close, and Richard Estes did not possess enough manual finesse to do so but because their concept was based on the fissures of naturalized conventions of looking at photography and, consequently, on the (albeit inadvertent) deconstruction of its apparatus. As with Kosuth, photorealist depictions could not be tautologically redundant in an absolute sense and thus devoid of meaning, for something entirely different was at stake: the production of conceptual – rather than painterly – meaning. Hyperrealism and conceptual art met at the same point, although they departed from different premises. Paradoxically, regardless of the fact that «the amount of information that appeared on the [photorealist] canvas was almost

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[35] J. Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected Writings 1966–1990*, ed. G. Guercio, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1991 (1969), pp. 13-32.

[36] In response to claims that conceptual art neglects its visual aspect in order to radically change the «nature of art», the American analytical philosopher Gregory Currie asserted that if the meaning of conceptual art is just in the annunciation of analytical propositions, then such art would not exist in any medium and would not have significant relations with any medium in particular. As this is not the case and almost all conceptual works depend on some essence, it is impossible to neglect the aspect of the materiality that this author calls «crafted appearance», even for conceptual art. See G. Currie, *Visual Conceptual Art*, in P. Goldie and E. Schellekens (eds.) *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 35.

[37] Kosuth is probably aware that it is impossible to achieve absolute tautology in art: since every artwork depends on the way it is presented to the observer, he introduces the concept of the «art condition»; with it, he abandons the consecrated field of art propositions in a narrow sense and enters the field of the institutional theory of art. Yet, unlike institutional theory, which, under specified circumstances, allows every artifact or idea to be transformed into a work of art, Kosuth considers that the art condition can only be a «conceptual condition». See Kosuth, op. cit., p. 20.

always less than what was contained in the photographic source»[38], this style is still under the burden of photographic naturalization of perception. Likewise, although there was always more information in the original conceptual art of the 1960s than Kosuth thought he was giving in his analytical propositions, his works are still considered to show the tautological equivalence of concept and matter.

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Although we can agree with Wassily Kandinsky's claim that «every work of art is the child of its age», it is more important to note that every epoch changes the meaning of earlier works of art. Only the discovery of the possibilities of new digital technologies faced humanity with the fact that images can no longer be interpreted within the order of reality but only within the symbolic order of images – painting, photography, film, the internet, and art in general. The ideas presented here lead us to the conclusion that hyperrealism is not just one of the artistic styles at the border of modernism and postmodernism, high and low arts, skill and concept, but may also offer an answer to many questions about the status of the image in recent time, about the relationships between painting and photography, between the extra-pictorial and intra-pictorial reality. These questions cannot be answered if we believe that only what we see in hyperrealism is art, but still, the fact that these *are* artworks, objects outside the immediate instrumental function, allows us to bring an antagonistic position of image and reality to a completely different level of reasoning. In the extreme interspace between a painting and a photograph opens up an expanse where different intensities of reality appear. We are able to grasp them because the expectations of the observer are always encountered by the conventions of representation. Here, we have indicated the need for a specific theory that can interpret conceptual realities in pictorial representations, for only the image has the power to convert the fallacy of transparency into something much more insidious – a fallacy of reality, which is why this research must continue in the direction of detecting layers of the visible in images.

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[38] J.P. Mandel*, The Deductive Image*, in G. Battcock (ed.) *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology*, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York 1975, p. 41.