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Point de vue
The Photographic Activity of "Visual Culture"

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Furthermore, these were the principle concerns of an entire generation of photographic critics.² The writings of Barthes and Krauss, along with those of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Alan Sekula, and John Tagg, questioned the relationship of photography with the discourses of history, science, law, and pornography. Barthes and Sekula established dialogues with Martha Rosler and Susan Sontag to address the rhetorical bias of documentary. And Barthes, Krauss, Sekula, Solomon-Godeau, Sontag, and Tagg joined John Berger, Victor Burgin, Douglas Crimp, and Christopher Phillips to confront the problematic articulation of “aesthetic” discourse in relation to photography classified as a form of modern art.

The striking unanimity of this critical project can be traced to the translation into English, in the late sixties and early seventies, of Walter Benjamin's writings, which effectively introduced “what were to become the major themes in the analysis of photography in the 1970s: the destruction of the ‘aura’ as a result of reproducibility of the image, the challenge of art which photography mounts and the extent to which it poses the question, not whether it counts as an art but if art can exist after photography.”³ These same issues form the crux of the problem introduced by the wholesale institutional transfer of photography from the archives to the aesthetic field of the art museum—an institutional reorganization that was understood to inaugurate postmodernity. Succinctly stated, “Postmodernism begins when photography comes to pervert modernism.”⁴

As the title of Douglas Crimp’s 1981 article “The Library’s Old/The Museum’s New Subject” suggests, postmodernism in the visual arts was motivated by what such an institutional reorganization implied for the social function and the evidential integrity of the photograph. As Crimp notes, at the same time that John Szarkowski was realizing the MoMA's fifty-year project to confirm the aesthetic values of photography, the New York Public Library was establishing a division of Arts, Prints and Drawings, and a formalist vocabulary informed the values of both collections. The end result, one imagines, will be that “what was once housed in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library will eventually be found under Arts, Prints and Photography under the classification August Salzman... Egypt will become Beato... Urban poverty becomes Jacob Riis... World War II becomes Robert Capa.”⁵

If this move entailed a lateral transfer of materials and forms from the realms of the information sciences to the field of fine arts, it also involved the renegotiation of a set of economic and cultural relations. Whereas the retrenchment of modernist values is enabled by the aestheticization of photography as art, the photograph’s social and political potential are not so easily repressed. Incrementally or abstractly, the indexical status of the photograph necessarily returns to the formerly hermetic world of culture traces of the social and political world.
that have been squelched. This is the photograph's perverse function.
Against the "aura" of authenticity and authority that connoisseurship
of photography invested in the image, the postmodern, photo-based
artist appropriated photographic materials from popular culture, the
library, and even the museum itself.

Reviving the historical avant-garde's strategies to exploit and
invent the exchange of values—index for aesthetic and back again—
these postmodern artists forced a reconfiguration of the disciplinary
rules informing both institutions. It is often forgotten that appropria-
tive strategies work on two fronts simultaneously. The same impulse
that motivated Sherry Levine to critique the concepts of originality
and artistic authority by rephotographing and re-presenting master-
works of art also inspired Carrie Mae Weems to reappropriate images
of her African-American ancestral community from the Smithsonian
Institute and Christian Boltanski to re-present the haunting grade-
school photos of whole communities of Jewish children lost to the
Holocaust. The radical contingency of photographic meaning which
the "re-presented," recontextualized photographic image displayed
undermined not only the autonomy of modernist art but the empiri-
ical values upon which the various other representational regimes
of modernism were founded. Photographic postmodernism posed chal-
denges to the discourses of science and history as well.

By now, the appropriation or "recycling" of historical photo-
graphic and film materials from private, public, popular, cultural, med-
ical, police, and social-science archives has become a common aesthetic
strategy within the contexts of both high and popular cultural pro-
duction, and critical response to this more general phenomenon has
been divided. Fredric Jameson, for example, has argued that many of
these productions are principally and problematically informed by
nostalgic sentiment. He argues that the recycled materials represent a
mere pastiche of stereotypes of history and are more symptomatic of
the "waning of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some
active way" than productive of any significant historical analysis or
critique.1

Insofar as Jameson's critique discusses the viability of an avant-
garde practice within an era of advanced high/low cultural compres-
sion, his concerns are shared by Foster in his essay on the archival
threat to the autonomy of the museum. Likening the effective spatio-
temporal transgression that characterizes the digital image (re)process-
ing of visual communications in a late capitalist economy to the surre-
alist appropriation and montage practices of the early part of the cen-
tury, he claims that the "dissonant" position in modernism has become a
dominant position in postmodernism... There is no tradition of auto-
ny to subvert; our tradition is Surrealist."11 With regard to the threats
posed to the materiality of the museal experience by global informa-
tion systems, and those to the autonomy of cultural practice by a con-
servative economic agenda that has forced cultural institutions to seek
more directive corporate funding from the very industries undergird-
ing the social phenomenon of visual culture, Foster advocates the
development of new aesthetic strategies. If "autonomy is a bad word," he
continues, "it may not be a bad strategy: call it strategic autonomy."12

There is another position available, however, one that requires
appreciation of the uses rather than the abuses of the concept of visual
culture. Anticipated by postmodernism, affiliated with anthropology,
visual culture as an academic rubric can be seen to emerge alongside,
informing and informed by, the changing function of the museum.
Andreas Huyssen argues that we need "to rethink (and not just out of
a desire to deconstruct) the museum beyond the binary parameters of
avant-garde versus tradition, museum versus modernity (or post-
modernity), transgression versus co-option, left culture politics versus
neoconservatism."14 Instead, one might consider the significance of the
currency of strategies of citing in contemporary aesthetic practice as
they underscore the value placed on spatio-temporal reflection in
contemporary cultural life. Such "returns to history," Huyssen claims,
made evident the important role that "nostalgia, as a form of memory,
always implicated, even productive of utopian visions" can play in a
contemporary culture otherwise preoccupied with discourse on the loss and dis-
appearance of the real.15 Moreover, as Huyssen also notes, "the desire
for history and memory may also be a cunning form of defense...against
the attack of the present on the rest of time."16 This is, I think,
the political potential of the photographic image as Walter Benjamin
intended, the radical promise of its historical force. "For every image
of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own
concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."17

Cheryl Simon

1. Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, "Introduction," October, 77
(Summer 1996): 3.
2. Ibid.
3. The reference is to Douglas Crimp's article of the same name, "The
Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," October, 15 (Winter
1982). See also his article "Pictures," October, 8 (Fall, 1979).
p. 8.
5. Vincent Lavoie, "Les fins de l'ontologie photographique,
CVphoto, 36 (Fall 1996): 5–6.
6. Rosalind Krauss, "Note on an Index: Part I," In Rosalind Krauss,
The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths
(Cambridge: MIT, 1985); Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans.
7. See Bolton, Context of Meaning, and Victor Burgin, ed., Thinking
Photography (London: Macmillan Education, 1982) for a fair selec-
tion of these authors' writings.
8. See the following by Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer,
"in Burgin, Thinking Photography; "A Short History of Photography,"
Screen, 13(1) (Spring 1972); "The Work of Art in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed and intro. by
Hannah Arendt, transl. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken
10. Ibid.
11. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late
13. Ibid.
14. Andreas Huyssen, Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a
15. Ibid. p. 88.
16. Ibid.