



Fig 2: Larissa Nickel, Photo Enforced, 10th and K, July 5, 2008 Digital Photograph, Courtesy the Artist

### **PHOTO ENFORCED**

Photography in the Age of Digital Reproduction, Larissa Nickel

THE COVER IMAGE IS OF a pathway through the forest, the greens and browns of the natural environment surround the viewer in the comfort of cotton khaki Dockers, the caress of a springtime morning, the instinctual memory of time passing as the leaves turn colors in fall. The image is a photograph, an image of a place, an event, a reality? The image is also *blurry*. For Peter Novak, color, shape and motion combine to communicate a deeper vision of the world. How do you depict the *feeling* of walking within a space? And why would you want to? The blurry quality of the photograph remixes the painterly technique of Impressionism and the Cubist investigation of time and movement. Rather than depicting the representational or mimetic literalness of the photograph, Impressionism sought the ephemeral, atmospheric effects beyond the reach of photography, while Cubism sought to define the three dimensional experience within the singular frame. Peter Novak's *Untitled*, *Trees* series starts us on this journey, a historical exploration that blurs the boundaries between photography and painting, past and present.

Photography derives some of its power from the juxtaposition of the past and the present-the past, caught when the shutter snaps closed, and the present, when a viewer responds to the image. Painting, however, slides between the timeline of history more ambiguously. While photography began with scientific inventions of a chemical and physical process, painting seemed subject to human error and individual subjectivity, which led William Henry Fox Talbot to predict, "natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil." Industrialization and the incorporation of the mechanical into the artistic process challenged painting's capacity to represent and to depict. By 1936, Walter Benjamin had already recognized the resulting consequences for the function of art in his

seminal text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. When the printing press and mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis as cult, he noted then it subsequently lost its aura and cultural value.<sup>2</sup> Later, in connection with Benjamin's essay, theorist Rosalind Krauss argued that photography "is a medium that directly produces copies, i.e. a medium in which the copies exist without an original."<sup>3</sup>

## Reconsidering the Object of Art

Skipping through the timeline of art history, the '60s and '70s played an important role in the definition of photography and its relation to art. The conceptual art movement redefined the terms and conditions, relationships and transformations of other art forms including painting, while deconstructing established art values through photography's reproductive output and perceived scientific objectivity. The cultural shift occurring between photography and the moving image, as the media were absorbed into critical art practice, questioned the objectivity of representation. Performance art forced the viewer to look outside the frame, outside the singular depiction, picture or object and into the spatial frame of time based media. In 1968 conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner created *One Quart Green Exterior Industrial Enamel Thrown on a Brick Wall*. His work challenged notions of artistic intent and authorship through language-based works, which dispute whether it is possible to create art without the physical construction of a work of art, relying instead on a mental image of a stated concept.

Another conceptual artist, John Baldessari, broke with his traditional painting methods and began creating photo-text works on canvas. The photographic sources of these works came from snapshots taken by Baldessari or others combined with text. In one of Baldessari's photo-text works, WRONG (1967), Baldessari is seen in a snapshot standing in front of a palm tree directly in line with his head. Below the photo is the word "wrong." Composed centrally within the picture, the juxtaposition of traditionally horrible composition, and the value judgment of being *wrong* as opposed to *right*, speaks to the changing role of authoritarian rules and values in art history.

The presence of photography, film, and video during the 1970's art practice corresponded to the ever-present forms of mass representation: television, advertising, cinema, and journalism. Artists contested the unique art object and challenged traditional aesthetic categories through these new mediums combining mass culture, high art, and technology. Video technology with its instantaneous playback and recording ability allowed artists to examine issues of representation and image making, while feminist artists, such as Eleanor

Antin, sought out the undefined territory in order to redefine categories, and explore the nature of identity and representation, reality and fiction, biography and autobiography, and objectivity and objectification. By the end of the 1970s many other artists turned to photography as a means of critiquing photographic representation and to subvert an art system based on the singular authority of the original.

## The Age of Appropriation

"Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." – John Berger in Ways of Seeing.4

In 1977, Cindy Sherman began her notorious series the *Untitled Film Stills* (*Fig. 3*). These small black and white photographs depicted Sherman impersonating female roles from B movies and film noir,



Fig. 3: Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #35*, 1979 black and white photograph, 10 x 8 inches Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

questioning the mass-produced glamorous images of television and print media's influence on identity. The performative pieces present any array of types and characters, while at the same time remaining unfixed and unspecified, allowing the viewer freedom in constructing the narrative based on the viewer's own voyeuristic desires. Through the deliberate nature of becoming the object of someone's gaze and depicting a character, the work of Cindy Sherman becomes inseparably a photograph and a performance. In A Note on Photography and the Simulacral, Rosalind Krauss cited Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills as an example in her argument of copies without an original. Sherman's thirty-plus year career has involved various forms of appropriated performance, depicting observed personalities, and conventions such as "masterpieces," centerfolds, and creepy clowns. Her challenge to the concept of originality has been placed directly onto the role of depiction through the photographic medium.

Try as it may, photography could not avoid the burden of this fundamental shift in the experience of depiction. If even the negative of a nature scene is a reproduction of the depicted subject and itself a copy rather than an original, then this concept and its force on the photographic quality of art undermines originality itself, long held to be the ultimate altruistic goal of art. Artist Sherry Levine defined this notion of appropriation in 1981 by

taking photographs of icons in photography such as her appropriated image series, *After Walker Evans*, in which she re-shot photos of Evan's iconic photographs from his exhibition catalogue and then displayed them in a gallery herself, which deconstructed notions of creative authorship.







Fig. 4: Amy Adler *Nervous Character*, 1999 24 Unique Cibachrome Prints 24"x 30" each, Courtesy of the Artist

In relation to artists Cindy Sherman and Sherry Levine, contemporary artist Amy Adler rephotographs images in a process that consists of making a drawing of a photograph, which is then photographed and manipulated on the computer, and finally produces a new photographic image which is then printed and framed. The initial drawing is destroyed, and the final image has the surface gloss of photography with the textural markings of a drawing. As both Sherman and Levine, her works are performative, constructed, and challenge thoughts of subjectivity with revised history and authorship. In *Nervous Character* (*Fig. 4*), Adler is reproduced as heads that cinematically look in varied directions. Walking past the image by image movement of the heads, similar to the early stereoscope, creates a movie of unease and nervous character. Her work speaks to the photographic object, its surface quality, reproducibility, and history.

## The Cinematic Narrative

While the 1980s developed postmodern art practice and appropriation, the 1990s explored photographic fantasy, image construction, and cinematic narrative. The works of artist Jeff Wall are in part inspired from great painted works of art from past centuries. He stages episodes for the camera combining photograph techniques and light box transparencies to create cinematographic photographs illuminated like advertisements. *In Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*, Wall worked with actors in the studio, photographed in individual sections, and later assembled digitally. While the image appears realistic, the depicted scene is clearly a fiction: it shows us dead soldiers who seem to talk and joke with one another. For that reason, Susan Sontag referred to this mural-sized image as the "opposite of a document." 7

Robert Kawika Sheer also stages performance photography that incorporates motion from his cinematography background into the still of an individual frame. Traditionally, film moves in succession *through* the camera, but Sheer reverses the process instead by moving in *front* of the camera. Utilizing the blackness of night exposure, Sheer becomes not only the

photographer but a performer in the scene, appearing in front of the camera and painting his shadow with light.

# I Belong to the Blank Generation\*

The digital revolution of the '90s remixed history like the musical sampling of Run DMC, the Wu-Tang Clan, and rap music. Artists today can freely manipulate representation, sample from history, or invent entirely new empirical worlds. Some artists such as Sally Mann utilize "out-dated" film technology as a means of defying cultural mass communication trends, preferring instead the slow, personal, spiritual, and scientific process of traditional film technology. Technological advancements in photography, reminiscent of the advancement of the printing press, have created a

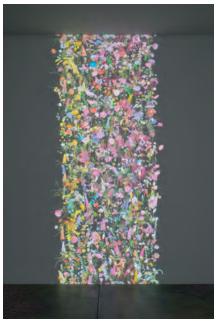


Fig. 5: Jennifer Steinkamp, It's a nice day for a white wedding., 2008 Photos by Robert Wedemeyer Courtesy ACME, Los Angeles

widespread cultural divide. Embracing technology to some means a loss of history or tradition, while others view the advancement as an opportunity to explore new viewpoints and visions.

Video artist Jennifer Steinkamp welcomes the creative potential and multimedia of digitalized photographic discourse. Since the early 1990s, digital animation has been her medium utilizing computer software and sophisticated technology to remix the traditional painting genre of flowers with the hybrid unnaturalness of technology. While technology plays a major role in her art, she uses technology as a tool such as oil paint, a palette, and brushes, never allowing technology to take precedence over the desired aesthetic effect.

Her video installations such as *It's a nice day for a white wedding (Fig. 5)* display a rainbow of color field flowers, daisies, lilies, and snapdragons, cascading like water down the wall to develop themes about artificiality, architectural space, masculinity/ femininity, motion, decoration, and perception. Manipulating reality and the environment around the viewer, the projections immerse the body in light and motion, creating emotional experiences questioning technology's role in the spiritual.

Similarly, Susan C. Weber creates abstracted realities by manipulating her photographs digitally into multiples, flip flopping images to create disconcerting effects that speak to

reality but are plainly artificial. Trees portray the decorative effects of lace or paper cuts, while fruit combines in an MTV-generated dance in a storefront window. The divide between nature and technology becomes a mirror onto itself reflecting both its similarities and differences.

### The Desert as Space

The natural environment of the desert landscape differs from typical urban city space with people and buildings shoulder to shoulder. The expansive terrain can be harsh, overwhelming, or foster a sense of adventure. The desolate landscape has seen its share of wanderers and explorers, from artists, gold miners, farmers, pioneers, military personnel, and the dreamers who founded utopian colonies. In 1991, Christo installed large yellow umbrellas along Interstate 5 and Highway 138 in the Tejon Pass to reflect on the open availability of the valley land, creating an invitational inner space, as houses without walls or temporary settlements. David Hockney's photocollage landscape of *Pearblossom Highway* in the Antelope Valley reveals the wide open space of land littered with cans and bottles, traces of human existence and carelessness, interrupting the desert desolation. Artists visualize the experience of space, and the desert area with its unusual plant life, rock formations, and environmental complexity has proven a distinctive setting for artists to create works responding to themes of wandering, desolation, travel, or mapping.

ShadowOfLightProject began in 2003 chronicling a geographic area he describes as the Mojave Triangle. Bounded by three old highways, the triangle initially allowed the Mojave Desert to be accessible to people from the Los Angeles basin. Today, the Mojave Triangle features thousands of abandoned sites—victims of disregard, vandalism, and the forces of nature. Within a nocturnal environment, ShadowOfLightProject creates an eerie map of the geographical and spiritual quality of mundane objects, abandoned buildings, and nature. By time-lapsing night images onto one frame of film, an entirely new reality emerges from the darkness.



Fig. 6: Todd Niebling, *The Observers, 2008* Film Photograph, 10 X 10 inches Courtesy of the Artist

Todd Niebling (*Fig.* 6) focuses on the characteristics of light, utilizing low-tech cameras which allow light to be in control rather than the artist. By submitting to the light, he can capture the mood of the scene creating something both beautiful and quietly spiritual. His subjects are found objects that perhaps you would regularly pass by and never

notice or find artistically interesting. Todd becomes a wandering *flaneur*, a poet of the city streets who highlights the simple and the overlooked, through investigations of the complexity of the world around us–within the frame of the photograph.

## The Photographic Evolution

Photography has continually evolved since its discovery, weathering debate and dialogue about the purpose and place of depiction and reproduction. From the printing press to television to video and computer technology, photography continues to challenge our ideas on the nature of our perceived realities. The digital revolution reinvigorated the conceptual role of art, challenging and globalizing theories of representation and mass cultural output. We're now all under the world's camera. Within this framework, the *Blurring the Boundaries* exhibit seeks to explore the individual voices in photography today, confronting our concepts of reality and representation through the works of contemporary artists and their frames of reference. The works in this exhibit challenge conventional notions of categories, blurring the boundary between invention and documentation, reality and fiction, truth and lies, while redefining the terms in unique and varied ways. Together the works in the exhibit create a conversation amongst depiction and influence, tradition and technology, concept and authenticity, and explore a journey into the past, present and future of the photographic medium.

#### **End Notes**

- 1 William Henry Fox Talbot, Some account of the art of photogenic drawing or the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil, in The Athenaeum, London, Feb. 9, 1893.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books Inc, New York, 1969), pg. 217-252.
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral", *October* 31, Winter 1984 pp. 49-68.
- 4 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pg 47.
- 5 Amada Cruz, *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*, exh cat. (The Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles, Thames and Hudson, 1997).
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral", *October* 31, Winter 1984 pp. 49-68.
- 7 Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York, 2003).
- \* I Belong to the Blank Generation, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Sire Records, 1977.