

Through a New Lens: Photography as an Art

Since the invention of photography, art critics, theorists, and historians alike have claimed that the practice is merely a perfect representation of reality that fails to leave room for artistry or interpretation. Mother Nature ostensibly herself harnesses the light from a camera and records it in the form of a photo — that is, except actually clicking the camera and the invention of the camera. Although photography is often regarded as a direct documentation of reality without human mediation, this conception denies the reality that human involvement is intimately tied into its technical and social aspects. As such, photography has not only captured reality but also the stretches beyond it, and this transformation has allowed it to develop into its converse: an art form. I track this transformation through a discussion of technical advancements in photo devices, different levels of human engagement, and photo manipulations.

While modern photography is perceived by many to be an art today, attention to its protohistory reveals that photography has not always been conceived of as such. Indeed, photography was originally rooted in rudimentary technologies that employed light to represent subjects for documentary purposes. Most notably of these technologies was the camera obscura which projected an inverted yet exact image in real time and color by reflecting light onto a surface.¹ In the early 19th century, British inventors Thomas Wedgwood and Humphrey Davy's early experiments with utilizing light to generate detailed images on light-sensitive material resulted in the photogram.² Concurrently, British innovator William Henry Fox Talbot created photogenic drawings, imprints of objects he made by dousing them in salt solutions to be exposed in the sunlight.³ However, etched into the protohistory of photography reveals minor

exercises in personal artistry that can be observed in mid-19th century silhouette drawings.⁴

These types of photograms were individualized, portable tracings of people's facial structure made by shining a light onto their face and outlining it on a canvas; occasionally, artists etched into patrons' facial features to further personalize them. Albeit diminutive, this instance of personal artistry reveals a slit in photography's commitment to depict objectivity, carving out a space for artistic expression.

Despite this exploration of personal artistry in photography, the attitude surrounding photography firmly remained in favor of it being a documentary practice. Concurrent with the Industrial Revolution and the proliferation of photography, prominent art critic Charles Baudelaire asserted that true art cannot be commodified and would be disingenuous for it to become so, arguing that art requires to be felt, not documented. As photography became mass produced and modernized, Baudelaire vehemently condemned it as a direct violation and mockery of what art is and a threat to the integrity of artists alike. He voiced apprehension about photography catering to the desires of the masses and how it captured reality without any semblance of the immaterial.⁵ Specifically, Baudelaire's disquietude stemmed from the widespread circulation of the stereoscope, viewing devices held closely to the viewer's eyes with two photos slightly spaced apart, whose popularity conflated photography with commerce. Like those before him, Baudelaire asserted that photography documents what is real but fails to capture the essence of what it means to be real: the morals, the emotions, the passion. Rather, he proposed photography to be relegated for sterile uses, such as for scientific journals or documentary publications, as long as it did not tarnish the essence of art.

When examining Baudelaire's disavowal of the stereoscope, as it signaled commercialization and the absence of artistry, I instead found the stereoscope to be a pivotal instrument in shifting the narrative of photography from a recording mechanism to a fluid, interpretive craft. The viewer would look into the stereoscope and, through the two photos, known as stereographs, enter a three dimensional space with their eyes scanning the scene to explore the field of depth proffered by the stereographs.⁶ In relation to this phenomenon, art historian Jonathan Crary coins the idea of subjective vision in which vision and knowledge are encased in cultural and social lenses that individually alter our interpretation.⁷ Coupled with this idea, stereoscopes enthralled viewers by immersing them into the layered space and depth of the stereographs and to explore and interpret a world tailored only to that specific viewer's learned culture. Stereoscopes enveloped viewers into a realistic space in which the stereographs became the viewer's environment to interact with. Although human involvement was minimal in stereoscopes, it was nonetheless instrumental in conditioning photography into an art form that did not exist to document but instead to invite and entrench the viewer into a world of its own.

Further contrasting Baudelaire's arguments, essayist Roland Barthes elucidates on two levels of interest, *studium* and *punctum*, in photography that support its standing as an art. *Studium* refers to the general obligation the viewer has to the photo through observation and acknowledgment whereas *punctum* speaks to a personally engaging detail that evokes a response specific to the viewer.⁸ These levels of interest establish a rapport between the viewer and photo, committing the viewer to honor the photo's verisimilitude and personal significance. As opposed to Baudelaire's claims that photography is corrupted by the masses and is ineligible to be considered art, the levels of interest directly refute his arguments as each individual — regardless

of how popularized photography has become — has varying, individualized degrees of studium and punctum that animate life to photography. The provocative nature of studium and punctum solidifies the mutual trust between viewer and photo while illuminating on how photography does not seek to archive but to enrich the viewer by inviting them to analyze and interpret.

In addition to studium and punctum, photography's most defining quality is its strong indexical relationship to the subject it represents because it is produced by the very thing it is capturing: light.⁹ Reflected in the technologies and attitudes of its protohistory, photography was considered to be strictly confined to a science or a series of mechanical permutations as opposed to artistry. On the contrary, photographic indexicality in no way detracts from its artistry; in fact, it is because of its staunch indexicality and mutual ability to elicit an emotional response that constitutes photography as both a grounded method of representation and compelling art form. When photographed, the subjects are forever immortalized — with the indexicality testifying to the very existence of that subject at that specific location and time — and herald a sense of timelessness: The viewer is aware that the subject is no longer in the photo yet still remains captivated by its presence. Regardless of the time it was taken, the photo traverses temporal boundaries, continuing to be imbued with personality and the ability to interact with the viewer long after the subject has been displaced. While objectivity and subjectivity seem diametrically opposed, they both deliver a uniquely concerted testament of an irrefutable sentiment that cement photography as art.

Yet, as the indexicality of photography began to be challenged in the 1860s, it became more evident that photography was an art, as photo manipulations blurred the lines of reality and artifice during the contentious 1869 William Mumler trial. In this trial, Mumler was accused of

falsifying his spirit photography by manipulating the photos to portray the spirits of deceased people. It was believed that Mumler incorporated photo manipulations, such as combination printing, masking negatives, and placing dirty plates into slides, and the prosecution team was even successful in producing spirit photography of living people, which greatly discredited the objectivity and veracity people valued in photography.¹⁰ Regardless, human mediation was more explicitly seen in photography than ever before, and Mumler's spirit photography introduced new avenues of artistry through photo manipulations that were previously thought to be impossible. This notorious Mumler trial was emblematic of the forthcoming revelations and implementations of photo manipulations that have grown so common today.

Defined by photo alterations, the contemporary landscape of photography proves that it is anything but a science. Modern photo manipulations span a wide spectrum of deliberate and artistic choices: exposure times, perspectives, color tones, brightness, and lighting curves. Today, photography is often accessorized with Photoshop, Facetune, and Snapchat filters that demonstrate talent, aesthetic, and art direction, all of which starkly counter Baudelaire's belief of modernity poisoning art. This cannot reign true when it is modernity that continues to breathe artistry and expression in photography. Photography is emotionally compelling as it is realistic, which allows it to communicate strongly and provocatively with audiences. Throughout its protohistory, photographic levels of interest, and photo alterations, photography has elevated beyond its origins as a science to an art.

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