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ARTICLES

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Infinite exchange: The social ontology of the photographic image

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Abstract

This paper approaches the problem of the ontology of the photographic image 'post-digitalization' historically, via a conception of photography as the historical totality of photographic forms. It argues, first, that photography is not best understood as a particular art or medium, but rather in terms of the form of the image it produces; second, that the photographic image is the main social form of the digital image (the current historically dominant form of the image in general); and third, that there is no fundamental ontological distinction regarding indexicality between photographically generated digital images and those of chemically based photography. 'The anxiety about the real' produced by digital imagery has its origins elsewhere, in the ontological peculiarities of the social form of value in societies based on relations of exchange. Distinguishing

between the 'event of capture' and the 'event of visualization', it is argued that it is in its potential for an infinite multiplication of visualizations that the distinctiveness of the digital image lies. In the digital image, the infinite possibilities for social exchange generated by the abstraction of value from use finds an equivalent visual form.

What does it mean to speak of photography from the standpoint of philosophy? The difficulty derives as much from the idea of a unitary philosophical standpoint – however abstract – as it does from the rapidly changing nature of the photographic, which now famously threatens any discourse about photographic ontology. Philosophy is riven from within by disagreements about its purported disciplinary autonomy, status and form, and hence its standpoint in relation to other fields of enquiry. It is split, in particular, by disagreements about the legitimacy of philosophizing beyond, even against, philosophy itself (Adorno 1967: 235); and these disagreements are necessarily reflected in different ways of philosophizing about 'photography'.

Suffice to say, in the 200-year dispute between those who attempt to separate out philosophy as the critical self-consciousness of reason from the experience of objects, and those who would conjoin them in the notion of the construction of a *critical experience of objects*, I side with the latter. To speak about photography from the standpoint of philosophy, from this point of view, it is also necessary to speak about philosophy from the standpoint of photography. That is to say, one cannot subtract the historical character of the image from the image of thought. At one time, it was considered useful to oppose the *photographic* image of thought of a reified Cartesian consciousness (by which objects are 'frozen' into things in order to be made 'available to science and practice as things for others') to the *filmic* image of a dialectical thought (in which the details of individual moments of an object are subjugated to the rhythm of the movement of thinking) – Adorno described Hegel's dialectics as 'films of thought' (Adorno 1993: 100, 121). Yet today, with digital technologies of image production, this distinction is itself outmoded. The attempt to *rethink* the nature of the photographic image, post-digitalization, has consequences for the *reimaging* of thought and hence for philosophy itself. It is also bound up with the concept of art, in its generic, post-medium form. In what follows, I approach the concept of photography and the notion of the photographic image at once historically, philosophically and via their relations to the concept of art.

Photography, art, digitalization

It is a familiar feature of the history of the relationship between photography and art that it has at least as much to tell us about art, in general, and the consequences and limitations of particular conceptions of art, as it does about photography and its artistic possibilities and limitations. Indeed, if there is a

single practice in relation to which the development of the concept of art over the last 150 years is most often narrated, it is undoubtedly, I think, photography. By which I mean photography in its expanded (and still expanding) sense as the *historical totality of photographic forms*, or types of images produced in one way or another by the inscription of light: predominantly, until recently, chemical photography, of course, but also film, television, video and now – absolutely, I shall claim – digital photography, as well as photocopying and scanning, and even microwave imaging, infra-red, ultra-violet and short-wave radio imagery (Osborne 2003). Given this historical diversity of technologies, there is no more reason to privilege the chemical basis of traditional photographic image-creation in the delimitation of the parameters of the concept of photography than there would be to constrict the parameters of ‘painting’ by the chemical composition of pigments used during the Renaissance. Photography, like art, is a historical concept, subject to the interacting developments of technologies and cultural forms (that is to say, forms of recognition); increasingly, developments within photography, along with digital-based image production more generally, are *driving* the historical development of art. This is so not just reactively, as was initially mainly the case in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century (in the transformation and internal retreat of other forms of representation), but affirmatively, in the use of photographic technologies to produce ‘art’ of a variety of kinds.

The question of the relationship of photography to art may thus be posed in two different ways: (1) synchronically or conjuncturally, at some specific time in their related histories (specifically, for us, now), and (2) diachronically, as a narrative question about the relationship between two histories: in terms of the possibility of some unitary narrative, which might contribute to the intelligibility of each. Both of these methods presuppose a position on the other. What is not helpful, I think, is to seek an answer to the question of the relationship between photography and art *in general*, as if they were not historical concepts, in the manner of an analytical philosophy of art. Nonetheless, the existence of a constitutive historical dimension to these concepts does not mean that we need be positivists about history, and deny an ontological dimension to photography or indeed to art, or downgrade it to the status of what Jean-François Chevrier calls an ‘impoverished’ ontology (Rancière 2009: 12–13) – anymore that the existence of art institutions, socially delimiting the field of art, means that we need be positivists about institutional form. Rather, both photography and art can be meaningfully discussed within the discourse of historical ontology. This is the philosophical basis and field of the remarks that follow.

The photographic present is, clearly, digital. I shall thus address myself to the question, ‘What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography?’ and more specifically, ‘What does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography as a form of art?’ Please note, I say ‘form of art’ and not ‘medium’ because I wish to problematize (indeed, to reject) the assumption that what may legitimately be called ‘photography’ today displays the unity of a ‘medium’, in the sense adopted and developed by modernist formalism: namely, a specific combination of material means and conventions governing practices of production. In the light of this, the critical-philosophical task would

be to update or redefine our conception of that medium under the changed technological conditions of 'digitalization'. *Certain* photographic practices may exhibit such a unity, but, first, this unity is not that of the photographic *tout court*; and, second, more importantly, nor is it of any ontological significance for the status of those practices as art – in the way in which, within modernist formalism and before, the art-status of a particular practice was taken to derive from its being an instance of a particular art – where 'art' is understood as the art of a particular medium.

My thesis is that the photographic is not best understood as a particular art; it is currently the dominant form of the image in general.

The problem with the concept of medium is that it mortgages discussion of the relationship of photography and art to a particular problematic critical tradition (modernist formalism). Not only is this tradition inadequate to the comprehension of nearly all the most significant developments within the visual arts over the last fifty years (as well as in the second and third decades of the twentieth century); it has also come to function philosophically as the historical ground for the revival of a (broadly Kantian) aesthetics of contemporary art, and thereby, the perpetuation of a fundamental conflation of 'aesthetics' with the philosophy of art (a conflation which, historically, photography played a central role in breaking up). A philosophical approach to the concept of photography, and its relations to art, thus raises, in the first instance, the question not of an aesthetics of the photographic, or even 'aesthetics after photography', but rather of 'art after photography'. This is not to say that there is no aesthetic dimension to photography (or to contemporary art), but only that it is not the criterion of *art status*. Contemporary art is not aesthetic art, in anything like Kant's sense. The question 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography as an art form?' should thus be reposed, even more generically, as 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography in art?'

I say 'the nature of photography *in art*', rather than 'the nature of photography *as art*', since the latter in no way exhausts the former. Photography plays an important role in contemporary art beyond what we may call photographic art, or what others might still want to call 'art photography' – as an element or component of a wide variety of different kinds of installation work, for example. One of the most important, unresolved critical questions of the day concerns the relationship between these different kinds of practice: that is, whether they can be subjected to a single overarching critical problematic; and what the consequences are for the concept of art if they cannot. 'Art' is therefore a fundamentally bifurcated field, in which two quite different sets of critical conditions apply – as has been suggested recently by Jeff Wall. The critical contest here is one between a conception of photography as a *pictorial* medium and a conception of photography in art as the domain of the *image* in general (Wall 2007; Osborne and Wall 2008).

In posing the philosophical question of photography in this way – 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography in art?' – my aim is to reposition the question of

photography's relation to contemporary art within a different critical history of contemporary art. This is a history that is less centred on mediums, their multiplication, problematization and *revival* (the current, belated second coming of medium-specific modernism; the hallelujah chorus of the revival of 'aesthetics' as a philosophical discipline) and more centred on mediums, their multiplication, problematization and the *definitive destruction of their ontological significance* for art, by the combination of performance, minimalist, conceptual and other related practices of the 1960s (of which photography was a crucial constitutive part). Those practices changed the status and thereby the character of the traditional 'arts' of painting and sculpture, and also – one must presume – photography. This is a critical history that gives rise to a broad ontological characterization of contemporary art as a post-conceptual art.

The paradox here is that photography only gained generalized institutional recognition as an artistic practice after the destruction of the ontological significance of medium in the 1960s – a destruction to which photography made a distinctive contribution, primarily via its roles in the documentation of performance and within conceptual art practice. Photography thus became a part of 'art' at the moment that 'art' became post-conceptual. In this respect, one might say – contra Jeff Wall – that photography is art to the extent to which it is itself a post-conceptual practice.

Digitalization and the real (or, anxiety about abstraction)

There is an ambiguity in the formulation 'photography after digitalization' which goes to the heart of the complexity of the role of photography in contemporary art. It corresponds to the two-fold nature of the traditional photographic process. For the phrase can be understood to refer to (1) the digitalization of the *act of photographic capture*, in the sense of the translation of the distribution of intensities of light on the sensor into the binary code of the data file, within the digital camera, in the 'taking' of a photograph – the photographic 'event'; and (ii) the digital condition of the *production of an image* from a data file, the so-called 'digital image' (although the image itself – qua image – is not digital, of course, since the image is a visually structured abstraction of elements of the physical process). These two processes are disjunctive and hence potentially separable, since the data from which a digital image is produced need not be the result of photographic capture, and so the so-called digital image is therefore not necessarily photographic. It is the disjunction between these two processes that raises the possibility of the manipulation and transformation of 'photographic' data, subsequent to the taking of a picture, prior to its projection as an image – that is, computerized image processing. And it is this possibility that generates ontological concern – anxiety – about the 'no longer indexical' character of digital photographs.

There are a number of things to be said about this. The first is that the former of these two processes (the digitalization of the act of photographic capture) *retains* both the causal and deictic aspects of photographic indexicality – and hence its crucial function of grounding reproducibility – but

without the iconic aspect of perceptual resemblance previously associated with them.¹ As Walter Benjamin showed, however, the key to the icon is not perceptual resemblance as such, but reproducibility: the semiotic replicability of the pictorial image is grounded in its means of reproduction (a ‘rule of construction’ (Pierce) derived from a law of production) (Osborne 2000: 40). The ontological anxiety about the real generated by digital photography is *in this respect* misplaced. It derives, rather, from the disjunction between the two stages of the photographic process. Yet this disjunction is also a feature of traditional chemical photography, in the disjunction between the negative and the print – each, in principle, as open to manipulation as a digital data file. Thus the difference does not concern the possibility of manipulation, per se, but rather its precise character and quality; in particular, the extraordinary ‘fine grain’ manipulation that becomes possible at the level of the pixel, which can be performed in such a way as to leave no *visible* trace – relative to visual expectations governed by conventions of photographic realism. Nonetheless, artists (and others) have been intervening in the mechanisms of the photographic process since its inception, without generating the ontological anxiety about the loss of the real (loss of indexicality) that has accompanied the advent of digital photography. So, one must think, perhaps something else is going on here?

This anxiety appears irrational – which is, of course, no more than to acknowledge it *as* an anxiety: a free-floating anxiousness about the real that has ‘latched on’ to digital photography as a cultural site in which to invest, because of the social importance but current uncertainty about the various documentary functions of photography. The basic source of such anxiety has nothing to do with photography itself. Rather, I would speculate, it has to do with the nature of *the abstraction of social relations* characteristic of societies based on relations of exchange; and, in particular, the relationship between social form and the value form (in Marx’s sense) – that peculiar sense in which, in the parlance of current journalistic commentary, the most decisive sectors of the capitalist economy, associated with finance capital, are *not ‘real’*. In late autumn 2008, the media incessantly repeated the message that the world financial crisis had started to feed through into the ‘real’ economy. There was, and is, something ontologically peculiar about this. For it is precisely the *most* real part of the economy – in the sense of being the most determinative – finance capital, which is declared ‘unreal’ here. The troubling thing is that in societies based on generalized exchange, certain kinds of abstraction (money being the most famous example) are in fact real or actual in a manner that does not correspond to the ontology of empirical realism that governs ordinary- language use of the term ‘real’ – hence the disjunction between the actually very ‘real’ economy of finance capital and everyday individual perceptions of the ‘real’ economy. This is the famously ‘spectral’ or inverted ontology of value familiar to readers of Marx’s *Capital* for well over 100 years now. The reason that I raise it here is that, I propose, it is anxiety about the real generated by these peculiar social forms (within which the most real appears unreal, and the apparently or empirically real has little determinative

1. I take David Green and Joanna Lowry’s point here about the neglected importance of the deictic side of this: the importance of the manner of pointing to the event of inscription – ostension as a constitutive, performative feature of photographic indexicality. Green and Lowry 2003.

significance) that is displaced onto and invested in the problem of the referential significance of digitally produced images. The fact that there is, in principle, *no necessary visible indicator* of the referential value of such an image mimics the structure of the commodity, in which there is no necessary relation between use-value and exchange-value.

Philosophically, then, I propose, there is no particular ontological problem posed by digital picture taking. There is, rather, a set of normative issues about the conventions governing the processing of data in the interval between its 'capture' and its projection or printing, under technological conditions facilitating a generalized manipulation of the components of images. This decoupling of the photographic image from its indexical ground (which remains at the outset) has a particular significance in the context of art, since art has been understood, philosophically, since early German romanticism as a form of self-conscious illusion. Might it not be the growing self-consciousness of the *potentially* illusory character of the photographic image, subsequent to its digitalization, that makes it the form of image most appropriate to art as self-conscious illusion? And is there not thus a strange convergence here, actualized in the digital image, between art and the commodity form?

The visible, the invisible and the multiplication of visualizations

Insofar as there is an ontological peculiarity or novelty at issue here, it attaches to the digital image per se, and not just the 'photographically' generated one – although most digitally produced images are, as a matter of empirical fact, photographically based, in one way or another. It derives from the lack of visual 'resemblance' between digital data and the projected or printed form of the image it generates. Insofar as it makes any sense to talk of a digitally produced image as some kind of 'copy' of the data out of which it is made, it is a *visible* copy of an *invisible* original, since it is the digital data that plays the role of the original here, rather than the situation or event that is depicted, which is its more distant, shadowy source. This is quite different from the role of the negative as the mediator between the act of photographic capture and the print. The contiguity of these two processes is ruptured by the ontological peculiarity, or self-sufficiency, of digitalized data. On the other hand, however, we might see this as little more than a variation (albeit also an intensification) of the essentially *theological* character of the traditionally chemical-based photographic image itself.

As Boris Groys has pointed out, insofar as a digital image is a visible copy of an invisible original, 'the digital image is functioning as a Byzantine icon – as a visible copy of invisible God' (Groys 2008: 84). Groys, however, appears to take this theological structure to be distinctive of digital imagery. Yet this is something it shares with the traditional photograph in a different form (Osborne 2000: 34–35). What is distinctive about the digitally produced image is that it exhibits something like a *de-temporalization* of the theological structure of the photograph, consequent upon its rupture in the continuity

between the two stages of the photographic process. Its decisive difference lies in the attention it calls to the *multiplication of varieties* of forms of visualization made possible by that rupture, within the parameters of what are still, essentially, processes of replication.

In Barthes' famous account in *Camera Lucida*, the temporal peculiarity of the photograph (as the literal presence of the past) is understood to effect an 'immobilization' and 'engorgement' of time (Barthes 1984: 91). This represents a naturalization of the theological structure of the icon, via time, because meaning participates in the real through the becoming 'carnal' of light. In the digital image, on the other hand, time is not immobilized or engorged so much as obliterated, insofar as any ontological significance of the physical contiguity of digital data is negated by the rupture in its visual form: its translation into binary code. It is this rupture that allows Groys to figure digital data as 'invisible' and hence metaphorically God-like. But it is not just *invisibility* that figures divinity in this account of the digital image but, ultimately more importantly, the *creative potential* of digitalized data to generate an in-principle-infinite *multiplicity of forms of visualizations*; although Groys does not quite put it like this himself, since he is primarily concerned with the mediating role of the curator as 'the performer of the image' (Groys 2008: 85), rather than the infinite potentiality of the data that underlies this role. (For Groys, it is digitalization that allows the curator to usurp the role of the artist.)

Invisibility and the multiplication of visualizations are linked insofar as, following the line of thought of iconoclastic religions, it is precisely the multiplicity of visualizations that sustains the invisibility of the invisible; since, were the invisible to be associated with a single, or even a few stable visible forms, the invisible would become identified with them, and would henceforth be rendered visible after all. It is thus the multiplication of possible forms of visualization/projection (screen, monitor, wall, etc.) deriving from the generic power of digitalization to *free itself from any particular medium* that, ultimately, distinguishes the digital image from its chemically photographic predecessor. And it is this multiplication of possible forms of visualization/projection that allows Groys to claim that, although the digital image remains in some sense a copy (a copy of its data), each 'event of its visualization is an original event' (Groys 2008: 90). So here we have the 'event' again: not the event of photographic capture, but *the event of visualization*. Originality thus migrates, or at least, is doubled: moving from *what* it is that is copied (now, the data) to the *form* of the copy. This has significant consequences for art practice, as well as for curation.

With regard to photography, though, we can say that the main function of digitalization is to place photography within the generic field of the digital image. This generically digital-based field is the closest thing there is to a material medium of the generic concept of 'art', characteristic of the post-conceptual artistic field. Indeed, one might go as far as to propose that the unity of the field of contemporary art is secured (internally to its institutionality, which sets its ultimate, social parameters) by the possibility of the digitally mediated re-presentation of works. (Digital imagery, one might say, plays the role projected for language – but which language could not play – within analytical conceptual art.)

This is not a ‘dematerialization’ of art (or photography), however – always a misunderstanding of art’s conceptual character – but a materially specific medium of generation of an in-principle-infinite field of visualizations (the data file). If there is a meaningful site of ‘dematerialization’ at stake here, it does not lie in the data file, nor in the conceptual dimension of the work (the originally postulated site of dematerialization) – which is actually always tied to specific materializations – but rather (ironically) in the image itself, insofar as the image is the name for the perceptual *abstraction* of a visual structure from its material form. Via the multiplicity of visualizations, digitalization draws attention to the essentially *de*-realized character of the image. It is this de-realized image – supported in each instance by specific material processes – that strangely ‘corresponds’ to the ontological status of the value-form. The return to medium – medium as a reactive response to an anxiety of its own (anxiety about the end of mediums as ‘arts’, as a discrete version of anxiety about the real more generally), or, we might say, medium as a mode of passive nihilism in art – is the dialectical counterpart to this de-realization of the image. De- (and therefore potentially re-) realized images may be infinitely exchanged. This is the social meaning of the ontology of the digital image, of which photography is now but one (albeit crucial) kind. In the digital image, the infinity of exchange made possible by the abstraction of value from use finds an equivalent visual form.

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