

The Medium As Subject

by Charles Desmarais



Keith Smith, a page from "When I was two" a book in progress.

miniscule number of consciously "artistic" photographs produced in the last century and a half have been far from the mainstream of artistic thought.

"Context," of course, is the key word, especially in talking about the art of our century. A black painting by Ad Reinhardt would be completely meaningless without some knowledge and understanding of the miles of canvas coated by oceans of paint that were consumed before Reinhardt's time. In the same way, "the snapshot aesthetic" wouldn't make much sense as a term or as an idea without snapshots.¹

Though we don't ordinarily spell it out as a condition for photographic criticism, I think all would agree that photographs must be considered within the context of the history of photography (as narrow a context as that might be). At any rate, we operate on that assumption all the time—without editorial suggestions that we do otherwise—in dealing with the kind of picture we all *used* to call a photograph, or at least, a straight photograph. But I think the real problem in my choosing to write about Heinecken for an art magazine was not that his work contains photographic elements and is therefore out of the realm of "art." It was that the work incorporates non-photographic techniques (like hand-coloring, collage and the addition of a third dimension) and materials (like canvas and paints and inks). The assumption on my editor's part was that, because Heinecken's pictures were made of the stuff of traditional painting and sculpture, they need to be considered as part of those traditions.

question, "then you can't be suggesting that there are separate criteria for judging works in each medium, can you?"

The obvious answer (though I didn't press the point then) is yes. "Yes" with more or less emphasis depending upon the specific picture under discussion, but I would nearly always say that photographs, and/or pictures with a large amount of photographic content, *do* require certain critical assumptions and expectations specific to their genus, and must be discussed in different terms from pictures in other media.

Of course, that's not so shocking an idea, on the face of it. Every medium has its own physical characteristics, for instance, that separate it and give it its own context (one wouldn't ordinarily talk about impasto in discussing a lithograph, say). But beyond the physical, the non-photographic visual arts share their conceptual contexts. A concern, an idea, a movement in painting usually corresponds to one in sculpture and (to a somewhat lesser extent) traditional printmaking. Photography, though, has been a bastard for so long that even that

A short time ago I wrote a review of Robert Heinecken's work for one of the New York art periodicals. The article emphasized the importance of considering Heinecken as a photographer, and was largely an effort to distinguish his work on that basis from the work of Pop Artists who used similar imagery (Mel Ramos, Richard Hamilton, Allan Jones, Wayne Thiebaud, etc.) or techniques (notably Rauschenberg). The distinction was useful, I felt, because Heinecken's originality lies mainly in his statements about the photographic medium, and his influence has been almost solely on photographers. The social/political content of his work, on the other hand, has never seemed either original or influential.

That article was turned back to me to be rewritten, the journal's editor strongly suggesting that whether we call Heinecken "photographer" or some other name was irrelevant; that the *process* by which the work was produced shouldn't affect the way we understand it. "If the complaint all along has been that photography and painting should be considered on equal terms," came the

But "drawing with light" implies more than silver salts embedded in gelatin on a paper support, and the word "photography" has come to denote an attitude and a new system of symbols as much as a technique. Despite our awareness of these facts, we still tend to make generalizations about our medium on the basis of the straight photographic technique.

This is probably to be expected—first, because it is far and away the most commonly used technique, and second, because the unmanipulated camera image embodies and preserves for easy, careful inspection a number of uniquely photographic characteristics. But precisely because those characteristics are immutably recorded in the straight photograph, we have the opportunity to study them—to mentally extract them and apply this new information to an understanding of that bastard child of bastard children, the manipulated photographic image.

Such images have repeatedly been overlooked, misunderstood or maligned because there has been no consistent attempt to view them as fully a part of the context in which they have been made and shown. Audiences, curators, even many of the artists making the pictures have taken only one step, in agreeing that if a picture is made with some photo-sensitive materials, it may on occasion hang with "real" photographs. The logical second step—to ask what the significance of the pictures and their photographic content might be—is too frequently beyond our interests or capabilities.

Not that there haven't been a few serious attempts to examine the manipulated photograph. But these have been based on the same misconceptions that commonly allow such work to be ignored. For instance, John Upton's essay, "The New Vision of the '70s," dwells upon a distinction between the daguerreotype as "a clear window opening on to the subject," and the calotype, whose practitioners, he tells us, were "concerned with the transformation of the photographic image into an art object." "These differences," he says, "indicated two stylistic directions which have persisted to the present day."²

This construct may at times be useful because it defines an important difference in working attitudes among some photographers, but that difference is not as closely related to technique as Upton—throughout his article—suggests. Furthermore, the distinction between the print with a "taint of handwork" as art object, and the window-like photograph as something else, emphasizes an unexamined assumption that such pictures are necessarily at two opposite poles.³ Thus we are led—or at least permitted—to think that to deal with one type of picture is to consciously exclude the other.

It might be more fruitful to consider *all* photographs first as part of the same family, and only with exceptional cause as referents to other media and traditions.⁴ From this point of view—again, considering pictures as

part of the particular contextual framework accepted by the artist—certain work gets a lot more interesting and gains a lot more meaning than it might have as some isolated accident of art.

There are so many cases in point that it's somewhat artificial to select just a few examples. One series of prints by Robert Heinecken is especially reliant upon its relationship to the rest of photography, and also happens to be a particularly apt comment on the whole window vs. art object issue. His *Documentary Photographs* were made by placing different meals (a bacon and egg breakfast, a dinner of pork chops and peas) into direct contact with photographic paper and exposing to light. The resulting prints seemed part "experimental art," in that they were photograms with a look similar to that of some of the work of Moholy-Nagy or Man Ray, and part record—though the term "documentary" seemed more appropriate (especially ten years ago) to records of social conditions than of what some artist had for breakfast.

The series could be (and often is) taken as simply a re-presentation of objects of popular American taste. As such, it doesn't hold up to a lot of earlier work in painting—say, Thiebaud's cakes or Warhol's soup cans. However, just as the work of those painters connoted far more than the junk food they denoted (technical and aesthetic problems of realism, monumentality of scale as it relates to conceptual monuments of culture, a desire for subject content in an art world of non-referential painting, etc.), so Heinecken's pop documents raise questions about the validity of current photo terminology, and about nature of the photographic document.

Other works in Heinecken's oeuvre which rely on photographic elements include his "sculptural" pieces (which play the apparently supple volume of a nude form depicted in photographs against the actual geometric volume of the cubes to which the pictures are attached), the *Multiple Solution Puzzles* (which our minds insist should be reconstructed into recognizable human forms, even while the puzzles themselves frustrate such an attempt) and his well-known *TV/Time* (a television viewed through a transparency of a nude—an instrument for spontaneous collage that recycles the mundane commercial narratives of TV into substantial if temporary combinations of sex, violence and materialism).

Joan Lyons recently showed me some drawings which also relate to this discussion. These she did in 1969, before she began to incorporate photography into her work. For her series, Lyons used a number of technical variations to create subtle, organic forms and fleshy landscapes, often punctuated by tiny bits of geometry—stars, octagons, crosses and the like. To get these shapes and forms, she used a minimum of free-hand sketching, preferring, instead, to trace around templates or to employ plant forms as spray paint stencils. Lyons herself points out that the pieces are,

for the most part, monochromatic, and that they are roughly the size of photographs (about 11x14 or so).

Lyons was a painter and designer before taking up photographic techniques. That knowledge may help to explain her choice of xerography (which, in her hands, produces pictures that resemble charcoal drawings) and photolithography as favored media today. But the correspondence of physical characteristics in her new and old work doesn't help to clarify much else.

The proto-photographic series of drawings from 1969, however, makes a number of things clear. They show that for Lyons the use of a camera is not simply a matter of convenience, or even of "correct rendering." Though she may refer to her xerox copy camera and processor as "just another drawing tool," it is a very special kind of tool—one which traces every outline, every detail; which, more than simply *reproducing* or even *re-creating* a subject, actually preserves a remnant of it, in the same way the spray paint frozen shadows are direct impressions of their plant stencils.

A list of other printmakers who are very clearly making use of their photographic heritage might include Sonia Sheridan, whose 3M prints of plants recall Talbot's photogenic drawings (but add the machine colors of the mid-Twentieth Century) or whose prints of bodies and faces are direct topographic transcriptions; John Wood, who builds little photographic "windows" into his elaborate, flat-surfaced collages; and Scott Hyde, who, in earlier work, devised a way to present several layers of information simultaneously, giving the viewer the option to accept all the layers at once, or follow the color codes to break down the image into its original components.

Of all the photographers who mix media, perhaps the one who achieves the most effective blend is Keith Smith. Smith began making pictures at age two, he says, but didn't become involved in photography until a number of years later when his sister sent him an inexpensive camera.⁵ Later, while a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Smith took a photography course with Kenneth Josephson. His initial reason for getting heavily into photography was actually a response to photographers' narrow views of what they were doing.

He told me:

It was *such* a *purist* medium. Anything would go in painting, but in photography they were so strict—they wanted everything just so-so . . . I just wanted to do anything they said they wouldn't like—draw on the pictures, bleach them, or whatever . . . There was no group of picture-makers I knew who were more strict than straight photographers, and that was the only thing I knew back then. Even Josephson's work was all straight at that time. So there was an open field—there were so many things you could do.

Smith's earliest photographic works maintained what his teachers called the "integrity" of the photographic image (by leaving it undisturbed) but challenged assumptions about the manner in which it might be presented. Thus, he applied photo emulsions to eggs, shoes, and other supports, and printed on them. Because a photographer Smith respected insisted that photographs should not be hand-colored, he made transparent overlays and colored *them*.

One of his early unique books is composed of a number of large black and white transparencies which, piled one on another when the book is closed, combine to become completely opaque. Thus toying with our ideas about the nature of photographic information, Smith has produced a book which (like any good book) becomes clearer with every turned page, but he accomplishes this by reducing the amount of information provided. (Of course, as the right hand page becomes simpler, the left gets more complex until the book, once again, is completely black.)

This programmed obliteration of the photograph is part of what Smith is about. One large series of large portraits is so brightly and heavily toned that the people pictured are transformed into thick-lipped green men (or whatever). The exaggerated colors and facial outlines conflict directly with the (black and white) photographic details which still show through, and the dichotomy is confusing and challenging.

In other work, snapshot poses are the norm for figures in both photo-derived images and in Smith's drawings and etchings. Books which don't contain photographs (silver prints or residue from copy machines or found halftones or other photographic material) are constructed and exhibited so that light itself becomes both subject and form. A very recent series of pieces (which Smith plans to publish as a small edition book) contains drawings and photography so convincingly combined that it is extremely difficult to determine where drawing ends and photograph begins.

Perhaps having stated the obvious (that many artists who use photography with other media lean heavily on photographic statements and meanings), we are left with certain questions which critics have hardly considered, much less answered. Why do these and other printmakers choose to use photography? What is the significance of the photographic content in their work? Are there special problems for critics and viewers in dealing with the work of such printmaker/photographers?

Technique itself, of course, often determines content—as in Heineken's television with nude transparency or his shuffled and rebound magazines. And, as Keith Smith's rebellion against the straight aesthetic reminds us, technique can be a statement of philosophy, too. It may also be that the "democratic" nature of the photograph is a political reason for incorporating cam-

era images into one's work. Yet, are there subtler incentives to take up photographic methods?

One of the most alluring aspects of photography to some artists is the nearly absolute technical supremacy of the photographic image. It is, first of all, an easy and potentially accurate means for putting images on paper. But perhaps even more attractive is those images' near indestructibility. Photographic perspective, framing, definition, lines, tones, and symbols for space and time all combine to make the photo image—or portions of a photographic image—recognizable amidst even the most extensive manipulation and/or embellishment. When used most effectively, the quality provides the artist with a universal (and realistic, in a sense) foil for his or her more personal reflections, freer techniques, or wilder dreams.

At the same time as the identifiability of the photographic process keeps it from becoming obscured by handwork or ornament, the photograph remains an apt subject for such manipulations. At least since Impressionism (and probably since well before) the painter has been expected, even when he or she painted what he/she saw, to paint it the way it appeared to that individual. Photography, on the other hand, is still expected to be capable of some sort of objective recording. Thus, the artist who would manipulate a trusted document in order to convince his or her audience of some higher truth—or of the untrustworthiness of documents—has in photography the best (and perhaps the only remaining) tool.⁶

The "objectivity," the realism of those tenacious bits of photograph that show through the painting or the scratches or the collaging is often more than solely a contrapuntal device, however. That illusion of something real and true can also make it easier for us to "suspend our disbelief": to accept the picture in its entirety as something that relates to our own world.

The suspension of disbelief that is required in our transactions with anecdotal works of art (verbal or visual) is frequently only possible if we are willing to foster it in ourselves. Most often, a play, a film, a narrative sculpture will give us many clues to its artificiality which we readily ignore in order to get to the substance of the work.

Ironically, the straight photograph tricks us into believing in it, thereby obviating the need for us to willingly accept a falsehood. (Of course, because we are tricked doesn't make such photographs any less false than any other verbal or visual images.) The manipulated photograph, though, *does* require an initial readiness to look for things or events in a picture which correspond to one's own experience. Perhaps "trained" by straight photos, too many viewers and critics who might otherwise understand certain work as part of the larger medium of light-drawing fail to make the effort. This factor, I think, is one of the roots of the unenthusiastic response mixed-media photography has always faced.

There are inherent obstacles to dissemination which also work against wider appreciation and understanding. Color, surface, subtleties, size, fragility, uniqueness, etc. play a large part in much of this work, making it difficult to reproduce, show or collect. Such obstacles and attitudes have created the current situation, wherein it is nearly impossible to see or hear about the work.⁷

What we need most of all in this important area of our field is information. We need exhibitions and publications. We need reporting on the work and critical explanations of it. We need interviews with the artists, and /or publication of their writings. Without all this, we know only a small part of what is, broadly and completely, the contemporary scene in photography.

NOTES

1. All this is changing very fast, I realize. The freshest of new photographers have entered the "art world" and have quickly brought the medium up as far as minimalism, while former painters are adopting the camera as a narrative tool and are working their way back. If this continues at the present rate, it won't be long till all the visual arts can be thought of as coming from similar backgrounds.
2. Kelly Wise, ed., *The Photographers' Choice* (Danbury, NH: Addison House, 1975), pp. 45-52.
3. Of course, such distinctions themselves are doubtful. Where is the line between the photograph as window and the photograph as art object? Are Gary Hallman's large, high-key pictures objects because they emphasize surface and picture plane, or windows because they still represent a single subject? Does Ralph Gibson's exaggeration of grain and contrast reduce the transparency of his windows to the point where they become pictures? And what of the work of such abstractionists as Moholy-Nagy, Brett Weston, Siskind, or Baltz, who use straight photographic techniques toward their ends?
4. I would also suggest that we consider all pictures which make use of photographic techniques, imagery, or elements as photographs, and thus part of the family. Someone told me that this is tantamount to saying that almost all twentieth-century pictures are, in the broadest sense, photographs. So be it. The way Hilton Kramer comes to his understanding of pictures is to relate them to the terms in which he is trained to think. That makes him a decent critic of painting but a lousy photography critic. Perhaps we can apply the opposite corollary in our attempt to understand photographs. Besides, *aren't* all significant twentieth-century pictures photographs, or responses to photographs?
5. Most of the biographical information and all of the quotations relating to Smith are from an unpublished interview I did with him on Feb. 23, 1977.
6. Keith Smith on this point: "I like combinations. I think one of the things I do best is putting together discordant elements—whether they're peacefulness and unworldliness, or beautiful and ugly; or whether they're thread and cloth and hair and such . . . So if I make something an extremely beautiful color, I put just a little bit of shit in there. Or if it's approaching elegant, I still try and make it look hand made, so that it's not all slick and looking machine made."
7. That many workers are taking up offset photolithography as an original print medium will help to alleviate this somewhat. This, however, is only one, narrow, option.

Charles Desmarais is Director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, a program at Columbia College, Chicago. The above paper was presented to the Second Conference on Photographic Criticism, held last spring at Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y. Some of the other papers presented at the conference appeared in the May/June issue of Afterimage.