

Lecture SMBA February 21, 2007

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The Interaction between Theories of Photography and Contemporary Photographic Practice

Contemporary photography is so diverse that it is almost impossible to characterize it in general. Nevertheless, some scholars tried to formulate an 'umbrella definition'. For instance, the German scholar Hubertus von Amelnunxen who had to characterize photography in different periods in the introductions of the four volumes of *Theorie der Fotografie* (Theory of Photography), concerning the history of the theory of photography. In his introduction to the fourth (last) volume *Theorie der Fotografie IV: 1980-1995* (2000), he describes contemporary photography as 'Mediumreflexion' (reflection on the medium). He wrote this introduction more than six years ago, but his statement is not out-dated yet. Since we almost all agree that it is impossible to define the characteristics of photography exactly, questioning these characteristics and reflecting on different views appear to be more interesting than trying to find the ultimate definition.

The discussion concerning the nature of photography already started in the middle of the 19th century, shortly after the invention of photography. Two main issues in the discussion were, and still are:

- The relation between a photograph and the referent or reality (I shall not bother you with a terminological discussion in semiotics)
- The comparison of photography with other media, especially painting and film

These two issues refer to two different perspectives on photography. The first concentrates on the view of photography as a window to reality. The second concentrates on photography as a medium, as an intermediary or interface between the observer of a photograph and reality. These two topics are related to two positions that were analyzed and described by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book *Remediation* (1999) and characterized as 'Transparency' versus 'Hypermediation'.

Transparent media give their users the impression that they are directly experiencing the reality the media portray in sight or sound. These users look through 'transparent' media, without having to pay attention to the device between them observing and the observed object. According to Bolter and Grusin, painting lost its transparency when photography was invented. And film made photography lose its transparency because it moves. But, before going further into this remark and the question how transparent photography is or can be, I will first discuss the other position, of 'Hypermediation'.

Hypermedial media are media that draw attention not to the reality they represent but to themselves as the representing media. Whereas you look *through* transparent media, you look *at* hypermedial media.

So, is photography a transparent or hypermedial medium? That depends. I will first quote the photographer and theorist Victor Burgin from his book *Thinking Photography* (1982):

"'Water' is not the same *theoretical* object in chemistry as it is in hydraulics - an observation which in no way denies that chemists and engineers alike drink, and shower in, the same *substance*. By much the same token, 'photography' is not the same object in photography theory as it is when it appears in a general theory of social formation."

So, in relation to the question whether photography is a transparent or a hypermedial medium, I experience a difference between my focus (that of a lecturer in theories of photography) on the abilities and nature of photography, and that of many other people who consider looking at photographs a direct experience of reality.

But the answer to the question whether photography is a transparent or hypermedial medium, also depends on the theme or subject of the photograph and the function and context of it. An exhibition, like 'Capricious' in SMBA, in which the leading thread is 'presentation forms of photography', draws more attention to the medium than an exhibition concerning a political or philosophical theme. But within this exhibition there are also differences between photographs which put more emphasis on the medium than others.

I don't want to categorize the photographs in this exhibition from more transparent to more hypermedial, since there are no clear criteria for defining these categories, but by emphasizing characteristics of photography, like *Flash Light* by Katja Mater, or juxtaposing photographs to its referent, as Marianne Viero does, the medium particularly draws attention.

According to Victor Burgin, the relation of photography with painting and film is based on sharing the static image with painting and the camera with film, but photography is

encountered in a fundamentally different way from either of them. The work of Katja Mater seems to address the relation between photography and film, whereas the work of Marianne Viero seems to address, in a way, the analogy between photographs and paintings as static objects.

Although the series of Melanie Bonajo and Linda-Maria Birbeck draw attention to issues concerning gender and identity, mirroring plays an important role, which is both a sociological and psychological item as a characteristic of photography.

So, in this lecture I like to address, in relation to this exhibition, three issues from theories of photography:

1. light and time in photography and film
2. the relation between photography and its referent
3. mirroring and photography

1. Light and time in photography and film

As you all know Photography literally means Writing with light or Drawing with light, based on the Greek words Photos and Graphein. From the start the aspect time was involved: how long do you need to expose your photosensitive material to the light? The important difference, often mentioned, between photography and film, is the difference between registration of an object varying from some minutes to a split second in photography and registration of moving objects during a much longer period of time in film. For film lovers this real time experience is the proof of the superiority of film in comparison with photography.

A remarkable example of discussing the difference between the light and time relation in photography and film, are the well-known photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto of American movie theatres. In this series the exposure time coincides with the projection time of the entire film, leaving a white rectangle at the place of the film screen. The film has disappeared and the photograph remains, so you may consider this photograph a victory of photography over film.

In his analysis of this series of Sugimoto Hans Belting concludes that these photographs discuss some interesting differences as well as parallels between film and photography ('Invisible Movies in Sugimoto's "Theaters"', 2002). At first sight we seem to look through a large window at the sunlight. Both photography and film are often considered as a mirror of

reality and is literally, in the camera, a mirror of light. Moreover these photographs make us feel as if we are located in a camera or even a camera obscura, looking to the world.

This photograph does not show what we see when we watch a film. Sitting in this dark theatre, we would see a film, which is completely illusive. Conversely, this photograph shows real life, which is here, with the light and the interior. The photograph comprises the light of about two hours of both the film itself and the light of the film on the interior, since the film is the only source of light.

Comparing the work *Flash Film no 5, Present absence* by Katja Mater with the photographs of Sugimoto both projects discuss the relation between photography and film. But, whereas we in Sugimoto's photograph see a registration of about one hour and a half, we see in Mater's *Flash Film* the split second of the flash light. It is interesting that we are dazzled by the light in both works. Through the overkill of light, these works seem to present photography in its characteristic of recording light. And, observing the works of Sugimoto and Mater we wonder if we look at a film or a photograph. Mater's film makes us aware that photography and film aren't different media, but that film actually consists of an amount of photographs. Like in Sugimoto's series, we can only observe the photographs.

2.

So, on the one hand photography shares with film the camera, which means recording light. On the other hand photography shares, like Burgin states, the static image with painting. But before discussing this aspect, I will start section 2 of my lecture with discussing the term Metapictures. In many paintings of painters at work, we see the referent and the painting juxtaposed, demonstrating that mimesis, copying reality, is the aim of the painter. We see the process of production and the result at the same time [Aert de Gelder, *Zeuxis*, 1685]. W.J.T. Mitchell (*Picture Theory*, 1994) calls a picture which has itself as a subject a 'metapicture'. It is interesting to realise that we find here an important difference between painting and photography. It is not possible to transpose this situation to photography although photography is said to be the mirror of the visible world. Of course we can find metapictures of a photographer taking photographs of the referent, or the photographer and the referent together with the final product, but not taking and making photographs, since these are two different steps. Of course, photographers try to find inventive solutions to show both the process and the product, but it is different from the painter at work (as in some of Helmut Newton's self-portraits).

So, not being able to present both the production and the result like in painting, the photographer has to choose whether to juxtapose the taking of the photograph and the referent OR the results of the production process juxtaposed to the referent, like Marianne Vierø does. Not a photographed juxtaposition in this case, but a live juxtaposition. In this way she demonstrates on the one hand that the photographed objects are almost identical with the real objects. On the other hand the juxtaposition calls forth the discussion about the relation between referent and photograph. This relation is quite complicated here, so let's start with a statement of Roland Barthes and some other works of art.

Roland Barthes stated in his famous book *La chambre claire* (1980) or *Camera Lucida* (the title of the English translation) that the noeme or essential characteristic of photography is ça-a-été (that-has-been), which means that you can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and from the past.

But what does this mean in relation to the kind of projects, that I will show you now? This is one of the scale models made by the Constant Nieuwenhuis for his New Babylon project. Constant preferred to exhibit photographs next to his scale models, and as a part of his project. At first sight the photographs refer to a place which exists or existed and which you can enter. But as a result of the juxtaposition of the photographs and the scale model, you realise that this place can only be experienced in this way in the photographs. Constant hoped that it would be a real place once, in the future. So these photographs are supposed to refer to a place in the future instead of a place in the past.

The next one is the mixed media work *Fly Catchers* by the German artist Astrid Klein. We can't identify the location on the photograph, but we recognize the place in the photograph as a room, where the fly catchers are hanging down from the ceiling. It is hard to say if the real fly catchers look more real than the ones on the photograph, in function. And since the objects are still packed, the photograph suggests a situation in the future. The photograph reminds us of illustrations in operation instructions: "How to use a fly catcher?" What kind of place are the real fly catchers in? The place is real but what kind of place is it? A showcase? It is not the box in which you buy these things. It looks more like a flat abstract painting or photograph. The photograph (at the right side) clarifies what these abstract stripes really are.

And what about the project of Marianne Vierø? At first sight the photographs look like documentation of the manufacturing process or the instruction in stages: How to make this still life out of furniture. Conversely, we may also interpret the objects as ingredients, as a first step. In that case the photographs refer to possible situations in the future, like the photographs of fly catchers of Klein and the architecture of Constant.

As I mentioned before, according to Roland Barthes (in *La chambre claire/Camera Lucida*, 1980), but also according to Susan Sontag (in *On Photography*, 1977) a photograph makes us aware of a moment in the past which is impossible to experience again in real. By offering the public the ingredients or referents, Vierø, Constant and Klein seem to invite the public to recreate the photographed situation or at least suggest the possibility of it.

The objects of Constant, Klein and Vierø are part of real space, the same space that *we* are part of. Nevertheless the objects form an impenetrable whole. Conversely the photographs seem to be able to call forth the experience of entering the photographed space. So we seem to be excluded from the real space of the objects and invited to enter the illusionist space of the photograph.

3.

Before discussing the third issue of Mirroring and photography, I like to reflect on the chameleonic nature of photography. The hybrid or even chameleonic nature of photography is partly expressed in the different presentation forms of photography. As we see in this exhibition, photography can be presented as physical prints, as immaterial projections or images on objects like playing cards. Moreover photography cannot only easily be combined with sound, text or objects, but even new entities are constituted in mixed media works of art. And photographs as prints can only be seen in a lit-up space, opposite to slides which can only be seen in the dark, like film.

A slide show looks like a series photographs and a film, but differs from both of them.

Darsie Alexander describes the characteristics of slideshows in his essay in the catalogue *Slide Show* (Tate Gallery, London, 2005). In contrast with series of prints presented on a wall next to each other, you can't experience the whole slideshow at once. But in contrast to film the slides are literally confined by the click of the projector. The slides are related, but don't have to become a continuing narrative. The slide show of *Bondages* by Melanie Bonajo has no order at all. This slide show doesn't have a linear narrative. It is a series of statements.

These photographs made me think of a statement by the photographer Gary Winogrand:

"Photography is not about the thing photographed. It is about how that thing looks photographed."

In theories of photography taking photographs is often compared with voyeurism, abuse of power. For instance, Susan Sontag states: "... having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur ... a camera is sold as a predatory weapon – one that's as automated as possible, ready to spring."

The photographer, often white and male, gazes at his subject, often female. John Berger defined these positions in 1972, in *Ways of Seeing* as: "One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."

In contemporary photography many photographers intend to interrogate the characteristics and conventions of photography. Many female artists interrogate in their work the male gaze. And since especially photography is so often characterized as the medium of voyeurism, photography appears to be the most appropriate medium to address the male gaze.

Instead of presenting women in other roles than before, we experience among female photographers a preference for overdoing, exaggeration, overstatements, irony, and absurdum of representations of women.

For instance, the *Film Still* photographs of Cindy Sherman look very familiar because of the female stereotypes. One can imagine having seen all those Hollywood-like films. Of course, the question concerning these kinds of photographs occurs: If these photographs were taken by a male photographer, what would the difference be?

In the series *Hot Wheels* by Linda-Maria Birbeck the camera seems to replace the rear-view mirror in the car. Whereas the slides of Bonajo deal more with the voyeurism and power of the photographer, the photographs of Birbeck are rather about girls watching themselves, which is confirmed by the statements of the girls that are added as captions to the photographs.

Anne Marsh addresses in her book *The Darkroom - Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (2003) the traditional comparison of the camera with a mirror: "The idea that the camera is a mirror has conventionally been framed in terms of the camera as a witness. However, if one argues that the subject is often, if not always, posed, then the mirroring qualities of the camera

suggest another interpretation which can draw on psychoanalysis and the theory of the mirror as metaphor for false identities."

These theories refer to the image in the mirror as the Other, to whom we have to position ourselves.

Unfortunately I don't have enough time to go deeply into the issue of isolation and silence as characteristics of photography, both literally and metaphorical, as defined by Jean Baudrillard in his book *Le crime parfait (The perfect crime)*.

I have to wind up my lecture now. This exhibition demonstrates the versatile character of photography: Sometimes photographs and texts depend on each other, sometimes photographs and sound, or photographs and objects. But, according to Sandra Smets in the Dutch Newspaper *NRC*, this exhibition lacks texts and statements (the SMBA website and free *SMBA Newsletter* notwithstanding). I hope that my presentation adds enough theoretical reflections to the exhibition, although I did not try to convince you that photography has an own identity and medium specific characteristics of which we can draw up an inventory. I agree with Clive Scott (in *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language*, 1999) that "Photography is such a fluid, mobile, unstable medium, so diverse in its applications, that any writer who takes it as a subject should avoid being too categorical about any aspect of it." Probably the only general conclusion about the identity of photography we can draw is the chameleonic nature of it and works in this exhibition and the title of it: *Capricious*, confirms this statement.

More information on the exhibition 'Capricious. Young photographers', held in Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam from January 20 to March 4 2007, can be found on

www.smba.nl