The Benefit of the Doubt:  
Regarding the Photographic Conditions of Conceptual Art, 1966-1973

by

Heather A. Diack

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Department of Art  
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Heather A. Diack 2010
The Benefit of the Doubt: Regarding the Photographic Conditions of Conceptual Art, 1966-1973

Heather A. Diack

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of Art
University of Toronto

2010

Abstract

This dissertation offers a reconsideration of the uses of photography under the aegis of Conceptual Art between 1966 and 1973 by analyzing the ways photography challenged epistemological limits, and, despite the claims regarding the medium’s inherent indexicality, emphasized experience over exactitude, and doubt in place of certainty. By focusing on four American practitioners, I argue for the “benefit of the doubt;” in other words, for the value of disbelief and hesitation, marking the reorientation of art at this time towards critical methods which oppose all orthodoxies, including but not limited to formalist dogmas, and instead are committed to the denial of autonomy in favor of understanding meaning as infinitely contingent. The dissertation is divided among four key case studies, including Mel Bochner (n. 1940), Bruce Nauman (n. 1941), Douglas Huebler (1924-1997), and John Baldessari (n. 1931). Each chapter argues for the unique contribution of photography in relation to conceptual art practices, while also situating the projects of these individual practitioners within the broader history of the medium of photography. I explore specifically the concepts of seriality, transparency and theory in Bochner; performance, “worklessness,” and failure in Nauman; portraiture, mapping and impossibility in Huebler; humor, didacticism, choice and chance in Baldessari. This project looks back continuously to significant precursors, in particular the work of Marcel Duchamp.
(1887-1968), as a means of engaging the status and function of art after the Readymade, particularly as concerns de-skilling, disinterest, affirmative irony, and nominalism, as well as the dialectic between inclusivity and inconclusivity.
Acknowledgments

Though this dissertation is preoccupied with doubt—the one thing of which I am certain is that it would not have been conceivable without the insight, support, and tenacity of so many people. First I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Elizabeth Legge, Mark Cheetham, and Louis Kaplan. In particular my supervisor Louis is without a doubt the index that underscores this project. This dissertation project was developed under his guidance and scholarly influence. I will always be grateful for his remarkable intellectual generosity as well as his contagious enthusiasm, humour and friendship. I am also grateful to John Paul Ricco and Blake Stimson who joined the committee in the final stage and thoughtfully shared their insights. I have been fortunate to be inspired by the work, commitment, and wit of each of my committee members.

This project also owes extensive theoretical and philosophical debt to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, for his kindness and critical seriousness during my time as a Rubenstein Fellow in the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. This program was absolutely instrumental in my thinking through the politics of photography. In addition, the invaluable dialogue with my colleagues in the 2006-2007 Whitney Independent Study Program, in particular Brendan Fernandes, Marisa White-Hartman, Minnie Scott, Martin Braathen, Elisabeth Byre, Michael Sperlinger, Elaine Gan, Christine Davidson, Jesper Nordahl, Soyoung Yoon, and Alex Kitnick, and the generosity of Ron Clark, have encouraged and stretched my ideas and my thinking in immeasurable ways.

I would like to thank the Art department of the University of Toronto for many years of support, and thank my colleagues in the program, especially Alex Hoare, Sarah Stanners, Alma Mikulinski, Sarah Guerin, Carolina Mangone, Betsy Purvis, Elena Napolitano, Margo Beggs, Irmgard Emmelhainz, and David Alexandre. I will always cherish our years together.

I am also grateful for the numerous entities that have funded this project, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Jackman Humanities Institute, and the Centre for the Study of the United States.

I am forever grateful for my many close friendships, my muses, especially Angela MacDonald who has been kicking it old school with me for as long as I can remember, Lisa DiQuinzio who knows me way too well, Nancy Clarke whose compassion always seems to have room for more,
Farah Malik who is one of the strongest women I know, and Celine Heinbecker who motivates me constantly by her example and her vision of the world. You all mean so much to me. I am also thankful to Jennifer Murphy, Erinn Beth Langille, Melissa Shiff, Michael LeBlanc, Seth Bloom, Miriana DiQuinzio, John Turner, and Josh Thorpe. I love you all.

I am thankful beyond belief for my big-hearted family, especially Grandma and Grandpa Diack, Rob and Lori Diack, Carol and Jim Bradley Williams, Jeff Thurlow and Cari Barrett, Jessica Thurlow and Todd Koffler, and Grandma Dee. To my brother, the best brother in the world, Ian Diack, I cannot think of a better model of determination and love, and I thank both you and Rocky Balboa for seeing me through. I thank my husband Erin Thurlow for his tireless support, for being a constant confidant, for spurring me to new questions, and for loving me without question. This project is absolutely indebted to you.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents, Bruce and Rachelle Diack. I have been so immensely blessed by your love, counsel, and encouragement throughout my life. You have always compelled me to strive forward and to keep my priorities clear while maintaining a serious commitment to experiencing the joy in life. There is no doubt that this project is dedicated to you.

Heather Diack, Toronto, April 2010.
### Table of Contents

**Introduction: Marks of Contingency** ................................................................. 1

**Chapter One: Dead Certainties: Mel Bochner Takes Photographic Measures** ........ 22
Picture This ........................................................................................................... 24

*No Thought Exists Without a Sustaining Support* .................................................. 28
Preposterous Transparence/ Incredible Transcendence ....................................... 37
“There is a labyrinth which is a straight line…” .................................................... 47
Misunderstandings and Understatements ............................................................ 59

**Chapter Two: Performance Proof: Bruce Nauman and Photography** ................. 72
The Incredible Lightness of Being and the Gravity of the Task .............................. 94
Easy Does It .......................................................................................................... 104
Fountain of Doubt ................................................................................................. 115

**Chapter Three: Definitely Dubious Documents: On Douglas Huebler’s Photographs** ... 125
On the Dialectics of Art and Photography ............................................................. 126
Mapping the Subject: Limits and Dislocations ...................................................... 139
Counter-Figurations .............................................................................................. 165
Familiar Resemblances and Irreconcilable Differences ........................................ 176
Bodies in Motion Remain in Motion .................................................................... 180

**Chapter Four: Suspension of Belief: John Baldessari’s Skeptical Photography** ...... 184
I Think Therefore I Art ......................................................................................... 186
On Painting, Pointing, and the Laws of Looking .................................................. 205
Various Small Fires and Other “Art Signals” ......................................................... 224
C-A-L-I-F-O-R-N-I-A .............................................................................................. 231
Doubt and Didacticism ....................................................................................... 240
Between Choice and Chance ............................................................................. 243
Who Laughs Last? .............................................................................................. 246

**Conclusion: Beyond the Shadow of Doubt?** ..................................................... 248

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................... 251

**Appendix** ......................................................................................................... 282
List of Figures

Figure 1. Mel Bochner, *Working drawings and other visible things on paper not necessarily meant to be viewed as art* (1966).

Figure 2. Mel Bochner, *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* (1966).

Figure 3. Mel Bochner, *H-2* (1966-67).

Figure 4. Mel Bochner, *Perspective: One Point (Positive)* (1967).

Figure 5. Mel Bochner, *Perspective: Two Point (Negative)* (1967).

Figure 6. Mel Bochner, *Viscosity (Mineral Oil)* (1968).

Figure 7. Mel Bochner, *Grid (Shaving Cream)* (1968).

Figure 8. Mel Bochner, *Transparent and Opaque* (1968).

Figure 9. Mel Bochner, *Singer Lab Measurement (#1)* (1968).

Figure 10. Mel Bochner, *Singer Lab Measurement (#2)* (1968).

Figure 11. Mel Bochner, *Singer Lab Measurement (#3)* (1968).

Figure 12. Mel Bochner, *Singer Lab Measurement (#4)* (1968).

Figure 13. Mel Bochner, *Singer Lab Measurement (#5)* (1968).

Figure 14. Mel Bochner, *Actual Size (Face and Hand)* (1968).

Figure 15. Mel Bochner, *Measurement Room* (1969).

Figure 16. John Baldessari, *Measurement Series: Measuring a Chair with a Coffee Cup (Top-Bottoms)* (1975).

Figure 17. John Baldessari, *Three Metaphorical Measurements* (1980).

Figure 19. Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow* (1920).

Figure 20. Mel Bochner, *Surface Dis/Tension* (1968).

Figure 21. Bruce Nauman, *Holograms* (1968-69).

Figure 22. Bruce Nauman, *Grimaces* (1970).

Figure 23. Bruce Nauman, *Grimaces* (1970).

Figure 24. Bruce Nauman, *Composite Photograph of Two Messes on the Studio Floor* (1967).

Figure 25. Brassai and Salvador Dali, *Sculptures Involontaires* (1933).

Figure 26. Victor Burgin, *Photopath* (1967).


Figure 28. Bruce Nauman, *Coffee Thrown Away Because It Was Too Cold* (1966-67/1970).

Figure 29. Bruce Nauman, *Coffee Spilled Because the Cup Was Too Hot* (196-67/1970).


Figure 34. Bruce Nauman, *Feet of Clay* (1966-67/1970).

Figure 35. Bruce Nauman, *Bound to Fail* (1966-67/1970).

Figure 36. Bruce Nauman, *Henry Moore (Bound to Fail)* (1966-67/1970).

Figure 38. Bruce Nauman, *True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967).

Figure 39. Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966).

Figure 40. Bruce Nauman, *Tony Sinking in the Floor, Face Up, and Face Down* (1973).

Figure 41. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (photograph by Alfred Stieglitz) (1917).

Figure 42. Marcel Duchamp, *Tongue in Cheek* (1959).

Figure 43. Bruce Nauman, *Hand to Mouth* (1967).

Figure 44. Bruce Nauman, *Flour Arrangements* (1966).

Figure 45. Man Ray, *Dust Breeding (Duchamp’s Large Glass with Dust Notes)* (1920).

Figure 46. Bas Jan Ader, *Primary Time* (1974).

Figure 47. Bruce Nauman, *Suite Substitute* (1968).

Figure 48. Bruce Nauman, *True Artist is a Luminous Fountain* (1966).

Figure 49. Robert Morris, *Card File* (1962).

Figure 50. Robert Morris, *Box with Sound of its Own Making* (1961).

Figure 51. Bruce Nauman, *A Cast of Space Under my Chair* (1965).

Figure 52. Bruce Nauman, *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* (1966).


Figure 54. Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalents* (1925-1934).

Figure 55. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global* (1971).
Figure 56. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #34, Bradford Massachusetts* (1970).

Figure 57. Douglas Huebler, *100E/ Variable Piece #70: 1971* (1971).

Figure 58. Douglas Huebler, *19/ Variable Piece no. 70: 1971* (1971).

Figure 59. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #101* (1973).

Figure 60. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Typologies Watertowers* (1972).

Figure 61. John Baldessari, *Wrong* (1967).

Figure 62. John Baldessari, *Wrong (version 2)* (1994).

Figure 63. John Baldessari, *Police Drawing* (1970).

Figure 64. John Baldessari, *California Map project/Part1: California* (1960).

Figure 65. John Baldessari, *California Map project/Part1: California* (1960).

Figure 66. John Baldessari, *Free Rolling Tire* (1972).

Figure 67. John Baldessari, *Art Disaster: Evidence* (1971).

Figure 68. John Baldessari, *The Backs of All the Trucks Passed While Driving from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January 1963* (1963).

Figure 69. John Baldessari, *White Shape* (1984).

Figure 70. John Baldessari, *Aligning Balls* (1972).

Figure 71. John Baldessari, *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Green Beans* (1971).

Figure 72. John Baldessari, *Renaissance Man* (from *Fragments*) (1966).

Figure 73. John Baldessari, *A Painting by Helene Morris* (1969).


Figure 76. John Baldessari, *An Artist is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer of a Series of Facts, Which in this Case the Camera Has Had to Accept and Mechanically Record* (1967-68).

Figure 77. John Baldessari, *Cremation Project* (1970).

Figure 78. John Baldessari, *Ryan Oldsmobile National City, Calif.* (1966-68).

Figure 79. John Baldessari, *The Spectator is Compelled to Look Directly Down the Road and into the Middle of the Picture* (1967-68).

Figure 80. John Baldessari, *Stoic Peach (Pathetic Fallacy Series)* and *Injured Yellow (Pathetic Fallacy Series)* (1975).

Figure 81. Frank Stella, *Union III* (1966).

Figure 82. John Baldessari, *Six Colorful Gags (male)* (1991).

Figure 83. John Baldessari, *This Is Not To Be Looked At* (1967-68).

Figure 84. Francisco Goya, Plate 26 “This is not to be looked at,” from *Disaster of War Series* (c. 1810).

Figure 85. John Baldessari, *Everything Is Purged From This Painting But Art, No Ideas Have Entered This Work* (1966-68).

Figure 86. Edward Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966).

Figure 87. Andy Warhol, *Tuna Fish Disaster* (1963).

Figure 88. John Baldessari, *A Movie: Directional Piece (Where People Are Looking)* (1972-73).
Introduction: Marks of Contingency

Photography prevents us from knowing what an image is and whether we even see one. It is no accident that Benjamin’s 1931 essay “A Short History of Photography” begins not with a sudden clarity that grants knowledge security, but rather with an evocation of the “fog” that he claims surrounds the beginnings of photography—a fog that, although not so thick as the one that shrouds the early days of printing, nevertheless serves as an obstacle to both knowledge and vision. – Eduardo Cadava.¹

...if photography was invented in 1839, it was only discovered in the 1960s and 1970s—photography, that is, as an essence, photography itself. – Douglas Crimp.²

This dissertation offers a reconsideration of the uses of photography under the aegis of Conceptual Art between 1966 and 1973 by analyzing the ways that photography challenged epistemological limits and, despite insistent and persistent claims regarding the medium’s inherent indexicality, emphasized experience over exactitude, and doubt in place of certainty. Looking at the work of Mel Bochner, Bruce Nauman, Douglas Huebler, and John Baldessari, each chapter critically considers the significant role of photography in the practice these individual American artists, and how their turn to photography at this particular historic juncture marked the anxiety surrounding art making in the late 1960s. From my perspective, their work can be read as an assertion of the continuing need for a discourse of the indefinite in the present. Via photography, these artists destabilized the major systems of representation in the late sixties by accentuating the importance of ideation without renouncing the value of bodily experience. By making actions rather than objects, these conceptual artists used photography to register a statement against materialism. Doing so was also a means of investigating how aspects of the performative were essential to the very notion of art, and absolutely central to the pivot of


photography. Ultimately my critical consideration of the photographic conditions of conceptual art acknowledges the movement away from the study of objects and towards a performance of effects in the late sixties. In this way, this dissertation is arguably as much an analysis of the photographic conditions of conceptual art as it is the conceptual conditions of photography.

Doubt regarding the possibility of ever grasping the “true” nature of photography can be traced back to its foggy beginnings. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, even the English “inventor” William Henry Fox Talbot, despite his adamant ambition to “fix” the photographic image, could not deny the ontological and aesthetic ambiguity of the medium, noting in his *The Pencil of Nature*: “Though we may not be able to conjecture with any certainty what rank they [photographic images] may hereafter attain to as pictorial productions, they will surely find their own sphere of utility.”

Over the course of the twentieth century, encouraged by the automatist aspects of the medium and the belief in the indexical function of photographic images, confidence was increasingly placed in the idea of the photograph as a neutral representation, and in the idea that photography was free from “the fallacies of the human hand.”

The twist of conceptual art was to use photography in a manner that countered this desire for reassurance, by challenging the very notion of the photograph as self-evident, in order ask not only what we do not know, or cannot know, but also how we can *unknow*.

---

3 See Geoffrey Batchen on how the “invention” of photography was neither a singular nor a decisive historic moment but rather a combination of coincidences and social imperatives, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).


5 Bertelsen, 169.
I regard the photographic work of Bochner, Nauman, Huebler, and Baldessari during the social, cultural, and political caesurae of the late 1960s as a distinctly postmodern inheritance from Marcel Duchamp. In part, this is due to the fact that Duchamp’s evocation of chance procedures and his problematizing of nominalist games figure prominently in the work of these four artists, but also because Duchamp’s readymades, and his specific conception of them based on analogies to photography, sets the stage for thinking through the photographic conditions of conceptual art as well as the conceptual conditions of photography. Duchamp emphasized how the readymades “were mass produced and to be duplicated,” a comment that highlights the photograph’s kinship with the readymade since both occupy an ambiguous place in relation to industrial production and reproduction and by extension capitalism, modernity, and the dominant relations of technological production. On the one hand, this connection can be read as primarily acquisitive, linked to what Susan Sontag called photography’s role as a “defense against anxiety” by accumulating the world. Thinking of photography in this way can be productive in that it draws attention to some of its key social and political functions. What it misses however, is the other side of the Duchampian coin, and for me the real source of photography’s potential for critique, namely to read photography beyond its acquisitive mode in order to consider seriously its “inquisitive” possibilities.


Duchamp’s idea of the “snapshot effect” enables the link between a theory of photography and the practice of the readymade, as well as an entryway into the inquisitive consideration I mention above. This is how Duchamp described the readymade in his notes:

Specifications for “Readymades.”
by planning for a moment
 to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), “to inscribe
 a readymade.” —the readymade
 can later
 be looked for. (with all kinds of delays)

The important thing is just
 this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like
 a speech delivered on no matter
 what occasion but at such and such an hour.9

The mention of “planning” emphasizes ideation and touches on one of the central issues of “making” conceptual art. The echoes of this “planning” can be heard in Sol LeWitt’s influential “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”: “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”10 Duchamp’s analogy to framing time, “a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute),” describes the apprehension or “inscription” of the image, the framing of time that both the photograph and the readymade effect.

Importantly, Duchamp also marks the contingency of the frame that is peculiar and unexpected in the snapshot by his evocation of “with all kinds of delays.” This note suggests how even the instantaneous “nature” of the snapshot has contingency built-in, the photograph, like the readymade, is never entirely fixed either temporally, spatially, or conceptually, “no matter what,” in that there are elements that remain unspecified, as in “such and such an hour.” For example,


what happens after the execution? In her reading of the “snapshot effect,” Rosalind Krauss emphasizes the index as the key link between photography and the readymade. I will elaborate on this point in my chapter on Bruce Nauman. What is more striking for me as a link between photography and the readymade however, and thus conceptual art, is Duchamp’s emphasis on “delay” and contingency. It is for this reason that I have entitled this introduction, “Marks of Contingency,” as a means of framing this aspect of conceptual photography in stark contrast to Jeff Wall’s thesis in his essay “Marks of Indifference”: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art” (1995), which confidently frames photography in relation to conceptual art as a “decisively modernist” project. Both the readymade and conceptual photography deal with the commonplace, the aesthetics of indifference, and address the seemingly random accumulation of everyday life. Importantly, both also provoke a rethinking of the basic relationship between a sign and its referent in a mode that continuously delays, or defers, any possibility of self-certainty.

Whereas in the nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire’s estimation that it was precisely due to its “exactitude,” however contemptible, that the masses would call photography art, in the twentieth century many conceptual artists (following in the footsteps of Surrealism) would find photography’s imprecise inexactitude its peculiar source of artfulness. One of the central

13 “An avenging God has heard the prayers of this multitude, Daguerre was his messiah. And then they said to themselves: ‘Since photography provides us with every desirable guarantee of exactitude’ (they believe that, poor madmen!) ‘art is photography.’” Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography,” Classic Essays on Photography, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1981), 86.
aims of this dissertation is to reanimate the rational practice of doubt that acknowledges the importance of inexactitude and of suspending judgment, and that balances the intellectual seriousness of conceptual art with the potentially humourous liberation of contradiction. This dissertation therefore examines major intellectual issues surrounding doubt and postmodernism in the late twentieth century against the grain of Greenbergian modernist discourse by analyzing particular art projects that used photography between the period of 1966-1973 within the American context of Conceptual art, and which demonstrate “a determined commitment to indeterminacy.” Importantly, it is my proposition that this commitment is a central characteristic of the legacies and practices of conceptual art as well as a crucial feature of photography itself. The continued prevalence of doubt as a vital attribute of, and photography as the principal medium of, contemporary art in the present makes the case all the more

---


15 Doubt needs to be differentiated from suspicion, or at the very least suspicion needs to be qualified. For example, I am not advocating for the kind of paranoid suspicion of the Islamic world that sadly has grown in the West since 9/11. I am advocating an open-minded skepticism rather than closed-minded suspicion. See Stuart Sim, Empires of Belief: Why we need more skepticism and doubt in the Twenty-first century, (Edinburgh University Press, 2006). See also Michael Leja, Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

16 Over the course of the last twenty years, a number of reassessments of Conceptual art’s history have emerged which take into account the practices of this movement beyond the centres of Western Europe and North America, such as Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950-1980s. While my project here certainly does not propose an all-inclusive history of Conceptual photography, and does indeed focus on a specifically American context, I do nevertheless believe that it suggests numerous theoretical strategies which could be relevant and productive in the analysis of work far outside the parameters of this specific dissertation, and particularly in the service of rethinking the radical ontological and epistemological challenges posed by both Conceptual art and photography.

17 Thomas McEvilley, Sculpture in the Age of Doubt (New York: School of Visual Arts; Allworth Press, 1999), 34.

convincing: “If conceptual art lives on today it is not because of the transmittance of any orthodoxy, but […] rather] its aporias, mistakes and misrepresentations,” and, I would add, misunderstandings, in the spirit of Mel Bochner.19 Photography, conceptual art, and doubt compose a web of inseparable (though often elusive) interdependent supports. As early as 1976 the critic Nancy Foote noted, “Oddly enough, conceptual art has never been plagued with accusations that it belongs on photography’s side of the tracks, yet the condition in which much of it could or would exist without photography is open to question. Photographs are crucial to the exposure (if not the making) of practically every manifestation of conceptual type art.”20 This open question regarding the photographic conditions of conceptual art forms the basis of the following thesis.

In the last two decades, much art historical writing has addressed issues in conceptualism,21 and yet a scholarly absence remains. Though artists, critics, and art historians have acknowledged a number of visual, material, and theoretical contradictions within the history of conceptual art,22 few have followed through with close readings of specific projects in order to mine the inconsistencies beyond the status of mere generalizations with the ends of

utterly destabilizing the aesthetic pretensions of modernist art while expressly dealing with the question of photography. Jeff Wall for example, in what has come to be one of the most significant texts on the historicization of conceptual art, let alone photoconceptualism, states that “many of Conceptual art’s essential achievements are either created in the form of photographs or are otherwise mediated by them.” I am in agreement with Wall on this point, however whereas he contends that, “photography realized itself decisively as a modernist art in the experiments of the 1960s and 1970s,” I argue by contrast that the significance of most uses of photography under the aegis of Conceptual art is located precisely in its break from the Modernist paradigm.

What Wall explains as the failure of Conceptual art to rid itself of depiction and of “its ties with the Western picture,” leading to the restoration of these categories in the 1970s, I understand as a blind and unquestioning attachment to the aesthetic, an attachment which homogenizes the diverse and often opposed strategies of Conceptual art. Like other self-deceptions attached to an unwavering belief in modernism, Wall is actually speaking of “contingency while believing [...] to narrate necessity, of particular locality while believing [...]”

23 One notable exception is the contribution made by the collaborative and cross-disciplinary research project organized by Margaret Iversen of the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex and Diarmuid Costello of the Philosophy Department at the University of Warwick, entitled “Aesthetics after Photography,” funded by the AHRC. Begun as a two-day session at the annual Association of Art Historians conference held at the Tate Britain in London in 2008, the project has most recently taken the form of an edited volume of the journal Art History (Vol. 32 No. 5) December 2009, with another conference on the subject of “Agency and Automatism” to be held in Spring 2010. The project overall focuses on the varying positions of aesthetic engagement in photoconceptual practices.


25 Wall, 266.
to narrate universality.... This is a position which needs to be critiqued all the more strongly at present, especially because Michael Fried’s recent book on photography seeks to not simply affirm Wall’s argument, but additionally to reinstate his own theory of high modernist painting from “Art and Objecthood” (1967) as the inheritance of contemporary photographic practice. According to Fried’s *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), photography “matters” because of its intrinsically self-reflexive mechanism, because as a medium, for Fried, it epitomizes the criteria of medium specificity that would “extricate the work from its entanglement in everyday contingency and indeterminacy.” Neither Wall nor Fried adequately question the paradoxical resistances that the “matter” of photography performs. Arguably, this critical occlusion is yet another symptom of the modernist aversion to “theatricality” characterized by Fried. By contrast, my project desires to highlight the unpredictable theatricality of photography as a conceptual medium and as an artistic “matter.”

Rather than aligning myself with Fried or Wall, I side instead with John Roberts, in his essay “Photography, Iconophobia, and the Ruins of Conceptual Art” (1997), where he argues that “photography was the means through which Conceptual art realized its exit from Modernist closure as practice.” If there is a failure in Conceptual art, it is a productive one and, in some cases, a deliberate one. Moreover, even “failure” itself in conceptual art is indeterminate.

---


“Conceptual art was not directed toward the elimination of visuality as such, but rather against the valuation of pictoriality within formalist Modernism,” through a philosophical critique of art’s conditions of possibility, which continued the tradition of doubt that was Marcel Duchamp’s signature, and his “systematic critique or “deconstruction” of the Kantian, or aesthetic, theory of art.” By challenging Clement Greenberg’s elision of “self-criticism” with self-certainty, I continue the argument put forth by Donald Kuspit, Louis Kaplan, and others: “Greenberg’s quest for the grail of self-certainty fails not simply because it is false from the start, but because it is facile in its method. It handicaps the uncovering of uncertainty as a necessary if not sufficient condition for creation by giving art a historically readymade goal.”

It is precisely in face of the ostentatious certainty and solemnity espoused by Greenbergian Modernism and continued by the writings of Michael Fried and Jeff Wall, that artists such as Mel Bochner, Douglas Huebler, Bruce Nauman, and John Baldessari responded with ironic wit and brazen doubt, directly undermining what was previously regarded as the integrity of art, “always leaving us with a problem not a solution.” Thus my dissertation will

32 McEvilley dubs Duchamp’s practices as “The first absolutely clear sighting of doubt in art history—the first moment it raised its head as from a trench of World War I—is in the works of Duchamp,” 29. Although I agree with McEvilley that Duchamp’s importance in proliferating doubt in twentieth century art should not be underestimated, I would also like to note that doubt and art have always had an intimate relationship. Examples such the work of Caravaggio or Hogarth make this exceptionally clear.
33 Ibid., 1.
35 Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 152.
focus on the early photographic work of these four practitioners. Conceptual art’s central
epistemological critique lay in its multiple and disparate efforts to dissolve the autonomy of art:
all four artists contribute to this project. Their use of photography intensified this critique, in
part by radically altering artistic conditions of production and consumption, as I will explain
further, and also by virtue of exploring the medium’s palpable duplicity. Conceptual art and
photography each enact a postmodernist sensibility characterized in Ihab Hassan’s words by
“openness, heterodoxy, pluralism, eclecticism, randomness, revolt, deformation…
ambiguity…perversion…unmaking, decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decentrement,
displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition,
demystification, detotalization, delegitimization….”36 This study will endeavour to consider
these attributes in the projects of Mel Bochner, Bruce Nauman, Douglas Huebler, and John
Baldessari in order to demonstrate the expanded rather than limited implications of such work
and how the conditions of uncertainty and contingency specifically mark both conceptual art and
photography.

* 

The belief in photography as revelatory has been linked to the medium from its
beginnings. Well before nineteenth-century debates surrounding combination printing and its
attendant accusations regarding the deceitful image, photography was praised as revealing what
had previously been hidden from the human eye. This exposure was to have both aesthetic and
scientific significance, purportedly allowing humans to understand the minutiae of movement
and biological form, as well as to appreciate the beauty previously hidden in “the everyday.”

36 Ihab Hassan, “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” in Natoli and Hutcheon, eds., A Postmodern Reader
Investments in photography’s essential veracity as a medium, as a kind of truth-sayer, exist at its inception and account in part for the late 20\textsuperscript{th} C announcement that photography is dead, executed by the digital.

I argue however that skepticism rather than assurance is central to the photographic principle. As such it is the potential instability and uncertainty of the photograph that underscores its power. The historic moment that best displays this realization in terms of artistic practice, is conceptual art of the late 1960s, a time when an overlap between discourses of art and science were taken up, and the question of the “real” hinged the aesthetic and the socio-political. Returning to the time between 1966-1973 marks an instant that embraced semiotic limbo as means to productively challenge authority, disciplinary boundaries, and artistic autonomy, often through the use of subversive humour, leaving one not necessarily with answers but rather with questions that in their provocation of a new way of thinking were infinitely more valuable. This emphasis on aporetic thinking and the negation of finite closure also points to the fact that if photography discloses truths, they are nevertheless kept in flux and cannot be contained. Photography reveals a process of being whose beginnings and ends continuously remain uncertain.

This dissertation is an analytic and philosophical questioning of how the benefit of the doubt, and the attendant questions that it poses to epistemology, is played out via conceptual photography in the form of specific practices, projects, and exhibitions. Pivoting on the difference between what we “know” and what we perceive, I engage one of the essential problematics of photographic documentation. The pervasive belief in the 1960s within the context of Minimalism was that objective work was the goal, and the desire was to create a work that was anti-illusionistic and uninflected, in which the “thing” was the “thing-itself”. This
notion of objectivity was inevitably challenged by the turn to photography, with its inescapable links to perspectival manipulation and the distortion of the lens, as well as the inevitable gap between the real and representation, despite the fact that many of its practitioners claimed the photographic medium as “literal,” direct, transparent, and ultimately unmediated. This paradoxical promise of photography is one of the many productive tensions that is played out in early photoconceptualism, as it challenges the concept of photography as a “true” evidentiary practice and evokes photography as both contingent and excessive, as an inassimilable eruption in logical thinking. Because the photograph has no single temporality, it is figured as a space of resistance to science, traditional concepts of art, logic, and progress, not simply in imaginary terms but in fundamentally ontological ones. The photograph’s complex temporality composes its essential irrationality and leads to doubt precisely because of the impossible desire for presence and certainty that is projected onto the photograph. For while Roland Barthes remarked in one moment, that “[b]ecause of its indexical condition, its status as a physical trace of its referent, the photograph is, of course, intrinsically documentarian, possessed with a unique evidential power: “the Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents.””37 Barthes nevertheless complicated the issue in the next moment by admitting the insecurity of his first proposition, stating that though “the Photograph never lies,” nevertheless “it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious.”38 Barthes’ comment on the tendentious aspect of the photograph can productively be connected to Sigmund Freud’s writings on humor and the human negotiation of irrationality.39

38 Ibid., 87.
of a “tendentious joke” in opposition to the “innocent joke” demonstrates striking affinities with the irrational underpinnings of the photograph, as I am describing it. A “tendentious joke” according to Freud is a joke that displaces some form of aggression and seeks to fulfill a repressed urge. In other words, “tendentious jokes safely give voice to what cannot be spoken directly out loud,” and “as displacement mechanisms, tendentious jokes function as a safety valve for aggression.”40 The photograph as a displacement mechanism will be analyzed at length throughout this dissertation, and often in conjunction with the device of humour as a means of disrupting the security of rational thinking.

Each chapter in the dissertation functions as a case study that investigates what is being given the benefit of the doubt in terms of specific photoconceptual projects and practices. For example, one of the central claims of early conceptual art was its insistence on “dematerialization,” despite its intense reliance on the material and materiality of photography. Yet another way of discussing conceptual art in the Sixties and Seventies was as “anti-object art”—my argument is that the discourse of anti-object art was actually a proposition surrounding the problems of objectivity, which looked for the place of the subject within the social as a means to confound rules of scientific objectivity as measures of human understanding and being. Further, the claims made for anti-object art parallel a fundamental reformulation of the sculptural object. I interrogate photoconceptualism’s contribution to this redefinition, and the expansion of the field of possibility within art historical discourse, art criticism and emergent artistic practices. The ambivalence of these contradictory positions will be unpacked in the following chapters, deducing how photography was received and perceived in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

I investigate repeatedly the heretical possibility of putting the viewer in the place of conceptual, and thus epistemological, doubt, concerning both the “nature” of knowledge and the “culture” of knowledge, and will discuss how these gestures provide the basis for much contemporary art, particularly as the emphasis on meaning making is placed onto the spectator as active participant. Each artist’s work is put into historical context, not simply in terms of the art world, emergent contemporaneous discourses of art history, and the history of photography, but also in relation to the integral political and social events of its times. I discuss Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein as philosophic and aesthetic progenitors to the project of photoconceptualism, and refer to Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and others as productive theoretical interlocutors.

A radical shift strikingly occurs in the late 1960s, in which despite Minimalism’s stance as anti-iconic and anti-representation, a number of “Minimal” artists, including Robert Morris, Douglas Huebler, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, and Mel Bochner, turn to using photography, a medium inextricably linked to the logic of the icon and the index. Through this shift, their documents enact an opening up of dialogues regarding the role of the object and of phenomenology that were not considerations of other photographers of the time. Through a diversity of approaches each of these practitioners drew strategic attention to the politics embedded in constructs of representation, interrogating photographs “as an ideological function to critique,” thereby providing tactics to obliquely confront the cultural confinement described by Robert Smithson as the context of living within the unrelieved social crisis that plagued the late

---

1960s through to the mid 1970s. My dissertation is an argument against reading the uses of
photography in conceptual art specifically as an extension of high Modernist logic advocated by
figures such as Jeff Wall, Michael Fried, and the institutional rhetoric of the Museum of Modern
Art in New York. I critically assess examples of conceptual photography between 1966-1973 in
order to demonstrate that it is not a detachment from other categories that defines these particular
photographs, but rather their insistence on aporias and even misrepresentations within
conventional expectations regarding art and visual culture. Though conceptual art itself has no
stable set of positions, I argue for conceptual photography’s critical difference by considering the
rupture occasioned by the photograph as a strategy for confronting conventional ways of looking,
framing, and depicting that were increasingly understood as orchestrating systems of control, and
thus providing the critical benefit of the doubt.

Beginning with the work of Mel Bochner, I examine multiple ways of considering the
transient reality of any photographed object and any photographic object, including rethinking
the indexical function of photography, the normative frames of art, and how the ideal of
measurement as an objective standard was questioned by Bochner through analogy with the
photograph. Bochner’s experiments with photography were indeed short-lived (1966-1970), yet
their implications, both material and theoretical, resonate with the practices of the other artists to
be discussed in the dissertation, namely Bruce Nauman, Douglas Huebler, and John Baldessari.

Robert Smithson wrote at length against the illusion that the art world or the gallery system were neutral spaces,
explaining for example that, “Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art
exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some
artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up
supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control.” The remarkable lack of exhibition spaces for photography in
the late Sixties is but one aspect of this system that confronted conceptual artists using photography and, to a certain
extent, inspired their commitment to using this particular medium. See Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement”
All four of these practitioners demonstrate how photography can be read on the side of doubt rather than the self-certainty of modernism.

Chapter One, “Dead Certainties: Mel Bochner Takes Photographic Measures,” discusses Mel Bochner’s photographic work between 1966-1970, charting his move from Minimalism as a bridge to Conceptual practice and specifically photographic projects. Nauman, Huebler, and Baldessari also confronted this shift. What began as a desire for order became the systematic undoing and confounding of all order, as Bochner realized the degree to which he could not control the photographic object. Stating emphatically, “I realized that the physicality of the objects I was making interested me less than the types of order I was imposing,” Bochner’s art practice crosses a trajectory from materialism through conceptualism that ultimately abrogates Modernist rule. Tracing his critical engagement with the duplicity of photography from 36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams (1966) through to Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography) (1967-70), this chapter seeks to systematically unpack Bochner’s claims for photography and art more broadly, while working through the philosophical questions they jointly pose. Bochner, (as did many of his peers), had other people take his photographs for him. This decision signals yet another challenge to traditions of the hand of the artist and to techne. Bochner initially saw this mode of “objective” creation as a means to a more scientific neutrality and thus a preferable approach to artistic production. The influence of scientific discourse, bureaucratic language, and other pseudo-empirical systems, will be analyzed in the early photographs of Bochner for their significant impact on the proliferation and meaning of photoconceptualism at this time.

Like Bochner, Nauman’s use of photography was also short-lived, and yet those early photographic experiments shed light on the artist’s later projects. Chapter Two, “Performance Proof: Bruce Nauman and Photography,” discusses the multiple ways in which Bruce Nauman engaged photography as a means to analytically, conceptually, and aesthetically accentuate the theatrical dimension of the work of art, making “literal” situations not only self-reflexive but also representationally subversive. Playful images such as *Bound to Fail* or *Self-portrait as Fountain* pose serious artistic and intellectual questions under the guise of humorous scenarios. Through a close reading of photographs from 1966-67/1970, I argue that Nauman contributed to the experimental framework of performance art at a pivotal historic moment in order to take the trace, otherwise known as the index, to task, thereby disavowing the dominant discourse of conceptual art. As mentioned above, though conceptualism was very much concerned with self-reflexivity; it was not associated with medium specificity in the ways heralded by modernism. Rather, by using an intermedia approach, Nauman’s evocation of bodily experience under the rubric of photoconceptualism ultimately denies the vital “dematerialization” of the work of art announced by much conceptual art, and by Lucy Lippard’s early reading of conceptual art, and by contrast insists on the essential corporeality of conceptualism. This chapter is simultaneously an analysis of photography through the lens of Nauman, as much as it is an analysis of Nauman thorough the lens of photography, which by extension reflects on how Nauman’s important contributions to the field of performance alter the terms of understanding not only art

---

44 In 1996 Lucy Lippard amended her original framing of conceptual art as dematerialization by including a new author’s preface to Six Years, stating, “[Since] I first wrote on the subject in 1967, it has often been pointed out to me that dematerialization is an inaccurate term, that a piece of paper or a photograph is as much object, or as ‘material,’ as a ton of lead. Granted. But for lack of a better term I have continued to refer to a process of dematerialization, or a deemphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness),” Lucy Lippard, “Preface,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger publishers, Inc., 1973), 5.
photography, but also the boundary between documentary and artistic practice under the auspices of conceptual art.

Chapter Three, “Definitely Dubious Documents: On Douglas Huebler’s Photographic Portraits,” continues my investigation of photography as a network of communication that not only reflects but also shapes socio-political and cultural boundaries. Though photography was the most visible material manifestation of conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of conceptual practitioners nevertheless denied the role of the medium on the work itself, instead writing photography off as a means rather than an end, as a transparent document of the “dematerialized” work rather than the work itself. Douglas Huebler’s photographs poignantly register the anxiety surrounding this occlusion by deliberately intervening into the pivotal role of photography not simply in conceptual art, but on social and economic ideology more broadly, noting the deceptive transparency of photography’s claim to truth value through strategic investigations of objectivity, portraiture, and mapping. In effect, Huebler uses photography to systematically unravel systems. For example, his *Variable Piece no. 70, (In Process) Global*, 1971, with the stated intention “to photographically document . . . the existence of everyone alive,” played on the humanistic and hegemonic desires embedded in the instantaneity and apparent objectivity of the photographic image while simultaneously exposing the failures of the medium’s democratic ideals. Proposals such as this “anti-documentary documentary” highlight the double negative process that formulates Huebler’s practice. Importantly, Huebler’s project cleverly shifts the emphasis from photography’s acquisitive capacity to its inquisitive potential, using accumulation itself as one of his key strategies. Addressing what Siegfried Kracauer described in the 1920s as the “blizzard,” “the flood,” and the “assault” of mass media photographs, Huebler similarly invests the manic omnipresence of
the photograph in the 1960s and 1970s with redemptive potential. Kracauer’s thesis, like Huebler’s, is based on a paradox, writing for example that, “[i]n the illustrated magazines, people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving,” suggesting that seeing is not the same as being critically conscious of what one sees, and moreover, that somehow through the over-accumulation of photographs, a radical recognition of over-rationalized society could and would occur. This chapter is a close reading of Huebler’s practice in face of and alongside select moments in the history of photography including the (in)famous *Family of Man* exhibition (1956) in order to interrogate the place of the subject in the social within the established criteria of documentary and art photography during this critical historical juncture, ultimately arguing against popular histories of conceptual art’s dematerialization and photography’s transparency.

My final chapter continues to problematize the photograph’s referential capacity and its connection to the body and performance, while furthering my discussion of the role of Duchampian meta-irony in photoconceptualism. Chapter Four, “Suspension of Belief: John Baldessari’s Skeptical Photography,” addresses one of the most significant and yet least explored antinomies that characterize the legacies of photoconceptualism, namely the tension between subversive humour and the notion of a constrained and analytic approach. Though these categories are not aesthetically or philosophically exclusive, they have nevertheless been pitted against one another as contradictory, in a manner that parallels the theorization of photography as either a mediator of authorial control or of artistic agency since the 1960s. In this chapter I

46 Ibid., 58.
will discuss this history while marking the profound influence this debate has had on the work of contemporary artists.

Nearly all of Baldessari’s photoworks pivot on ruptures in logic, and gaps in legibility, using photography to suggest wholeness and yet expose its limits and unknowns, thereby serving as a humourous reversal of Joseph Kosuth’s declaration that the purest definition of conceptual art is its investigation into the foundations of the “art” concept, and moreover that humour has no place in “serious” art. This chapter seeks to productively reveal the playful seriousness of humour in photoconceptualism. Drawing on the legacies of Marcel Duchamp, it will oppose Kosuth’s interpretation of Duchamp as doctrine to Baldessari’s use of Duchampian subversion as a means to challenge the false orthodoxies which have typified Conceptualism as the new authoritative art movement of the late twentieth century.

In summary, my dissertation analyses conceptual photography as a network of communication that not only reflected but also shaped socio-political and cultural boundaries. I acknowledge and investigate conceptual photography’s significant movement away from a consideration of objects towards a performance of effects, away from thinking about products towards thinking about processes. Conceptual art emerged in the late 1960s as the first global art movement, and the first art movement in which photography took centre stage. This is not a coincidence. Its protagonists were a generation of artists considerably altered by communication systems and increased mobility.47 I argue further that the broadening of artistic definitions and boundaries at this time, and the various challenges to aesthetic preconceptions and theoretical models, were inextricably connected to this new emphasis on photography.

Chapter 1
Dead Certainties:
Mel Bochner Takes Photographic Measures

The intention of this act of forgery was to undermine any possibility of belief in the text, and raise doubt from a subjective to an objective principle. –Mel Bochner

More than a challenge to Conceptual art, photography was the challenge of Conceptual art. The “impossibility” of the photographic document, as John Roberts and others have remarked, despite photography being largely untheorised as a medium in the early years of conceptualism, “destabilized certain conventional expectations about making and talking about art which remain the shared cognitive ground of advanced art today.” My aim is not to recuperate the aesthetic importance of photography under the aegis of Conceptual art, but more provocatively to expose the theoretical implications of conceptual art through the rubric of photography in order to demonstrate how the threat photography poses to ontological security was crucial to Conceptual art’s postmodern challenge to modernist certainty. I am not alone in this conviction—the conviction that doubt is vital to conceptual art. This chapter focuses on Mel Bochner’s early use of photography and how his clever disclosure of what he has called the “groundlessness” of photography refutes one of the most iconic claims of late Modernist art, namely that “what you see is what you see.” Bochner reveals how this belief turns upon itself,

---


49 Walter Benjamin’s writings for example were not available in English translation until the 1970s. “The writings on photography of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes had not yet been translated,” Mel Bochner, Ibid.


51 Frank Stella coined this phrase in 1964. See Mel Bochner, Ibid.
like so many axioms of modernist artistic practice, with its exaggerated certainty being among
the first of its death knells.

Photography was used by Conceptual artists in a number of ways, many of which were
seen as incidental or extraneous to the “art” itself. One of the most popular narratives
surrounding this fact is the idea that conceptual artists were interested in photography due to its
status in the sixties as “non-art.” Rather than being the “piece,” photographs would “document”
the piece. This strategy was seen as particularly useful to artists dedicated to the
“dematerialization”\(^5\) of the art object, either through performance or land art for example,
arguing that though photography possesses a material presence, it was not one that could be
considered art. This paradoxically dependent and yet dismissive view of photography is
characteristic of much early Conceptual art. A proliferation of artists’ commentary from the time
attests to this. Dennis Oppenheim for example has claimed repeatedly “They [the photographs]
were there simply to indicate a radical art that had already vanished. The photograph was
necessary only as a residue for communication.”\(^5\) As I have stated in the Introduction and will
evidence throughout this dissertation, the idea of uninflected documentation is not simply
reductive, but moreover false and impossible, particularly as concerns the photograph. Though
central to the “idea” of Conceptual art, this is but one of the paradoxes inherent to a discussion of
photography within Conceptual Art.

\(^{52}\) Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* vol. 12, no. 2 (February
1968), 31-36. Of course Lippard also reiterated the term as the subtitle of her significant anthology, *Six Years: The

\(^{53}\) Dennis Oppenheim, cited by Alison de Lima Greene, “Dennis Oppenheim: No Photography,” *Spot*, vol. 12, no. 1
(Spring 1993), 5.
PICTURE THIS

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. – Sol LeWitt, Artforum (June 1967).

Arguably the year 1966 marked the ascendance of Minimalist art in New York, featuring Donald Judd’s first show at the Leo Castelli Gallery, Sol LeWitt’s presentation of white cubic lattices at the Dwan Gallery, Carl Andre’s first “brick show” at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, “Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Structure” at Finch College, the group show “10” also at Dwan, and the advent of the Jewish Museum’s enormous “Primary Structures” exhibition curated by Kynaston McShine, which received extensive coverage in Newsweek and Life and brought Minimalist work to the larger public’s attention. Pivotal 1966 is also the year that has been invoked repeatedly as the touchstone for the emergence of Conceptual art. This date has been linked to a particular exhibition, “probably the first truly conceptual exhibition (both in terms of materials being exhibited and in terms of presentational style),” which paradigmatically demonstrated the shift from Minimalism into Conceptual Art and the importance of what these movements shared as well as where they differed. The exhibition I am referring to is Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art organized by Mel Bochner at the School of the Visual Arts, New York, in December 1966, in

which Bochner photocopied one hundred pages of studio notes, working drawings, diagrams by
other artists, including Eva Hesse, Dan Flavin, Sol Lewitt, Donald Judd, as well as pages from
*Scientific American*, notations from serial music compositions, mathematical calculations, and
other “paraphernalia of the production process,” and presented them as Xeroxes of the
“originals.” Bochner organized the information into four identical binders that he placed on
pedestals in the gallery.

Among the many iconic images of art in the late sixties, the installation views of this
exhibition stand out as distinct and have shaped the collective memory and subsequent
historicization of the art world of the late sixties. This exhibition proposed a dynamic model of
conceptual art based in “process” and in the “development” of an idea. Notably, it has become
one of the most famous starting points for discussing conceptual art. Akin to Sol LeWitt’s
statement that “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work,”
this exhibition by Bochner highlighted “planning and decisions.” Importantly its method of
realization points to a process akin to photography, perhaps suggesting that the “idea [that]
becomes a machine that makes the art” might be a camera. With the seemingly simple gesture of
photocopying, Bochner marked the photographic processes of copying, doubling, and repetition
at the genesis of conceptual art.

Without money to frame the drawings, Bochner resorted to mechanical reproduction,
using a xerox machine at the school to photocopy the drawings and to reduce and enlarge them

58 Ibid.
59 Bochner was teaching at the School of the Visual Arts at the time and was asked to organize a “Christmas Show
60 Meyer, Ibid., 102.
depending on their original size in order to create a uniform collection of copies. This was an act that had no precedent in the artworld in 1966. Four copies of the bound volume were presented at the exhibition, each mounted on one of four white plinths that were table height and arranged in a straight row resembling not haphazardly a serial Minimalist installation. The height of the pedestal meant that the viewer would have to hunch over to “read” the piece. The distance between oneself and the work would become literally embodied and physically manifest. This effect deliberately denies the viewer any comfortable mastery of the work. In fact, considering the format of the work as presented in books, it also very literally made the viewer acknowledge their position as “reader.” The overwhelming multiplicity of works contained in the books further challenges the omnipotence of any individual author or the ability to view the work with any sense of immediacy. Since the books contained 100 diverse projects it would be a commitment of time to peruse them. Moreover, with four books on four separate plinths, it was not clear if their contents were identical until one took the time to leaf through each, therefore attention would be required to fully experience the exhibition. As James Meyer has remarked, “Bochner, in his inaugural work, did not aim to please: he made the viewer uncomfortable.” This discomfort is plainly visible in the photographs from the show that document viewers bending over plinths, shuffling through pages, trying to decipher meaning, and one can imagine how this discomfort would make the viewer/reader very conscious of the distance between themselves and the art. In this sense, everything in the show was at a remove, ranging from the work to the experience. In effect this exhibition embodied the mediation of experience performed by photography.

61 Seth Siegelaub’s famed The Xerox Book, for example, did take place until 1968.

62 Meyer, Ibid., 96.
The works of course were “working drawings,” or more precisely reproductions of working drawings, and they were not the final “thing” themselves, but rather “images of images of projects” in process that are references to, and yet not entirely indexes of, the thing itself. This paradox of referencing yet not convincingly indexing is an element of the photograph that Bochner would soon investigate, as I will explain. Already in this exhibition however it is visible how the physical demands of the installation and the books emphasize the space “in-between” that one cannot dismiss, the space that separates ideation and realization, that space between experience and cognition. As only partial indexes, illusionism is not allowed to win out and neither is any version of “pure” presence. Instead modernist opticality is revoked, and the very possibility of “a single point of view dissolves into endless views and reframings, further removals, ‘infinite myopia’.” The realization that the object can no longer be seen with a confident eye demonstrates that the object in the modernist sense had indeed vanished. It was replaced with a postmodern object, which fulfilled Craig Owens’ summation of the postmodernist work: “when the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence.”

---

63 Ibid., 104.


This moment marks a fracture from Minimalism and a striking “turn toward a conceptual art,” for Bochner as well as a number of other contemporaneous artists. It is at this point in 1966 that the work of Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, and Bochner visibly break with Minimalism as characterized by Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and above all, Donald Judd. The work of these artists might, at least at the outset, still have shared many formal similarities, however the serial systems that underscored the works became increasingly crucial to the former group. For example, “[w]hereas Judd used serial systems as a hidden means for generating objects, LeWitt inverted the emphasis so that the three dimensional work appeared to serve simply as a mechanism for describing those serial systems.” Bochner, as I am describing, similarly sought to expose the “serial secrets” of minimal sculpture by drawing attention to the spaces between serial objects, and saw the potential in photography to “balance the schema and its embodiment, without tipping the scale under the weight of the object.”

---

66 Title of contribution by Bochner to Arts Magazine, April 1970, 44.
67 Scott Rothkopf, Mel Bochner Photographs 1966-1969 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 5. I am extremely indebted to Rothkopf’s scholarly research and insight into Bochner’s early photographs. My hope is that the present chapter is a contribution that furthers a number of the conceptual frameworks Rothkopf points to, and that it suggests viable approaches for an increased understanding of the art historical and theoretical stakes of Bochner’s project.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 6.
70 Ibid., 8.
Beyond the resistance to photography from the art market and the criticism of Clement Greenberg,\(^{71}\) Bochner faced the “implicit opposition to photography in the anti-illusionistic claims of the Minimal art he so greatly admired,”\(^{72}\) such as the work of Donald Judd, who wrote avidly as an advocate for nonrepresentational art and anti-illusionism. For Judd the only escape from illusionism was to create art that existed as an object to be experienced physically in three dimensions, and without indexical reference.\(^{73}\) Against these two opposing streams of criticism, Bochner was nevertheless able to mobilize photography in a new way.

It is significant that Bochner “came of age during the apogee of photographic reportage,”\(^{74}\) in an era ironically promising liberation through the presentation of pictorial “facts” in popular magazines such as *Life* and *Look*.\(^{74}\) Yet these facts were always characterized by a high degree of affect. As an influential counterpoint to such expressionistic images, Bochner saw in the work of California-based artist Ed Ruscha a model of unemotional, nearly generic photographs without pictorial effect that were shown as series, causing the overall sequence of each project to override the representation of any single image therein. Ruscha worked in the Duchampian tradition, using the photograph, and often his subject matter, as a readymade object without inflection. In these works, as with Duchamp’s readymades, ordinary and familiar objects enact

\(^{71}\) Greenberg wrote very little on photography, since he understood photography as helplessly bound to its inherent indexicality and thus without the capacity to be autonomous in the way that, for him, the best Modernist painting was. He further likened any attempt at “abstract photography” to an act of self-deception; See Clement Greenberg, “Night Six,” lecture delivered April 15, 1971 as part of *The Bennington College Seminars*, reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155.

\(^{72}\) Rothkopf, 8.


an intellectual challenge, including the question: “Is it art?” Ruscha himself claimed his banal photographs of gasoline stations and palm trees for example were not “arty” but closer to “technical data like industrial photography.” Adding to this objective look that he admired, Bochner wanted his photographs to be even more restrained in order to avoid subjective composition as much as absolutely possible. Thus he turned to the quintessential method of Minimalist production: he hired a professional.

Bochner hired the photographer Gretchen Lambert to shoot each of twelve cubic modular constructions from three fixed viewpoints in order to create 36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams (1966). Like Ruscha’s Thirtyfour Parking Lots (1967), the title divulges the linguistically predetermined premise of the piece. In Bochner’s case, the title referenced three photographs from three different vantages of each of the twelve constructions arranged in vertical columns, with the original gridded drawings that preceded them as plans included as the apex of each respective column. The three vantages correspond to architecture’s standard means of describing a three-dimensional form in space: the “plan,” a bird’s eye view of the structure; “the elevation,” the view perpendicular to the “façade;” and the “perspective,” taken above one corner, in line with the diagonal axis. As standardized as these photographs are and as measured and pictorially uninflected they appear, they nevertheless fail to attain the desire for “literalism” Bochner strived for. Despite their use of minimalist lessons in order to be “objective,” the mediation of the medium was not avoidable. Bochner has recounted his goal in these early

______________________________


76 “By using the fabrication techniques of Minimalism, it gave me a certain objectivity,” Bochner in conversation with Rothkopf, (1999) 10.

77 Ibid.
photographs: “The thing is the thing and not a representation of the thing; there’s no mediation at work.” This formula of course would not hold. Instead of being objective, the photographs produced strange unintended shadows and the linear structures appeared slightly curved in reproduction, an effect of the convexity of the camera’s lens. In photography, Bochner had envisioned “the paradoxical promise of a medium so completely illusionistic as to sidestep the problem of illusionism altogether.” Yet this fantasy of avoiding either illusionism or mediation was bound to fail since the medium itself is predicated on a degree of indirectness, of liminality and distance, and believable as the real only through an acceptance of fallacy. For one thing, the shift in scale that the photographs effected on the blocks in Bochner’s experiment was not in proportion to the original sculpture. The fact of its inevitable inexactitude, that it somehow could never measure up to the dream of exactitude promised by the idea of indexicality, demonstrates how there was no way that it could ever be “the thing itself.”

These photographs are indeed successful at underscoring the serial attitude that unites the pictured forms, however rather than emphasizing a logic that is self-contained, viewing the piece opens it up as a whole to questions regarding the very absurdity of the predetermined system. Though one may be able to convincingly read the sequences horizontally across the rows, three simultaneous and yet different views of each single object cause the object to become nearly unrecognizable, and the subject, rather than being presented objectively, “unravel[s] with an

---

78 Ibid., 11.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 15.
almost cubist complexity.”82 Similar to Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs of bodies seen in motion through serial photography, often presented with three correlating camera angles (which, not surprisingly, Bochner was very interested in), rather than a greater understanding of the figure depicted, one is confronted with the jarring disconnects between the images.83 One wonders at the distance that separates each instantiation. The simple cross structure in Bochner’s series for example becomes almost entirely indecipherable from the elevation view. There is no longer anything straightforward about these standardized shots. “Instead of behaving for the camera as Bochner has intended, all the blocks resist easy ‘objectification’.84 Such experiments in impossible objectivity would typify conceptual art of the late sixties and early seventies.

The doubt Bochner’s project casts on both the medium and the object became invaluable to the artist’s later works, which inquire further into the limits of conceptual art. For despite conceptual art’s insistence on being associated with objective systems, whether deliberately or by chance, it was nonetheless forced to contend with and acknowledge the subjectivity and flaws of its own methods. As Sol LeWitt proclaimed in his seminal 1967 article in Artforum, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art": "Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece

---

82 Rothkopf, 12.
83 Notably, Bochner purchased a work by Muybridge in the sixties, which shows a bird in flight, head on, and in profile. Bochner describes Muybridge’s work in his essay “The Serial Attitude,” saying “Muybridge simultaneously photographed the same activity from 180 degree, 90 degree, and 45 degree and printed the three sets of photographs parallel horizontally. By setting up alternative reading logics within a visually discontinuous sequence he completely fragmented perception into what Stockhausen called, in another context, a ‘directionless time-field,” “The Serial Attitude.” Artforum 6 (December 1967) 28-33. Reprinted in Solar System & Rest Rooms, 42. Also cited in Rothkopf, 44. The concept of a “directionless timefield” reoccurs in numerous conceptual art projects using photography, including the work of Douglas Huebler, which will be discussed in the Chapter Three of the dissertation. This phenomenon can be seen as yet another manifestation of the doubting perception encouraged by the photograph as conceptual art.
84 Rothkopf, 13-14.
or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined." In many cases, the ruin is a built-in shortfall of the system itself.

Photography’s stubborn resistance to any predetermined conceptual idea encouraged Bochner to take measure of the structure of the photographic print, investigating it as a systematic entity and pressing its physical and conceptual fragility. He began to “act on the photograph itself as an object,” a gesture which would bring him narrowly close to contemporaneous developments in modernist painting, with a twist. This proximity to modernism created by Bochner’s investigation of the medium of photography would not fulfill modernism’s demands for medium specificity or self-reflexivity. In fact Bochner’s experiments with photography would actually further elucidate the contradictions embedded in both modernist and Minimalist discourse by demystifying the medium of photography as vastly contingent and always unpredictable.

In late 1966, Bochner created H-2 (1966-67), a work that addresses the sculptural tensions inherent in the earlier series, and yet magnifies these further by concentrating increasingly on the issues photography brings to bear on the “thing” photographed. At a distance, the blocks of the nearly four-foot square structure imaged by H-2 appear to move forward into the exhibition space, until one realizes that this is a kind of trompe-l’oeil. The sense of three-dimensions suggested by this relief is an illusion since the actual object presented is in fact completely flat, namely a photograph mounted on masonite. This spatial effect was achieved by “abandoning the neutrality of the traditional rectangular frame,” and cutting the

---

85 Ibid., 18.
86 Ibid., 19.
border of the photograph to the edge of the structure depicted, and then hanging the photograph at a slight distance from the wall in order to further accentuate an effect of depth. Bochner did not see this approach as a threat to his interest in literalism and had no problem with compromising the “autonomy” of the medium. By contrast, in early 1966 Robert Morris had written a distinct critique of such a use of the relief, stating that: “The relief has always been accepted as a viable mode. However, it cannot be accepted today as legitimate. The autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space—not a surface shared with painting.”

The parallel, whether intended or not, between work such as Bochner’s H-2 and Frank Stella’s contemporaneous shaped canvases is hard to miss, and may be as revealing about Bochner’s status as a conceptual and post-minimalist artist as it is of Stella’s “terminally ambivalent” position between Modernist art and “objecthood” at this juncture. In each case the picture surface is pushed away from the wall, giving it a deliberately sculptural appearance. Stella was of course not the only painter working in this mode, considering that "the shaped canvas was the dominant form of abstract painting in the 1960s." However, among those

87 Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” Artforum 4 (Feb 1966), 43.
89 Frances Colpitt, "The Shape of Painting in the 1960s," Art Journal, Spring 1991, 52. Colpitt notes that the list of artists making shaped paintings in the sixties should also include Robert Barry, Stephen Durkee, Michael Heizer, Peter Hutchinson, Patricia Johanson, Craig Kauffman, Sol LeWitt, Clark Murray, Joe Overstreet, Edwin Ruda, Sylvia Stone, Peter Tangen, Richard Tuttle, and Lawrence Weiner; 56. Donald Judd asserted in 1965 that “several people are already stretching canvas into three-dimensional forms, and, while the possibilities are not used up, it is no longer very unusual to do so,” Complete Writings, 1959-1975 (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 158.
artists anthologized in the mid-sixties by definitive exhibitions such as *The Shaped Canvas* and *Shape and Structure*, he was certainly the most prominent. Significantly, in addition to Stella’s works shaped into notched rectangles and crosses, he had also done a number of canvases that similarly appeared as “cut-outs” which had their centres removed to reveal the wall beneath as well as their proximity to this structural support.

Frances Colpitt writes that the shaped canvas, "although frequently described as a hybrid of painting and sculpture, grew out of the issues of abstract painting and was evidence of the desire of painters to move into real space by rejecting behind-the-frame illusionism." Bochner by contrast sought to move into real space by exposing the illusionism that nevertheless was suggested by the frame.

Though Bochner’s work at this point formally resembled a piece such as Frank Stella’s *Carl Andre* (1963) (first exhibited as part of his “Portrait Series” at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1964), they were each based in distinctly different, even opposing, methodologies and philosophies. Stella’s striped painting derives its appearance from the shape of the frame, reinforcing the support and the direction of its axis. This was the technique hailed by Michael Fried as “deductive structure,” and according to Fried the ostensible route to Modernist

---

90 *The Shaped Canvas* was curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, December 1964- January 1965, and included Richard Smith, Paul Feeley, Sven Lukin, Neil Williams, and Frank Stella.

91 *Shape and Structure* was organized by Frank Stella and Henry Geldzahler at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, in January 1965. Although Stella did not exhibit his own work, his object-like canvases were important precedents for the other paintings in this show.

92 Colpitt, 52.
painting’s pure and autonomous self-reflexivity, “generated by the framing edge.” Such “explanatory acrobatics” were among Fried’s controversial attempts to salvage “Stella’s work for painting, as opposed to sculpture, an effort to which Stella himself remains committed.” Bochner inverted this approach by trimming the perimeter of the object to convene to the image, simultaneously violating the camera’s rectangular viewing frame and undermining Fried’s “deductive structure.” This project also illustrates Bochner’s move away from focusing on seriality as means and ends, and rather towards a clearer investment “in questions inspired by the photographic object, its specific relation to contemporary painting and sculpture, and the ineluctable illusionism that continued to thwart his fascination with literalism.” A poignant parallel is visible between Bochner and LeWitt once more at this point, in that Bochner’s frame is generated by the image, just as LeWitt’s objects reveal the system that underpin them, thereby exposing the contingent dependency between structure and perception.

In Bochner’s work aspects such as hanging the work slightly away from the wall in order to appear more “present” are exactly the elements that reveal its ruse and complicate its literalness, since the shadows in the photograph and the shadows cast by the photograph on the wall do not accord. These are only convincing from the perspective of viewing the work straight on. At an angle, the illusion falls apart like a “stage-set façade that demands a particular

---


94 Hopkins, 133.


96 Rothkopf, 20.

97 Ibid.
viewpoint or stubbornly withholds its illusory rewards,” explicitly pitting “the ‘artificial’ perspective frozen in the photograph against the changing ‘natural’ perspective of its viewing.” This perceptual discrepancy makes one aware of the photograph as both an object and vehicle that is liable in its subjection to unique and specific viewing conditions. “The circumstances of perception are then no longer coded only in the relationship between the camera and the blocks, but also in the relationship between the viewer and the silhouetted photograph,” which, in this way, directly engages its surroundings. Bochner’s work exposes the artificiality of perspective and “its role as art’s invisible accomplice.” The discontinuities in the construction and perception of perspective would continue to be the question underscoring a number of other pieces by Bochner including, *Perspective One Point (Positive)* (1967) and *Perspective: One Point (Negative)* (1967). Bochner has said that he was making the system “something to look at, rather than using it to look at something,” which allows one to view Bochner’s work as inherently methodological, thereby interpreting his use of the photograph as a conceptual subject of investigation rather than the means with which to investigate other subjects.

PREPOSTEROUS TRANSPARENCE / INCREDIBLE TRANSCENDENCE

---

98 Ibid., 21.
99 Ibid., 22.
100 Ibid., 20-21.
101 Ibid., 24.
102 In conversation with Rothkopf, 1999; See Rothkopf, 24.
Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for this reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document, and act as a work of art as well. – Clement Greenberg.103

“I know,” is how the critic Clement Greenberg described the sensation that he believed was the promise of all good art, “yet without having anything specific or definite to know.”104 Perhaps ironically Bochner’s work with photography highlights the tension built-in to this “indefinite” aspect of modernist knowing. Surface Dis/Tension (1968) has been called the “culmination” of Bochner’s work “with perspective, silhouetting, and composite photography.”105 This image was created by soaking a photograph of Bochner’s gridded Perspective: One Point (Positive) (1967) in water until the top layer of silver could be removed from the dissolved paper support. This delicate “surface” was then hung to dry on a line, creating a crumpled and pliant epidermis, altered from its original form by numerous wrinkles and creases. Bochner then re-photographed this flayed skin, veritably the veil of his earlier photograph, and printed the image in both positive and negative on the same piece of paper. By slightly shifting the position of the paper in the middle of the two-part printing process, Bochner achieved the look of high contrast solarization to give the surface its textured appearance.106 Of these furrowed perspectives that expose the contingency of the membrane of the photograph itself, Bochner has said, “They were the first place where I thought of acting on the photograph as an object which bore no


104 Olga Viso, “Foreword,” The Quick and the Dead, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2009), 23.

105 Rothkopf, 28.

106 Ibid.; This process is clearly described in a study Bochner made for an artist’s book, which he hoped would be editioned in 1969 by Marian Goodman’s Multiples Gallery. The work was entitled Notes And Procedures: Photograph Series B/Part 2, 1966-1969, and was never published by Goodman. It survives however in the form of a fourteen-page stapled booklet of ink drawings on graph paper, and was included in the exhibition Mel Bochner Photographs 1966-1969, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge March 16-June 16, 2002.
relationship to something which took place outside the photograph.”¹⁰⁷ In this way, Bochner combined the dismantling of academic linear perspective with the deconstruction of the physical body of the photograph. Both structures are revealed as dependent on outside supports for their credibility, let alone legibility. “Thus,” as Carol Armstrong has explained, “in the process of thinning the physical life of the concept, Bochner arrives at an awareness of the ultrathin thickness of the photograph.”¹⁰⁸

Perhaps even more productively, Bochner’s operation on the photograph’s “ultrathin thickness” could be understood in terms of Duchamp’s invented category of the “infra-thin.”¹⁰⁹ Notoriously indefinable, the “infra-thin” (infra-mince) is a kind of measure without definition that combines a consideration of an object’s physicality with its conceptual structure and questions the relation between the two.¹¹⁰ Duchamp described the liminal partition of the infra-thin as the “immeasurable difference or separation between things,”¹¹¹ stating that, “The possible, implying the becoming -- the passage from one to the other-- takes place in the infra-thin.”¹¹² In taking apart the medium of photograph, Bochner draws attention to the interstitial nature of the photograph as a space of becoming in literal and figural terms. Physically, the deceptive flatness of the photograph is opened beyond its apparent two-dimensional confines,

---

¹⁰⁷ Mel Bochner in conversation with Scott Rothkopf, (1999), 47.
¹⁰⁸ Carol Armstrong, review in Artforum Vol. 41, issue 1 (New York, Sept. 2002), 197
¹⁰⁹ Duchamp’s first mention of the “infra-thin” was published in View magazine in 1945.
revealing what could be described by using Duchamp’s term as “invisible and intangible, but otherwise manifestly present.”

Among analogies evoked to further illustrate his point, Duchamp suggested the infra-thin was like “fire without smoke, the warmth of a seat which has just been left, reflection from a mirror or glass, watered silk, iridescents, the people who go through (subway gates) at the very last moment, velvet trousers their whistling sound is an infra-thin separation signaled.” Each of these imagistic examples challenges the existential logic of the photographic index. For instead of pointing back to the original, as a trace of the real, the fire does not have smoke, and the warmth of the vacant seat or even the reflection in the mirror is temporal, unstable, and vanishing. The index may exist, but it does not hold.

Like the photograph, the infra-thin pivots on doubt as an operative principle, evoking a search for the differentials among identicals, uniqueness among multiples. In another sense, by testing the transparence of the photograph moreover, one could say that Bochner’s *Surface Dis/Tension* disassembles the Renaissance visualization of art, namely the “picture,” as a window on to the world, at the same time that he plays up the metaphoric significance of Alberti’s description of the “open window” (*aperta finestra*) as his *De Pictura*. In this way, Bochner continually resists any truly transparent understanding of art in favor of the infra-thin.

---

113 Devening, Ibid.

114 Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, 45.

Again an analogy can be found in the work of Duchamp, namely in the similarity between the riddling transparency in Bochner’s piece and the strange opacity of the Large Glass (1915-1923).

Given the lattice structure of Surface Dis/tension, the work also strikingly recalls the history of early photography, or to be precise, the oldest photographic negative in existence: William Henry Fox Talbot’s print image of a latticed-window at Lacock Abbey (1835). The reference to the window is implicit in Bochner’s piece, and explicit in Talbot’s, and whether intended or not, it can be read as a meta-commentary on photography. It is at once see-through and yet obscure. “Windows” are layered in these pieces as well as segmented. Talbot’s annotation attached to the Lacock Abbey image reads: “the squares of glass about 200 in number could be counted with the help of a lens,” an observation which brings empirical measurements directly into the equation as well as the need for yet another glass through which to “properly” see.

A comparison with Talbot is particularly revealing for Bochner’s project, since Talbot, as one of the many competing progenitors of the medium of photography, was the first to use the word “fix” in relation to photography. Bochner points out that this “fixity” was not beyond the shadow of a doubt. In opposition to Talbot, Bochner here is working to unfix photography so-to-speak, removing it from its traditional supports (philosophical, perceptual, and physical) by literally taking the picture apart. Bochner’s gesture exposes the reality that Talbot’s method of fixing was never totally successful, and not simply because it was eventually replaced by

---


117 Talbot announced that he had discovered a method of overcoming the difficulties of temporality by “fixing the image.” On January 25, 1839, Talbot wrote to John Herschel about “the possibility of fixing upon paper the image formed by a Camera Obscura, or rather, I should say, causing it to fix itself.” On February 8, he wrote again, this time using the word more specifically and self-consciously (”my method of ‘fixing’”) to refer to the method whereby the induced image was to be made permanent. See Larry Schaaf, “Herschel, Talbot, and Photography: Spring 1831 and Spring 1839,” History of Photography 4, no. 3 (July 1980), 185, 190.
Herschel’s “washing out” process. “Fixed,” as Geoffrey Batchen has insightfully made clear, is itself misleading, suggesting “only a momentary and untrustworthy stability.” Bochner challenges the questionable “art of fixing a shadow” that is photography.

Bochner’s act of re-photographing the disembodied image in *Surface Dis/Tension* further complicates the viewer’s ability to discern what it is they are looking at. Again one is confronted with an object that appears to be three dimensional, and yet it has in fact been restored to the smooth and flat illusion of the photograph. These interventions disrupt both Renaissance pictorial ideals and Minimalism’s rigorous geometry, and mark a transition to more fluid, material, subjective, and chance-oriented modes of art practice that ask the viewer to consider the uncontainability and uncontrollability of the piece or pieces. This is coincident with similar investigations by other artists, such as Barry LeVa, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Bruce Nauman, who also challenged Minimalism’s severity by creating soft, materially sensitive, and irregularly shaped sculpture that came to be grouped under the rubric of “Post-Minimalism” or “Anti-Form.”

Bochner, for example, was specifically impressed by Nauman’s *Flour Arrangements* (1966), which he encountered in the September 1967 issue of *Artforum* and in Nauman’s solo

---

118 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999) 241 n.148. “Never quite able to decide whether the origins of photography lay in nature or in culture (notice how his own photograms include both botanical specimens and samples of lace and handwriting), Talbot later conjured yet another descriptive phrase that contains elements of each: “the art of fixing a shadow.” He further elaborated: “the most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our ‘natural magic, and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy…. Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change,” William Fox Talbot, “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing” (1839), in Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: Essays and Images*, (New York: museum of Modern Art, 1980), 25. Quoted in Batchen, 91.

119 Rothkopf, 29; “Post-Minimalism” was a term coined by Robert Pincus-Witten in an article entitled “Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime” in the November 1971 issue of *Artforum*. This broad term generally implies a reaction against the values of Minimalism, and has been used to embrace diverse phenomena such as Conceptual art, Land art, Performance art, Process art, and Video art. See Robert Morris, “Anti-Form,” *Artforum* 6 (April 1968), 33-35, and “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects,” *Artforum* 7 (April 1969), 50-54.
show at Castelli Gallery in January 1967. Nauman’s piece consisted of seven photographs featuring abstract mounds of baking flour that Nauman rearranged on his studio floor every day for a month. The implications of this piece will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Notably both Bochner and Nauman began working with photography in 1966 and by 1970 both had abandoned it almost entirely. Bochner’s *36 Photographs* as well as *Surface Dis/Tension* shares many affinities with Nauman’s use of materials, in that the process is paramount in each, and both exemplify the tricky tension between the frame of the image that seeks to contain and the contents which become increasingly unruly as the series is viewed. Bochner shared with Nauman and Robert Smithson an interest in early satellite photography and in images of the surface of moon, which had become conspicuously publicized in the mid-sixties. Nauman’s *Composite Photo of Two Messes on the Studio Floor* (1967), for example, specifically alludes to such photography and could be productively compared on these grounds with the “grounds” or small-scale “topographic” effect of Bochner’s *Surface Dis/Tension.*

Bochner’s experiments with photography became ever more interested in the physical properties of images and took on increasingly corporeal aspects, visibly evident in his documents of two rapidly sketched grids on glass, one drawn in mineral oil, *Viscosity (Mineral Oil)* (1968), and one drawn in shaving cream, *Grid (Shaving Cream)* (1968), then photographed with his Polaroid camera. The use of these ordinary household products adds “a wry, almost absurd inflection to the Modernist grid.”

---

120 Rothkopf, 48, fn. 70.
121 Ibid., 31.
grids on glass once more deny the easy understanding of the picture as window. One can also see such works as parodies that mock the modernist grid of meaning, especially given the ephemeral nature of these liquid substances. This manipulation of the print before the photograph is taken, in combination with *Surface Dis/Tension* in which the print was staged after the initial print was taken, demonstrates Bochner’s questioning of the limits of the photographic form, as well as his conclusion that the release of the shutter is but one in a series of processes which compose ‘the’ photograph.

Bochner’s next series continued to investigate the constant negotiation between surface and depth perception as a means of understanding the substance and meaning of photography, now moving into the use of colour. With funding from E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) Bochner once again hired a professional photographer; this time, one who specialized in product photography. The photographer was asked “to do nothing more than make the most beautiful pictures possible of Vaseline and shaving cream” applied to glass, to be titled *Transparent and Opaque* (1968). Each image in the twelve photo series proves itself to be both: transparent and opaque. The clear yet viscous Vaseline and the plain white foam each reveal light as the critical agent in the photographic process, accentuated by the use of colored

---

122 There are also affinities between these “windows” and Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow* (1920), which consists of a miniature French window, a painted wood frame, and eight panes of glass covered with black leather, (Collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York). The title is a pun on windows, which becoming widow evokes the idea of mourning. The fact that the “windows” are obstructed by black fabric is also suggestive of this reading, as if the shades were drawn. The use of leather however adds sexual and animal overtones, especially combined with the word “Fresh” which is a play on “French.” There is a bawdy suggestion that the widow is available behind the shades, which creates a humourous scenario that challenges codes of etiquette along with the traditionally accessible “view through the window” associated with art and illusionistic painting.

123 The organization E.A.T. was founded by Robert Rauschenberg and the physicist Billy Kluver in 1966, and was designed not only to make technology more financially accessible to artists, but also to provide artists and engineers the possibility of collaborating.

124 Rothkopf, 31.
lights that test the surfaces while alluding to the centrality of the body in their sensual consistency, as well as to the fact that both products (Vaseline and shaving cream) have domestic associations to bodily use. On one level, the attempt to make these substances “beautiful” is redolent of the stuff of practical jokes, displacing and destabilizing the categories of the base and the beautiful. By the same token, they are formally impressive photographs.

Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss acknowledged these corporeal connotations and the way they ask base materialism to contend against the elision of matter in the high version of Modernism, by including images from *Transparent and Opaque* in their 1996 exhibition, *L’Informe: Mode D’emploi* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Though it is nearly impossible not to notice the formal parody these works give rise to in relation to the heroism of abstract expressionism’s “allover” compositions, they also accentuate the radical possibility of formlessness and in effect provoke a rethinking of conventional readings of other artworks that have been categorized as distinctly modernist. This was Bois and Krauss’s professed post-structural position in assembling *L’Informe*, using Georges Bataille’s notion of “l’informe” to destabilize the organizing principal of form and the idea of form as an organizing principal. According to Bataille, form itself is filled with doubt:

---


126 Luke Skrebowski, “Productive Misunderstandings: Interpreting Mel Bochner’s Theory of Photography,” *Art History* December 2009: 919. This contribution by Skrebowski is part of the AHRC funded research project, “Aesthetics after Photography.” Though many of my own questions overlap with Skrebowski’s, his text focuses primarily on Bochner’s *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)* (1967-1970) in order to challenge the ways in which Jeff Wall’s partisan history of photo-conceptualism is used to legitimate Wall’s own practice of photographic tableaux. In his critique of pictorial aesthetics, Skrebowski also negotiates the fact that Bochner has since returned to painting as his primary practice. The present chapter similarly works to unfix specifically modernist presumptions regarding photography, yet from a slightly different angle, in that I am simultaneously arguing that there is no legitimate and comprehensive way to either organize or understand photography or the world, aesthetically or otherwise, that does not fall apart upon closer examination. I argue that the photographic conditions of conceptual art have forever altered the very possibility of aesthetics as a fixed category, despite the persistent desire from many directions, to reestablish it.
formless is not only an adjective… but a term serving to declassify the requirement that each thing have its own form… Actually, for academics to be happy would require the universe to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal… On the other hand, to say that the universe resembles nothing and is nothing but formless is the same as saying that the universe is like a spider or a blob of spit.  

Bochner evokes the excessive bodily connections that Bataille alludes to as a kind of anti-formalism. Taking the “form” of the photograph, Transparent and Opaque nevertheless resists empirical measures of understanding, demonstrating the photograph’s essential futility in containing the shape of even a microcosm of the universe. Such pieces do the work Bois sees as the function of the formless, the work of “undermining concepts, of depriving them of their boundaries, [and of] the capacity to articulate the world.”

Bochner’s choice of subject thus continues his repudiation of the formalist account of Modernism as well as and the persistence of Leon Battista Alberti’s metaphor of “transparency,” which has been central to the history of Western art since Alberti compared the surface of a perspectively constructed picture to a transparent pane of glass. Modernist painting supposedly shifted away from this view of a “window unto the world” in order to emphasize painting as “a material sign—an opaque object.”

Bochner’s photographs demonstrate how neither paradigm is entirely sufficient and both rely on cultural and technical assumptions in

---

127 My translation. “. . . un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but: il s'agit de donner un rédingote à ce qui est, une rédingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'informe revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat,” Georges Bataille: "Informe," Documents 7 (December 1929), 382.


129 Rothkopf also notes this comparison, citing Erwin Panofsky, “The surface is now no longer the wall or the panel bearing the forms of the individual things and figures, but rather is once again the transparent plane through which we are meant to believe that we are looking into a space, even if that space is still bounded on all sides,” 33 f.n.78.

130 Rothkopf, 33.
order to be believable. Bochner’s 1966 review of the “Primary Structures” exhibition at the Jewish Museum clearly outlines this view of art, describing all art as the root of artifice, as “unreal, constructed, invented, predetermined, intellectual, make-believe, contrived, useless.” Bochner’s play on and with photography provocatively denies use-value and form as a value, by putting metaphors of painting in dialogue with the stubborn presumptions about pictures that had shaped photography since its inception. Bochner’s photographs encourage an alternative lineage of thinking, first expressed by Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and others in the 1930s, and increasingly critical to artists working in the sixties and seventies: “Neither [painting or photography] has the capacity for truth in terms of a search for an underlying structure.” Investigating the underlying structure inevitably exposes the skeptical supports of both systems of representation.

“THERE IS A LABYRINTH WHICH IS A STRAIGHT LINE…”

Bochner’s installations of “measurements” are arguably the work he has become most famous for. Closing in on how measuring is an attempt to delimit the world, Bochner literalizes measurement in order to highlight the limits that are taken for granted as givens and thus making strange the very idea of inches and feet. Though many of these projects were exhibited exclusively as “direct” experiential spaces, with no photographic mediation after 1969, it is significant to note that the artist’s initial foray into the “measurements” took the form of

_____________________

131 Mel Bochner, “Primary Structures,” Arts Magazine 40 (June 1966), 32-35.
photographs, and at least initially they could only be experienced through this medium. First appearing in a group of five unassuming black-and-white photographs, Bochner marked off various distances in small black Letraset numbers. For example, Singer Lab Measurement (no. 4) (1968)\(^{135}\) captures a cropped, oblique view of a scuffed door meeting a gray expanse of linoleum tiling. Implicitly the square tiles can be read as allusions once more to the modernist grid as well as the Renaissance construction of space. Running along a seam in the tiles, two short black pieces of tape mark off a distance between the door and an indeterminate point on the floor, directly in the middle of which hovers the mark “12”. Another photograph, entitled Singer Lab measurement (no. 1) (1968), pictures “10” spanning from an aerosol canister to the molding of a doorframe, while a third (Singer Lab Measurement (no. 3)) (1968) measures “12” running from the top of a door down its edge. The remaining two photographs mark off “36” along the floor and “12” from a wall molding to a piece of black cloth, (Singer Lab Measurement (no. 2) (1968) and Singer Lab Measurement (no. 5) (1968)). The significance of either the spaces, or the objects, or the measurements is never clearly deducible. “If these descriptions sound somewhat vague, it is because most of the measurements themselves, despite the apparent precision of their distances, bear an ambiguous relationship to the terrain they chart;”\(^{136}\) A “perspectival parallax makes the mark appear misaligned.”\(^{137}\)

---

\(^{135}\) Singer Company is a New Jersey sewing machine manufacturer that collaborated with E.A.T. to create an artist-in-residence program which Bochner took part in at the Singer Central Laboratories in Denville, New Jersey in the fall of 1968. Bochner was the first participant in this program.

\(^{136}\) Rothkopf, 36.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 49, f.n. 85.
These works “question measurement vis-à-vis space in the real world,” and Bochner’s use of photography in this process is far from haphazard. More than a conceptual redefinition of space and sculptural objects, Bochner’s “measurements” implicate the photograph as measure of the world and as a means of distilling experience. Bochner for example has elaborated specifically on his understanding of the conceptual supports that account for standards of evaluating dimensions and for buttressing belief systems, explaining: “Measurement is one of our means of believing that the world can be reduced to a function of human understanding. Yet, when forced to surrender its transparency, measurement reveals an essential nothing-ness. The yardstick does not say that the thing we are measuring is one yard long. Something must be added to the yardstick in order that it assert anything about the length of the object. This something is a purely mental act…an ‘assumption.’” Moreover, one should note that Bochner’s use of feet and inches points significantly to the bodily nature of these measurements and of the perception/experience of space. Beyond implying “the existence of often unacknowledged, deeply rooted and culturally based perceptual baggage,” the foot and inch system specifically, by contrast to the metric system for example, is tied to the proportions of the human body despite the fact that those proportions are by no means universal.

Yve-Alain Bois has observed, “All measurements are indices;” a comment that implicitly connects Bochner’s interest in measurements to an interest in investigating Indexicality and by extension photography. While Bois contends that Bochner “shifted from his investigation of

139 Bochner, Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible, 64.
140 Kallina, 90.
measurement as index to a mode of inquiry.” I would argue that what Bochner realized through 
his experiments with photography was that the index itself is always more than a measurement, 
and is always open to inquiry. This reading plays on the more nuanced understanding of 
“indices,” which in French also signifies “clues,” suggesting traces marked by doubt rather than 
firm answers.

This series of works questioning the referential nature of measurement can be 
productively compared to Marcel Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-1914). Both 
pieces are implicitly photographic and Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages* (also known as 
*Canned Chance: Trois stoppages etalon*) is the work that comes to mind as being the most 
illuminative conceptual precedent of this conundrum of “indices.” Like Bochner’s work, it 
demonstrates the artist’s interest in mathematics as well as the concept of chance. Duchamp 
dropped three measures of thread, each one meter long, from a height of one meter, and 
documented the results. Each fell in its own random and abstract shape, and was then glued on 
Prussian blue canvas cut into three strips. These canvas strips were then glued to three glass 
panels through which the threads are visible. Three wood slats were then shaped along one side 
to match the curved paths taken by the threads. Together all of these pieces were then encased in 
a wooden box. This piece demonstrates the generative activity of creating a work as the 
expression of a procedure, which anticipates the core principles on which conceptualism 
Bochner’s “measurements,” reveals the arbitrary nature of standards and measurements. The 
typically functional aspect of such measures is thrown into doubt and a meter in each work un-
can-nily translates into an understanding of the meter, or any other quantifiable measurement, as 
culturally constructed and pliable. In effect, this is also a questioning of the straight line, in that 
when it falls to chance a meter no longer equals a meter. There is an additional analogy to the
photograph embedded in these glass plates: “[w]hen Duchamp’s pieces of string twisted themselves, ‘as they pleased,’ through time and space, they were stopped, frozen, by their impact with the pieces of canvas glued onto glass plates, just as the movement of the real world through time and space is stopped, frozen, by the exposure of glass photographic plates.”¹⁴¹

Photographic chance is thereby emblematized by Three Standard Stoppages.

Connections can also be made to the work of other conceptual artists who were grappling with the dubious legacy of art after Duchamp against a standardized view of the world, such as John Baldessari’s Measurement Series: Measuring a Chair with a Coffee Cup (Top-Bottoms) (1975), in which the artist photographically documents his use of his coffee mug as a kind of viewfinder in sizing up his studio while he reclines in a chair behind the camera. The coffee cup as standard or measure seems about as arbitrary here as the concept of a meter, which as Duchamp revealed can take on infinitely variable forms that are neither straight nor predictable. Baldessari’s later Three Metaphorical Measurements (1980) humourously takes this point further by inscribing the walls of a room not with numerical measurements but rather language in a manner that brings Lawrence Weiner to mind. For example, one wall reads “AS FAR AS FROM EAST TO WEST” and another reads, “AS HIGH AS HEAVEN AND AS DEEP AS HELL,” using metaphoric expressions to map out the width and height of the space. Baldessari has explained that, as opposed to “specific measurement” he believes “idiomatic language is usually more evocative of what we really mean— more to the point than specific information. A person that is really cold does not say, “it’s below 10 degrees below zero” but “it’s colder than

The irony of Baldessari’s example makes the idea of finding appropriate analogies in order to understand the world doubly abstract by describing hell, which is imaginably an inferno, as particularly cold.

One striking difference between Duchamp or Baldessari and Bochner is that Bochner retains the use of the regimented straight line. No curves or extrinsic language enter his measurement series. Or at least, so it seems. His apparently uninflected method is deceptive. As Bochner described “I slowly came to realize that these measurements are so deeply imbedded in our experience that they regulate our perception, yet remain completely invisible.” Bochner tests this invisibility just as he had deconstructed transparence in the earlier photo pieces.

In a clearly Duchampian twist “Bochner’s measurements most often seem not to mark the distance between meaningful physical points,” making them seem nearly absurd, being “robbed of the function they would usually perform.” The straight line itself is questionable, unreliable, even confusing. In a 1971 installation in Spoleto, Italy, Bochner inscribed with chalk across on a stone floor: “THERE IS A LABYRINTH WHICH IS A STRAIGHT LINE…”

JORGE LUIS BORGES. Positioned between two walls, and entitled Quotation Piece: “There is a labyrinth…” this piece speaks not simply of the popularity of Borges in New York art circles in the late 1960s and early 70s, but moreover the importance of a basic skepticism regarding objectivity that increasingly became crucial to Bochner’s work. Duchamp’s Three Standard


\[143\] From a transcript of Elayne Varian’s interview with the artist, March 1969.

\[144\] Rothkopf, 37.
Stoppages can also be viewed as a meditation on this phrase, as it too demonstrates that what appears to be a straight line can be misleading and conceptually labyrinthine.

There is a visible connection between Bochner’s adoption of Borges’ quote and one of two films Bochner made in collaboration with Robert Moskowitz in 1966. Walking a Straight Line Through Grand Central Station was a 72-second 16 mm movie whose premise was entirely open to its inevitable failure. Despite the geometric determination of the piece in space it was impossible for social interaction not to effect the outcome:

The idea was that the film was moving the camera in a straight line and the camera was moving through the space in a straight line. We rehearsed it all day long. I could walk (I was the cameraman) in a perfectly straight line, guiding myself by keeping Bob’s ear in the corner of the frame. We waited until rush hour to shoot the film, so that there would be so many people bumping into me that it was impossible to keep on a perfectly straight course. We wanted to let reality invisibly bombard the process of making the film.145

Similarly, each piece in the Measurements series, and each photo work, poses an a priori spatial concept (such as a particular measurement or perspective) in relation to the physical world it is expected to describe, and each also is burdened by the reality of its situation that makes any one concept insufficient for understanding the world. Noticeably, there are small intervals between the actual architectural elements in the measurement pieces and the taped measures that mark the space. This observation reinforces “the impression that the room had been duplicated,”146 in effect posing a meta-interrogation of the photographic process. The apparent disregard for the specific “ground” of the measurement, makes them only all the more imprecise, which is compounded again when the scale shifts further by being photographically documented. “The essential scalelessness of photography grows startlingly explicit when a measurement is

indicated on a place parallel to the picture’s surface, as in the case of the spray can photograph in which ten inches occupies less than five,”¹⁴⁷ seen in Singer Lab Measurement (no.1) (1968). Such projects point to how space is always perceived according to a set of culturally constructed standards and Bochner’s intention to “change the work of art’s function for the viewer,” so that “Art would go from being the record of someone else’s perception to becoming the recognition of your own,”¹⁴⁸ or any universal system of measurement, and in this way, it would bring doubt to bear on any form of systemic thinking.

Robert Pincus-Witten described Bochner, as early as 1971, as “an epistemological Conceptualist,” who “is engaged in the study of knowledge as its own end. He tends to make or do things for the kinds of information, knowledge or data, which the things or activities reveal. He tends to be a grammarian, a mathematician, a cartographer.”¹⁴⁹ Pincus-Witten was right to note Bochner’s distinctive epistemological questioning, however it is important to also mention that this search for “information, knowledge or data” is a means of opening more questions rather than being grounded in any definite answers. “Modernist theory led us to believe that these issues were all resolved,” Bochner has explained. Referring further to his deconstructionist practice, he discusses the “dysfunctional map” of any “theory of vision,” saying “I want to show that there is no resolution, no firm ground. Everything that is given is immediately taken

¹⁴⁷ Rothkopf, 37.
¹⁴⁸ Mel Bochner, From the transcript of Elayne Varian’s interview with the artist, March 1969.
away.” Tellingly both of these artists are interested in examining the boundaries of art in order to “produce situations which are actively at work upon the body and perceptions of the viewer.”

Beyond the way that the taped measurements in the room suggest the phenomenon of reproduction by doubling the frame of the space, there is another crucial link between the “measurements” and the photograph, which, though it is accentuated by the fact of having the rooms or spaces photographically documented, remains true even when there is no attendant photograph. I am referring to the ways in which each, the photographs and “measurements,” are able to serve as implicit, if not explicit, tools of institutional critique. Photographs and museums, particularly in the sixties, were considered containers of art, and not art themselves. Art practices such as Bochner’s, or Michael Asher’s or Bruce Nauman’s for that matter, reveal the suspension of disbelief that unpins these viewpoints.


151 Robert Pincus-Witten, 234.

152 Ibid.

By taking measure of the space of the gallery or museum, Bochner in effect is measuring the supports that prop “up the ideology of the autonomous art object.” Like the photograph, the measurements seem to “picture” any given space without apparent discrimination, and yet, via its seemingly invisible framing capacity, it is also able to make visible the constructed dimensions that had previously seemed inevitable. The medium of photography, like the space of the museum, adds something magical to what it records or frames. Both photography and the museum also share the metaphoric if not literal function of preserving time and conserving their contents. “Taping up the gallery space has the effect of taping it off, making us acutely aware of its presence, as if at the scene of a crime,” an observation which brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s description of Eugene Atget’s photographs of deserted Parisian streets. This connection is not haphazard since both examples emphasize the “exhibition value” of photography, and the use of the photograph as evidence. “With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences and acquire a hidden political significance”; with Bochner the gallery is revealed as supporting canonical art forms and ways of seeing which similarly hold implicit political significance. Bochner’s framing thus uses a Duchampian methodology in order to break the space down into its constituent parts, or measures. “Mel Bochner’s measurement pieces are located at the point where an anti-metaphysical desire to


highlight all accepted conventions (or boundaries) runs into a phantasmagoric feeling of estrangement.”\textsuperscript{158}

This suspicious rupture between subjective perception and objective measurement can never be fully mended. The first two photographs from the Measurement series bring this challenge of self-doubt to bear on “actual” photographs of the artist. In \textit{Actual Size (Face)} and \textit{Actual Size (Hand)} of 1968, the first shows Bochner’s face, the other his hand, positioned next to a vertical line that has been traced on the wall as an indication of his measurements. These images were intended to be developed at a ratio of 1:1, printed so that the “12” mark in the image occupies exactly twelve inches on the paper. Doing so does not make the images more real however, but rather reveals the incompleteness of this circular logic.\textsuperscript{159} At any size, the photograph will never be the thing itself. Moreover, the photograph is always an index without a referent.\textsuperscript{160} If anything, these images of the artist connect back more convincingly to the scene of the crime, in that their structure alludes to categorical photography and specifically mug-shots.

By 1969 Bochner had begun his best-known installations, such as \textit{Measurement: Room} (1969). Rather than set-ups for photographs, the artist considered these new measurements as works in themselves.\textsuperscript{161} Notably however, Bochner has commented on the connection retained between these works and the medium of photography; calling the distances marked on the wall,

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 172.


\textsuperscript{161} Rothkopf, 39.
projections of the room’s “negative” or blueprint onto the space in question. The ghostly aspect of the “measurements,” floating in the empty white space of the modern gallery, described by Yve-Alain Bois as creating “an eerie sense of displacement,” also recalls André Malraux’s hypothetical situation described in the “Museum Without Walls” (1947), in which the physical body of the museum would dissolve, to be replaced by photographs. Bochner’s artwork seems to propose that even if Malraux’s museum were possible, it would certainly still have walls, albeit duplicitous ones, seeing as photography is always a medium as well as a support. As Douglas Crimp has explained in “On the Museum’s Ruins,” “photography not only secures the admittance of various objects, fragments of objects, details of objects to the museum; it is also the organizing device; it reduces the now even vaster heterogeneity to a single perfect similitude.”

Bochner pursues the imperfection of this correlation by interrogating photography as an illusionistic medium. His original desires for objectivity, coming out of Minimalism, were frustrated repeatedly, and thus he began to deconstruct photography as a “depictive,” “comprehensive,” or “self-sufficient” medium, challenging its purported ontological ground. The use of the measurements parallels this ontological destabilization. Moreover, the very thought of measurement itself can in fact be viewed as a conceptual work of art, particularly since any measurement is itself a feat of conceptualization. Measuring as a conceptual process

162 Mel Bochner in conversation with Rothkopf, 49, f.n. 88. Yve-Alain Bois has also noted this connection: “The empty room had been transformed into an architect’s blueprint,” “The Measurement Pieces: From Index to Implex,” Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible 1966-1973 (Yale University Art Gallery, 1995), 167.


shares much in common with the process of photography. For example, if we read the following quote by Bochner in 1972 and attempt to replace the references to “measurements” with references to the photograph, the centrality of fallibility to Bochner’s project becomes apparent:

“Its commonness of application renders it virtually invisible. Measurement is one of our means of believing that the world can be reduced to a function of human understanding. Yet, when forced to surrender its transparency, measurement reveals an essential ‘nothing-ness.’ The yardstick does not say that thing we are measuring is one yard long.”

Likewise Bochner’s attempt to produce Actual Size (Face) and (Hand) (1968) as “a perfectly indexical depiction, resulted paradoxically only in the generation of an index (the photograph) of an index (the scale alongside Bochner’s head or hand).” The referent escapes. The realization of this “vicious circle” as Bochner has called it, obliged him to announce, “That, for me, was the end of photography.”

Deducing what photography was not, rather than gaining any certainty as to what photography is, Bochner understood that the medium of photography, despite its indexical claims to comprehension, was and would always be a test of the immeasurable flux between reality, representation, and perception.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND UNDERSTATEMENTS

Arguments against autonomy are essential tactics in the practice of conceptual art. Aided and abetted by photography, conceptual art’s critique of stable authorship takes on multiple dimensions, many of which are consciously contradictory. Mel Bochner’s Misunderstandings (A

Theory of Photography (1967-70) is a conceptual piece that deliberately calls attention to photography’s distinctive characteristics while simultaneously encouraging a game of mistaken identities. It is composed of an envelope containing one reproduced photograph and nine photographs of index cards, each with a quote from a famous author handwritten on it. Each quote is presented as a ‘theory of photography,’ as a means, as Roland Barthes would say, “to learn at all costs what Photography was ‘in itself.’”\textsuperscript{168} Beyond the fact that the index-card format is reminiscent of notes for studying, that the collection is presented in an envelope may also be read as a reference to Barthes’ calling the photograph a “transparent envelope,”\textsuperscript{169} despite the contradictory opacity of the information contained therein.

The eclectic grouping of ‘authors’ included in Bochner’s Misunderstandings are Marcel Duchamp, Emile Zola, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Taine, Mao Tse-Tung, Marcel Proust, James J. Gibson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the Encyclopedia Britannica. However, each of these authors are subsumed paradoxically by Bochner’s own asserted ‘authorship,’ evidenced by the fact of his purposely handwritten transcriptions, and stylistically by his quick, ‘apparently’ haphazard penmanship to inscribe their quotes. His use of handwriting, as opposed to the typewritten statements that typify most conceptual art of this era, suggests his desire to emphasize the inevitably subjective aspects of purportedly objective theories. This casualness is itself misleading. As an ironic gesture, the hand of the artist thus underscores and complicates the logic and readability of the overall piece, seeming to say that not only is any theory of photography subjective, but moreover it is always entwined in multiple subjectivities.


\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 5.
The quotations themselves have many layers of provenance, and had been originally compiled by Bochner for an article appropriately entitled “Dead Ends and Vicious Circles” (1969), which remains unpublished. It was offered to and rejected by both Artforum and Art in America in the late spring of 1969. Bochner’s Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography) in fact became the artist’s farewell to photography as such, for though on occasion he would make individual photographs after 1969, fewer than five exist. The Misunderstandings collection, enclosed in a standard manila envelope, finally saw the light of day under the aupices of Marian Goodman’s Multiples Gallery as part of Artists and Photographs in 1970. This box set included contributions by Nauman, Kosuth, Smithson, Dan Graham, Rauschenberg, Jan Dibbets, Andy Warhol, Ruscha, Christo, Tom Gromley, Huebler, Alan Kaprow, Michael Kirby, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Bernar Venet, and a text by Lawrence Alloway.

Each quotation in Bochner’s set is inscribed on an index card, which has been reproduced photographically, and is equivalent in size to all the rest, as well as to the only seemingly “actual” photograph contained: an image of Bochner’s own arm and hand. This formal and measured equivalence between the frame of the cards may be taken as a proposal that all of the claims are equal, and by extension that each author’s authority on the subject is equal. It can also be read formally as a wink back at Bochner’s early interest in Minimalism’s systematic

170 See Richard S. Field, Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible, 33. Mel Bochner: “I submitted it to Artforum but Philip Leader said ‘we're not a goddamn photography magazine, this is an art magazine, don't give me anything on photography, we don't do photography!’ Then I sent it to Art in America and they were not interested either, but suggested that I send it to a photography magazine! Like Popular Photography! Well I knew that no photography magazine could possibly be interested in this, so I put it in a drawer and forgot about it. Then in 1970, Marian Goodman, who then had a gallery called Multiples Gallery, came up with the idea of doing a boxed multiple set of artists' photographs,” Obrist and Antelo-Suarez, “Interview with Mel Bochner.”

171 This envelope does not have a seal however. “[T]he unbound envelope format was chosen to subvert any implication of a beginning, a middle, or an end (at least in that order),” Bochner, Solar System, 180.
organization. Difficulties arise immediately however, as one considers the disparities. For example, the fact that the grand authority and conventional wisdom of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is ultimately the most anonymous and unknowable of all of the contributors, and that individuals such as Marcel Duchamp founded entire careers on their ability to be duplicitous by keeping their identities and intentions in flux. As Luke Skrebowski has insightfully noted, it is not by chance that Bochner chose the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, since in order to check the veracity of the citation, “the scholar would have to take up the labyrinthine challenge of working through the entire back history of the Britannica from the date of first entry on photography. This is so extensive that even the British Library does not hold the complete set of all relevant editions.”[^1] A statement that seems straightforward repeatedly becomes a labyrinth.

In common Duchamp and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* share, despite their admittedly differing definitions of photography’s meaning, the assertion that truth is a social construct, created by popular agreements on how the world can be legitimately organized, classified, and by extension understood. While *Encyclopedia Britannica* articulates ‘common-sense’ definitions in order to give wider authority to them, Duchamp’s practice by contrast highlights the internal contradictions in the notion of ‘common-sense’ and challenges the authority that claims to substantiate it. Thus these two ‘theories’ could be read as an argument against one another. Each nevertheless exposes the subjective element intrinsic to human measures of truth. Importantly, Bochner has admitted that three of the nine quotations are fake, invented by

[^1]: Skrebowski, pg. 931, f.n. 31.
himself, and he has never surrendered which are which.\(^{173}\) Perhaps it does not matter. As Bochner has explained in a description which draws striking parallels to the earlier measurement series’ exploration of the index: “The “groundlessness” of the quotations became the equivalent of the “groundlessness” of photography itself, focusing attention on the artificiality of any framing device.”\(^{174}\) What is crucial for this project is the knowledge that the ‘theories’ can never entirely be trusted, all frames are subject to falsehoods, and their inevitable “groundlessness” leads to a vertigo-like dizzying doubt. The quotation, like the photograph, always exists at a remove from the original utterance and is thus always subject to being confused or altered in translation. Both exist in a space from which the referent is absent. The space between the statements in *Misunderstandings* and their sources is recursively suspect since they are then presented as photographs, adding a further level of indexical remove to what each purports to represent.

Among the quotations that compose *Misunderstandings*, one in particular seems to have been especially prescient for Bochner, since it is the only one among them that was singled out and reproduced as the subject of a separate photographic print. This is the text attributed to *Encyclopedia Britannica* that reads, “Photography cannot record abstract ideas.” *Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas* (1969) was issued as an individual work. Ironically both versions of this quote give the lie to themselves, by being in effect records of an abstract idea. Like Duchamp’s quote, “I would like to see photography make people despise painting until

\(^{173}\) Jonathan Benthell attempted to figure out which quotes are fakes and suggested the false “theories” are Mao, Proust, and Merleau-Ponty. See Jonathan Benthell, “Bochner and photography,” *Studio International*, April 1971, 147-148.

something else will make photography unbearable,” which evokes the cliché that one representational art will simply replace another, this quote challenges the limits of photography’s representational abilities. The photograph may act as a ‘stand-in’ literally and figuratively but what are the boundaries of this make-believe?

Ideological and political investments are further implicated by Bochner’s piece with the inclusion of definitions of photography by figures such as Mao Tse-Tung, while theoretical commitments and varying contextual approaches are also thrown into the mix, namely through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s, Merleau-Ponty’s, and Taine’s (who one imagines is Hippolyte Taine) contributions. Whose statement is to be taken as true, or valuable? Or, for that matter, real? Should Mao’s belief that “The true function of revolutionary art is the crystallization of phenomena into organized forms” be more or less weighted than Marcel Proust’s idea that “Photography is the product of complete alienation”?

Fundamentally, Bochner’s *Theory of Photography* intentionally courts confusion. Rather than providing clear insight into the ontology of photography for example, it frustrates one’s ability to ‘know’ photography at all. One is presented with a myriad of false identities, some more persuasive than others, yet all are cloaked by a peculiar shadow of doubt that questions the ultimate truth-value of photography and any theoretical or conceptual measure of the medium.

While Emile Zola claims “In my opinion, you cannot say you have thoroughly seen anything

---

175 This is one quote whose source is indeed traceable. It is an abridged version of a well-known letter that Duchamp wrote to Alfred Stieglitz in 1922, criticizing Stieglitz’s determination to have photography recognized as fine art. The full quotation reads: “you know exactly how I feel about photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable,” Marcel Duchamp, “Letter to Stieglitz,” in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York, 1973), 165.
until you have a photograph of it,” the viewer/reader of Misunderstandings is paradoxically challenged by the cryptic legibility of the photographs presented.

The only image included amidst this set of photographs further accentuates the viewer’s inability to firmly grasp any ultimate meaning of photography, and with that the tacit analogy between understanding and touch is brought to the fore. The image is a reproduction of that earlier work by Bochner entitled Actual size (Hand) (1968), which, as previously mentioned, consisted of a photograph of the artist’s own arm and hand printed to the exact size of his real arm and hand, a choice which seems to insist on the empirical reality of the photograph to record and reproduce real measurement. It was originally accompanied by another “measurement” piece that further implicated the corporeality of the artist: Actual Size (Face) (1968). This gelatin silver print, like Actual Size (Hand), shows Bochner’s body alongside a thin line crossing the image vertically, featuring a segmented section that reads “12”. This numerical inclusion actually makes the image and the artist only more abstract as an empirical entity, since it remains difficult to judge precisely where the demarcated 12 inches intersect Bochner’s body. The image of the hand could be even more misleading, since the absence of the artist’s face also calls into question the identity of the “actual” body to which this hand belongs. Actual Size (Hand) is reduced here to the index-card size, confounding its original claim to factual size from yet another angle, and playing on the failure of the index itself. This photograph’s claim to either truth or reality is additionally subverted by the fact that this photograph is presented as an inversion, as a negative rather than a positive print.

To make matters more questionable, one notes that this photograph appears to be from a Polaroid—a camera that does not produce negatives. Its appearance itself marks an absence that is false, and the look of the negative masks the fact that it is a positive print. “Paradoxically
then, the image declares itself to be the negative of a positive, that is, a negative-less, photographic process, thereby cleverly reversing Talbot’s two-step negative/positive print system. This visual riddle denies one’s ability to take anything for granted. The very idea of an original, which is always put into question by the photograph, becomes even more complicated here. This puzzle precedes digital photography and is revealed as an intrinsic issue to analogue processes. Contrary to Alloway’s argument in *Artists and Photographs* that “The fact that photographs are multiple originals, not unique originals, as well as one’s sense of them as evidence rather than as source objects, should protect their authenticity ultimately,” Bochner’s photographic intervention points to the oxymoron that is a “multiple original,” which, to raise the specter of Talbot once more, was in essence the criticism and praise of his photographic process. Talbot’s calotype had been dismissed as being unreliable until the realization of the benefits of reproducibility allowed it to surpass the Daguerrotype in popularity.

This series of conundrums involving the confusing conceptual interchange between duplicity and originality should not be surprising however, considering that Bochner announced his intentions at the outset by entitling the work: *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)*. The same conceit (or perhaps more aptly deceit) is doubled (or tripled, or quadrupled… etc.) by the quotes on the cards, for, as mentioned, three of the nine quotes were falsified by Bochner: “I added three fake quotes, which I invented (and have never revealed which are which).”


purportedly ‘original’ source does not exist. Nearly forty years later, Bochner still will not reveal which ones are fake and which ones are real. Perhaps, all of them are. Finally, according to Bochner, the “truth” is beside the point. Bochner denounces the very search for a true definition of photography as meaningful by stating: “What mattered (…), was not photography per se, but thinking about photography and how we use it.”  

This emphasis on “thinking” deliberately runs counter to Greenbergian criticism according to Bochner, and against what Bochner has summed up as Greenberg’s desire for the Kantian moment of aesthetic revelation: “[Greenberg] said he didn’t want to think” in front of an artwork.” It is also suggestive of how the ‘meaning’ of a photograph is always a result of cultural definition, depending “on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability,” moreover always presenting only “the possibility of meaning.”

Bochner’s art refuses to be a revelation of Modernist certainty. Describing the limited reception of photography in contemporary art in the late sixties Bochner has explained: “In 1967 there was no place for photography in a contemporary art gallery. It was almost impossible to get an art dealer to look at, let alone exhibit, anything photographic, unless it was presented in the context of painting. One dealer went so far as to suggest that until I “silk-screened the

180 Godfrey, Conceptual Art, 301.


183 Ibid, 38.
images on canvas” nobody would ever show my work. Photography was seen as the enemy of all the values of late modernism… and, as things turned out, it was.”

Notably, Bochner’s use of the index-card format could also be read as a link to a pivotal feature of photography and much conceptual art, and certainly of the discourse surrounding each: the index. Photography’s legacy as index to the real is made nearly absurd here, as Bochner’s study anticipates the great lengths to which ‘notes on the index’ would be taken within the next decade. In her astute articles “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 1 and 2” (1977), Rosalind Krauss takes on the heterogeneity of 1970s art practices in an attempt to deduce a cohesive principle that might facilitate analyzing and organizing the pluralistic art of that decade. The semiotic order of the index is her answer, and she emphasizes in her argument above all the precedent and continuing influence of Marcel Duchamp, both in terms of his work that materializes itself photographically (reading for example his Large Glass (1915-1923) “as a kind of photograph”)

as well as the photographic aspect of his readymades. Without the prerequisite of actual physical photography, Krauss was ‘thinking photography’ so to speak by applying its internal structures to other mediums and manifestations, as she liberally applies Barthes’ definition of the inherent features of the photograph as “a message without a code” to an array of disparate art works.


185 Krauss, Part 1, 77.

Pivotaly, as I foregrounded in my Introduction, Duchamp’s readymades and his specific conception of them based on analogies to photography, sets the stage for thinking through the photographic conditions of conceptual art as well as the conceptual conditions of photography. Krauss corroborates this reading with her focus on the centrality of the index, stating, “it is Duchamp who first establishes the connection between the index (as a type of sign) and the photograph.”

This is an important correlation that will be elaborated at length in the proceeding chapters of this dissertation.

The dynamic connection Krauss wants to make is that the process of production is the defining and determining feature of both photography and the readymade. Thus the readymade’s parallel with the photograph, be it a coat rack or a comb, is established by its process of the “physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection.”

Hailing this sign as inherently “empty,” Krauss describes it as “meaningless meaning that is instituted through the terms of the index.” Similarly other writers, such as André Bazin, saw photography’s singularity attached to and defined by the “very virtue of the process of its becoming,” and thus selectively cling to this feature as a defining aspect of art in the Seventies. This particular process-based aspect of the photographic conditions of conceptual art will developed in more detail in the following chapter on Bruce Nauman. For the moment however, it is clear already however that the “snapshot

188 Krauss, Part 1, 78.
189 Ibid.
effect” plays out in Bochner’s early photographs as series of delays, which in their association with the logic of Duchamp’s readymades demonstrate the unstable meaning of each.

Overall, the sense of tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, or “meaningless meaning” noted by Krauss, should be read with and against the context of not only the intellectual investigations of the time, but also the political and social. The wide-spread backlash against the American military intervention in Vietnam, and the leftist political suspicion of all ‘official’ information, photographic or otherwise after 1960 in the United States, for example, form a crucial backdrop to the artistic resistance to viewing photography as either truth or knowledge. As Susan Sontag explained in the early 1970s, “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks…” Bochner’s work with photography in the late sixties is but the beginning of these conceptual explorations, which reveal insistently that the unpredictable contingency, which Greenberg, and later John Szarkowski, identified as the central weakness of photography as a modernist medium, is the very attribute that earned photography a key role in contemporary art which continues to be relevant today.

Despite the Encyclopedia Britannica’s admonition (or was it Bochner’s charade?) that “Photography cannot record abstract ideas,” it remains apparent that the idea of photography is always slightly out of reach, continuously intangible, and characterized by an often repressed yet critically persistent doubt. In other words, the very idea of photography is at

---


base conceptual and abstract, notwithstanding the numerous claims regarding its indexical, and by extension ontological, security.
Chapter 2
Performance Proof: Bruce Nauman and Photography

*It doesn’t work from knowing some kind of result and then making the piece... It somehow has to do with intuitively finding something or some phenomenon and then later relating it to art.... But the approach always seems to be backwards. I never seem to get there from knowing...*—Bruce Nauman

While photography is easily accepted as the recorder, or documentary proof of an event, what are the resistances to, and potentials of, considering photography as a participant in that which it records? In other words, thinking of photography as not just a supplement that breaks the event into static ‘pieces,’ but as an intrinsic aspect of the ‘piece’ itself, which reaffirms the logic of the camera as essentially theatrical. Thinking deliberately against the grain of modernist critics such as Michael Fried who were averse to both literalism and theatricality in art, artist Bruce Nauman engaged photography as a means to analytically, conceptually, and aesthetically accentuate the theatrical dimension of the work of art, making ‘literal’ situations not only self-reflexive but also representationally subversive. Through a close reading of his photographs from 1966-67/1970, I argue that Nauman contributed to the experimental framework of performance art at a pivotal historical moment in order to take the trace, otherwise known as the index, to task, thereby disavowing the dominant discourse of both conceptual art and photography. For though conceptualism was very much concerned with self-reflexivity, it was not associated with medium specificity in the ways heralded by modernism. Rather by using an intermedia approach, Nauman’s evocation of bodily experience under the rubric of

---


photoconceptualism ultimately complicates the ‘dematerialization’ of the work of art announced by much conceptual art, and by contrast insists on the vital corporeality and equivocal temporality of conceptualism and photography. Thus Nauman’s early photographs provoke a rethinking of what one might mean by ‘photographic proof’ at the outset (particularly if that proof depends on the notion of the photograph as indexical), while also suggesting a reconsideration of traditional definitions of conceptual art.

In the rhetoric used to describe conceptual art, its alias as ‘the dematerialization of the art object’ is particularly revealing. More than a matter of semantics, this ‘dematerialization’ and its attendant ‘dematerialized art’ signal a direct link to the process of change itself. As opposed to saying ‘immaterial art’ for example, one is made aware that an intervention has been made into the traditional understandings and expectations of art as a material and tangible object. The fact that photography becomes the focal medium in this process of ‘dematerialization’ further lends itself to my overall reading of conceptual art within the late Sixties as a moment of conflict with the ‘real,’ which results in the untenable status, and overall mode of questioning, of objects and ideas.

The term ‘Index’ originates in the writings of Charles Sander Peirce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and enters art world discourse in the 1970s with the publication

---


196 For more on Peirce’s definition of the Index see the texts from which the following excerpts are taken: "An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object," in “A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic,” EP 2:291-292, 1903); and "The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established." (‘What Is a Sign?’, *The Essential Peirce* 2:9, c. 1894).
of Rosalind Krauss’ landmark text “Notes on the Index” (1977).\textsuperscript{197} The index is key to comprehending the codes of photographic vision, in that it theorizes the notion of a direct physical trace of any photographed object, and yet it is not exactly the object itself. As mentioned in my chapter on Mel Bochner, it is Marcel Duchamp who first establishes the connection between the index (as a type of sign) and the photograph.\textsuperscript{198} This correlation also informs Bruce Nauman’s art. The dynamic link that Krauss makes between the two is that the process of production is the defining and determining feature of both photography and the readymade. Tellingly, Duchamp noted this quality of the readymade as the “snapshot effect,”\textsuperscript{199} a kind of rendez-vous, born of the encounter between an author and an object and as a result of the conditions of that encounter.\textsuperscript{200} The theorization of the index marks a transition to thinking about process as integral to and formative of conceptual art, which emphasizes the ideation over realization.

The index, particularly in photography, had been historically taken for granted as an instantiation of the real, as the thing itself. To use Hollis Frampton’s paraphrase of William Henry Fox Talbot’s (1800-1877) account of discovery from \textit{Pencil of Nature} (1844-1846), the trail blazing photographer realized that “the ‘image’ he had sought to make is already there.”\textsuperscript{201} Such claims make it seem as though the invention of photography was simply a discovery of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[201] Hollis Frampton, “Incisions in History/Segments of Eternity,” \textit{Artforum}, XIII (October, 1974), 41.
\end{footnotes}
how to affix the discontinuous images that Nature proffered, without noting the interventions that
the medium itself effects on those images, let alone the effects of the photographer’s own
agency, or the specific historical context of its creation or circulation. This belief in photography
as equivalent to the real, as part and parcel of the fabric of reality, distinctly comes under attack
in the Sixties and Seventies. John Tagg, for example, argued vehemently in *The Burden of
Representation: Essay on Photographies and Histories* (a set of essays begun in the 1970s)
against Roland Barthes’s claim that “every photograph is somehow co-natural with its
referent.”

Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theories of discipline and power and Louis
Althusser’s analysis of ideology and political control, Tagg contests that there is no
phenomenological or ontological guarantee with photography. Instead the notion that a
photograph promises any corresponding pre-photographic existence or specific meaning is a
truism that should be put into doubt. Tagg writes against seeing any photograph as evidence, in
that every photograph is a result of “significant distortions which render its relation to any prior
reality deeply problematic.” Thus the photograph, as well as the ‘real’ are thrown into
question.

The late Sixties is not only a moment in which the real and its photographic counterpart
come under mutual and correlative suspicion; in some instances the photograph actually replaces
the real so that their relation is reversed. In other words, rather than seeing photography as the
real, the real becomes seen as photography. It is on these issues that conceptual artists working
with photography centrally pivot—with the effect of having the photograph function as a

202 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of

203 Ibid., 2.
question as opposed to a self-evident statement. Important theoretical precursors such as Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957)\(^\text{204}\) demonstrated through close readings how the ideology of society works like a myth underpinning representations, which are constructed in order to be understood in distinct and particular ways. Conceptual artists working with photography similarly investigated how much photography depends on the rhetoric of the unreal, as much as to what degree the rhetoric of the real depends on photography, and how each of these dimensions are instigated by various ideological positions. This conflict over the ‘real’ was revealed in part by evidencing the semiotic instability of the photograph, namely, revealing the ways in which photography functions as both the index and the icon, both the reference to the thing and the uncritical belief that it is the thing itself. In fact, the all too frequent elision between the characteristics of the index and icon has become the subject of recent scholarly debates desiring to move beyond ‘indexicality’ as ‘the’ defining feature of photography and of photography theory. The index, based on Peirce’s system, is above all a mode of representation, it points to something that directly causes it to be, but it does not need to have a visual semblance. For example, smoke may index a fire but it does not resemble it. It is the category of the icon that must bear the visual resemblance to the ‘real.’ In photography there is a curious blurring of the icon and the index because very often there is a coincidence between the two.\(^\text{205}\)

\(^{204}\) Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972). Though Tagg’s accusations against Barthes’ position in *Camera Lucida* are valid, it is also important to acknowledge that Barthes’s early writings on photography in *Mythologies* address the intractable need to consider and question the ideological underpinnings of images. One of Barthes key claims in *Mythologies* is that photography is not nature, nor is it a “universal language.” See for example his essay on “The Family of Man.” *Camera Lucida* avoids politics and by contrast to *Mythologies* is a much more personal and idiosyncratic meditation on photography.

Deconstructing this aspect of the photographic medium preoccupied many conceptual artists. The work of Robert Smithson is emblematic in this regard. In a 1969 interview, Patricia Norvell encapsulated Smithson’s sense that the photograph is a trace of the site that alters our ability to perceive the site without it. The claim was that photography alters our way of seeing the world to such an extent that we are veritably trained to accept surface as experience:

“[Photography] is a way of focusing on the site. For instance, if you take a trip to the site, then the photograph gives you a clue to what you look for. I think, perhaps ever since the invention of the photograph, we’ve seen the world through photographs and not the other way around. In other words, we see through cameras rather than around cameras.”

Despite the fact that fine art photographic discourse in the late Sixties remained caught between a conservative emphasis on artistic biography and narrative content, one can still detect the anxiety of leading photographic curators (such as John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Nathan Lyons at George Eastman House, Rochester) regarding the difficulties of deciphering and articulating a clear position on ‘the art of photography,’ especially as concerns the ways photographs construct meaning. This ambiguity was in part a result of grappling with the legacies of high formalist theories of the 1950s, which emphasized photography’s seemingly inevitable equation with transparency. In 1946, Greenberg would explain this judgment as the following:


Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for this reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document, and act as a work of art as well.  

For Greenberg, a document could not be art, while for most photo-conceptualists part of the task was to posit all photographs as documents and as such call attention to the mendacity that is inextricably linked to photography, and therefore art, even in its reportorial mode. Like earlier strategies of the historic avant-gardes, artists using photography under conceptual art disavowed autonomous artistic purpose and instead insisted on the photograph’s integral and contingent basis in the praxis of everyday life.

The contemporaneous curatorial catalogue essays for the exhibitions *The Photographer’s Eye* by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art (1966) and *Contemporary Photography: Toward a Social Landscape* by Nathan Lyons at George Eastman House, Rochester (1966), (arguably the two most significant institutional curators of photography in the United States at this time) both exemplify the negotiation between a modernist view of photography as anti-thesis to art and a desire to critically locate the contemporary status of photographic work as art. Szarkowski’s text returns its focus to photography as a self-referential autonomous art, while Lyons’ emphasized the inextricable relationship between photography and external ‘reality.’ Both published in 1966, their views are indicative of the late Sixties institutional struggle to decipher and articulate how photographs construct meaning on the one hand and their position as art objects on the other.

---


In that same year, 1966, Bruce Nauman began to stage color photographs that were considered daring at the time due to their “artless and perfunctory nature.” Nauman’s purported ‘unthinking’ or mechanical façade functions as a means of engaging insolently with the limits of art practice and discourse. Denying both the autonomy of art and authorship, and working in opposition to the prevailing ‘fine-print’ aesthetic, Nauman deliberately chose to work with photography in some measure because it could still be identified with non-art functions. As such, Nauman’s performed “perfunctory nature” can be read as critical commentary on an increasingly mechanical culture, which the artist interrogates through the medium of mechanical reproduction itself. Often making use of his own body as material on which and with which to act, series such as his *Studies for Holograms* (1968-69) which were screen-printed duotones, photo-mechanically reproduced from infrared photographs, depict the artist’s face contorted physically and distorted representationally. The analogy between the mechanical control of the camera and the mechanical control of the body underscores these pieces. Viewed within the context of political and social upheaval in America (such as the Kent State shootings and the Civil Rights movement) and internationally (namely the war in Vietnam) they must be seen as more than childish insolence. For though they are ostensibly not political, in their emphasis on discomfort and distorted information they can arguably be read as very much a reaction to and against their time, and a questioning of the possibility of protest not just in art but in the public realm more broadly.

---

210 Mark Pascale, “Studies for Holograms, 1970 by Bruce Nauman,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Modern and Contemporary Art” The Lannan Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago, (1999), 40. Among these 1966 works were *Flour Arrangements*, a group of seven colour photographs documenting varying arrangements of flour on Nauman’s studio floor, and Nauman’s famous *Self-Portrait as Fountain*.

211 Infrared photography records the image of an object by using film sensitive to invisible infrared radiation, or heat, instead of to ordinary light. Although it was probably used in this instance because Nauman was recording himself in low light, an analogy can be made between the heat of the body being captured on film and the artist’s larger interest in the malleable human form; See Mark Pascale, 1999.
Tony Godfrey has articulated one of the central underlying debates of not simply conceptual art but also the constitution of society in the late Sixties in marking the “Language Wars” of Vietnam and its seemingly endless proliferation of euphemisms as central to the public’s growing distrust of politicians and the media. For example, military concepts were dubbed with confusing aliases, in order to at once confound meaning and simultaneously make the ideas themselves more publicly digestible, at least in so far as they sounded solid and certain, in their attempts to avoid allowing space for doubt or insecurity. Terms such as ‘Acute environmental reaction,’ which really meant shell-shock, or ‘credibility disaster’ which translated into ‘being found out,’ characterized this confusing time when the order to kill could be guised as ‘terminate with extreme prejudice,’ all concepts which baffled one’s ability to ever be fully ‘in the know’. Conceptual strategies in the work by artists such as Nauman sought by contrast to elucidate and expose the rampant doubt that underpinned the system itself.

As Godfrey elaborates: “According to news broadcasts, it seemed that the war was being waged by acronyms (NVA, DMZ, ARVN, MACV, PX—mystificatory names by which the North Vietnamese Army, Demilitarized Zone and such like were invariably referred to), but in reality it was being fought, on the American side, by teenagers (the average soldier was aged nineteen), uncertain why they were there and, in many cases, high on drugs.”²¹²

Acknowledging the manipulative power of language further underscores how language can function as a weapon and possesses the capacity to be deployed both on the side of questioning authority as much as in the service of reifying its sense of certainty. Images of course are inseparable from language as representation; this truth would be invaluable source

material for Nauman’s later works which pivot of the instability of language, through
documentation by the camera. Just as there is no war that does not depend on technologies of
representation, the war machine is in every way a photographic machine.213 Thus the crisis in
photographic and linguistic representation in the late Sixties is directly linked to the experience
of large-scale traumatic events that were circulated to and experienced by the public through
photography and television.214

This moment of unrelenting social crises and intense human self-consciousness was in
part orchestrated by the infiltration of photographic media into all aspects of life, public and
private, at home and abroad, leaving unclear which artistic direction was relevant to the
experience of contemporary life. As the various uses of photography became increasingly
prevalent, a full gamut of criticism was set in motion. Bruce Nauman’s expressive contribution
to the Information exhibition, (curated by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art in
New York as an “international report on art”215 in 1970) entitled Grimaces (in fact duplicates
from his Studies for Holograms) visibly mocks not only the clichéd photographic imperative to
smile, but demonstrates a painful inability to do so. The tacitly mute character of these images
derides the very idea of self-expression in an art context as well as in a broader public
framework. There is also a tense play between the way in which these images look like the artist

213 Eduardo Cadava, Writing of Light: Theses on the Photography of History (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1997), 135.

214 In spite of the increased sales in televisions in the mid-1960s, television news did not surpass newspapers and
picture magazines as a major source of information until the early 1970s; Mary Warner Marien, Photography: A

is trying to force himself to speak versus the possibility that the hands imaged are not his own and rather belong to an external interrogator.

This riddled muteness manifests itself both as a result of the confines of the photograph as a visual medium rather than an auditory one, and alternately by the way the hands in the photographs manipulate the artist’s mouth. The photographic prints of this series are cropped intentionally below the artist’s eyes, focusing attention exclusively on the lips and neck and their sequential distortions as Nauman fools around with his visage. Including pinched and pulled lips, pinched cheeks, and pulled neck, these images appear simultaneously banal and mischievous. By contrast to this naivety they are further complicated by being reproduced in large format, at a scale larger-than-life and in a shade of nauseating yellow, which accentuates a disturbing undertone and spreads the sensation of unease to the viewer. Speaking on the body and its correlation to emotions, Nauman has explained: “The idea of making faces had to do with thinking of the body as something you can manipulate. I had done some performance pieces—vigoroue pieces dealing with standing, leaning, bending—and as they were performed, some of them seemed to carry large emotional impact.”

---


Furthermore, as discussed at length in my introduction, there are critical differences between the brand of self-reflexivity that Greenberg champions and the position of self-reflexivity in postmodernist thinking. Reading Nauman on the side of postmodern deconstruction reveals how his indifference (akin to Andy Warhol’s) should not be taken as disinterest, but rather as a continuation of the Duchampian tradition of the aesthetics of indifference.

There are a number of conceptual works that take to task photography’s claim to verisimilitude, for example by employing the ironic gesture of producing life-sized replicas of an object or surface, and exaggerating the very idea of the 1:1 ratio as a ‘real’ equivalence with reality. My earlier discussion of Mel Bochner’s *Photograph of the artist’s hand (actual size)* as well as my ensuing discussion of Douglas Huebler’s “equivalences” both relate here. Each is an instance that exposes an impossibility within the photograph, despite the desire for the real ‘real’ that is so often seduced by a belief in the potential capacity of photography’s indexical function. Bruce Nauman’s *Composite Photograph of Two Messes on the Studio Floor* (1967) is a compelling case in point, and an illustration of how the boundaries of literalism were explored through conceptual photography.\(^{218}\) A re-photographed montage measuring 40.5” x 123”, *Composite Photograph of Two Messes on the Studio Floor* is a black and white photograph that reproduces spatially and representationally an area of the floor of the artist’s studio, featuring two piles of debris joined by a strip of relatively clean floorboards. The plain banality of subject

\(^{218}\) Considering the anecdotal relationship between Nauman’s Messes and George Luis Borges’s famous narrative of the “map of the world with the 1:1 ratio” as well as his “library containing all knowledge,” would also be fitting here. A map in any format will never actually be a territory but will always be an abstraction. Similarly, the possession of information is not the same thing as possessing knowledge. Borges’s map will be discussed further in my chapter on Douglas Huebler.
matter, often a signature of Nauman’s practice, is ironically the most striking aspect of the work, at least initially.

Pictured at this scale, Nauman’s composite poignantly complicates not simply photography’s claim to represent, but moreover the possibility of reading its mode of representation as a direct stand-in for the thing photographed. Despite the scale, the ‘whole picture’ leaves gaps in the information. As a straightforward document of artistic works or practice, this is evidently a failure. The real is no more present at this scale than it would be at any other—whether that be magnified or reduced. Further, though the photographs that compose this ‘composite’ are themselves technically unremarkable in appearance—focused, evenly lit, controlled—they nevertheless re-compose the decomposition that is their subject matter in a way that is completely opposite: seemingly haphazard, disjointed and discontinuous.

As an accumulation of debris, this detritus appears as the excess of studio production, as leftover mess. However, in becoming the subject of the photograph as a work of art, the detritus on the studio floor is cast as much more than a mess. Through photography on any scale these messes would take on a sense of monumentality, moreover in this case, by being reproduced in large life-sized versions their importance is amplified.


220 Using his studio activities as a trope for, and a challenge to, the notion of ‘artwork’ continues to be a central device for Nauman. In a recent piece entitled Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage), a large-scale video installation, Nauman records the nocturnal activity in his studio of his cat and an infestation of mice during the summer of 2000. With seven projections and multiple audio tracks of ambient sounds, Nauman, in his words, "used this traffic as a way of mapping the leftover parts and work areas of the last several years of other completed, unfinished, or discarded projects," (Dia Center for the Arts press release 12/14/01).

221 The catalogue text that accompanied Nauman’s first one-man show at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York in January 1968 attempted to heroize this photomontage as a privileged glimpse into the ‘workings’ of the artist. Describing the photograph alongside the body molds and neon sculptures also included in this show David Whitney wrote, "A long rambling composition, it is a direct statement on how the artist lives, works and thinks. Unlike
insignificance is monumentalized and transposed through selection and magnification, making the messes appear as strange uncharted territory. Tellingly, these images have been compared in their montage format to early satellite images of outer space. In one sense this is an insightful comparison in that it draws attention to the alien presence that photography can endow its subjects with. Via photography, an ordinary space becomes extraterrestrial. Yet perhaps a better resemblance is noted by acknowledging another photographic precedent, namely the ways in which Nauman’s *Messes* are reminiscent of Brassai and Salvador Dali’s photographs of *Sculptures Involuntaires* (1933), in which conventionally valueless and formless bits of detritus, such as little twists of paper out of the linings of pockets become surreal and even begin to possess mythical status. In a similar way, Nauman’s images use the excess of everyday life to parody monumental sculpture and to highlight the ways that material is transformed by virtue of being photographed. Another poignant aspect of this parallel, is their shared emphasis on being ‘involuntary,’ which signals an inherent tension between not only what can and cannot be controlled but also what the artist is willing to control or not control. Nauman’s work, read as ‘involuntary sculpture,’ reiterates once again the artist’s implicit and an explicit disavowal of artistic ‘work,’ and is yet another declaration of aesthetic indifference, at the same time that it

Jasper John’s [sic] painted bronze of a Savarin can with brushes, a statement about how the artist works, it is a documentary photograph of what is there,” *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Leo Castelli, 1968), unpaginated. It is striking that even within the context of the exhibition space, Whitney chooses to describe these photographs as documentary rather than art photography.


223 Nauman has described his turn to photography in the late 1960s as a desire to escape from aesthetic concerns associated with drawing and painting: “Somehow I think, I may be mistaken, I had the idea that I could just take a picture, and I wouldn’t have to think about how to draw it or something. Of course, when you take a picture, you have to think how to take the picture, but in another sense I knew enough about painting to know that it would be a whole lot of work and I didn’t really know enough about photography to get involved in trying to make a really interesting or original photograph,”
is ironically also presented as a work of art. Both Sculptures Involontaires and Composite Photograph of Two Messes on the Studio Floor deliberately pivot on the act of making strange, each pushing the agenda of defamiliarization central to the notion of the avant-garde.

Yet another Dada-Surrealist piece that Nauman’s work shows an affinity for is Man Ray’s famous collaborative photograph of Duchamp’s studio, namely Dust Breeding (Duchamp's Large Glass with Dust Notes) from 1920, which is a document of The Large Glass after it had collected a year's worth of dust on the floor of Duchamp’s studio in New York. Like Nauman’s images, this piece documents artistic work in the studio as passive accumulation. After all, doing nothing is precisely the way to breed dust or messes. Traditional ideas regarding artistic production are here inverted. The use of photography to capture and transpose ‘art’ is not haphazard, but rather can be read as an implicit comment on the medium itself, as if to take a picture is to do nothing. Dust and messes are also nearly inevitable aspects of everyday life, which in effect can cause a sense of futility in the struggle to contain or exorcize them. Importantly dust and messes are indeed traces of life, even as indices of a lack of action, which is a description that similarly registers with the photographic index as a trace that is the result of inactivity. Moreover, dust is said to consist mostly of human skin, bringing the reality of dust, messes, the photograph, and the work of art back to considerations of the body.

These particular photographs by Nauman uncannily also resemble Victor Burgin’s Photopath of the same year (1967), in which Burgin reproduced a strip of a gallery floor in black and white photographs, developed proportionally to the size of the floor photographed, to be

displayed on top of the same gallery floor depicted in the images, precisely in the order in which they were derived.\textsuperscript{224} In contrast, Nauman’s life-sized floor montage of photographs were intended to be exhibited hanging on the wall—presumably with complete indifference about which wall. Nauman’s piece is not site specific in the ways that Burgin’s is. Despite this difference of display and situation, both Burgin’s and Nauman’s projects in this instance reflect back on their shared interest in Wittgenstein’s \textit{Philosophical Investigations} (1953), in particular his discussion of how one can simultaneously look at something and think about it.\textsuperscript{225} A commonplace argument has been to read pieces such as Nauman’s \textit{Messes}, in view of structuralist works such as Burgin’s, seeing them as “tightly contained self-referential units, in which the title provides the conceptual framework for the eponymous photograph,”\textsuperscript{226} without specifically asking the consequent question of what exactly that “framework” signifies. To end one’s reading there, without explicitly addressing the unique contents of Nauman’s image and their significance, is an overly tidy and insufficient reading that drastically overlooks the ironic and fundamental inclusion of the messes for what they really are: messes. The clean starkness of Burgin’s structuralist piece and his search for “perfect congruence” provides a productive character foil in this regard. Nauman’s act of photographing the messes alters their essential temperament, changing them from being unruly to being contained and essentially clean, manageable, movable; though one is also made aware of the superficiality of this containment.

\textsuperscript{224} This piece was included in the London version of Harald Szeemann’s landmark conceptual art exhibition, \textit{When Attitude Becomes Form: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information} of 1969. According to Burgin’s predetermined instructions, \textit{Photopath} consisted of “a path along a floor, of propositions 1 x 20 units, photographed. Photographs printed to the actual size of objects and prints stapled to the floor so that the images are perfectly congruent with their objects.”

\textsuperscript{225} Tony Godfrey, 205. Godfrey acknowledges the genesis of Burgin’s piece in Wittgenstein’s \textit{Philosophical Investigations} but does not mention the connection to Nauman.

\textsuperscript{226} Soutter, \textit{The Visual Idea}, 72.
The tension between the ordered photographic product and its messy contents throws the photograph itself into relief as ultimately imbalanced and imperfect, becoming by extension a proposition regarding the disorderly ontology of the photographic real. By contrast to André Bazin’s statements on the ontology of the photographic image as grounded in its objective character, Nauman points to the disarray and its inevitable subjective manipulations. Bazin based his theory in part on the nuance implied by the term and function of the ‘lens,’ which in French is called an ‘objectif.’ Nauman’s translation of terms here denies the very credibility that Bazin claimed was the nature of photography.227

Nauman’s earlier photographic piece, *Flour Arrangements* (1966) from the previous year, should also be taken into account as a precedent. In *Flour Arrangements* the artist recorded piles of flour arranged on his studio floor. This piece was recorded over the course of time, as Nauman committed himself to making one ephemeral flour sculpture each day for over a month. *Flour Arrangements* is another example of the artist’s involvement with recording incidents ostensibly both banal and pointless, which he reverts to as a recurrent theme in his oeuvre, that has consistently proven to be as deceptive as it is disarming. The pun of using flour instead of flowers in his “arrangements” furthers the critique of traditional art, disavowing the pursuit of beautiful subjects and organized compositions as well as nature and still-life paintings dating back to the seventeenth century.228 Nauman’s use of word play in this title can also be

---


228 This work has been fodder for many artists, including most notably one of Bas Jan Ader’s best-known works, *Primary Time*, commonly referred to as *Untitled (Flower Work)* from 1974. This piece, created as a film as well as a series of photographs, presents the artist arranging a vase of flowers. We see the artist’s body, dressed in black, from the hips to the neck. No face is necessary, for the focus is on his actions rather than his expression. As he arranges the flowers he carefully segregates them into the three primary colors: red, blue and yellow. Through the process of
understood as a Duchampian strategy, in the tradition of Rrose Selavy. In both cases, the language game is a retort against facile meaning, and as the pun is visualized the secondary homonym becomes its primary meaning. In this way, the inversion of meaning parallels the way in which photography becomes ‘real.’ This is a move that Nauman returns to repeatedly and that I will continue to investigate throughout the present chapter. Both Duchamp and Nauman exemplify “how wit collapses mimetic projects that seek to reflect or contain the world.”

Ultimately Nauman’s prolific practices assert themselves as uncontainable by language, photography, or conventional linear thinking—they press against the boundaries of language and logic in the tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), who famously asserted that, “the meaning of a word is its use.” Once activated, meaning is often excessive. At every instance, Nauman’s work threatens to literally and figuratively spill over and across borderlines of medium and subject matter, as well as physical, temporal, and conceptual delineations. Emphasizing Nauman’s interest in word games and language structures, arranging and rearranging, the vase moves from being multicolored to being monochromatic and then back again to an arrangement that contains all three colors. As Thomas Crow writes in the exhibition catalogue, "The performance was his wry homage to and mockery of Mondrian, Rietveld, and the floral clichés of his native country," Crow, Thomas, *Bas Jan Ader: A Bridge Too Far*, Brad Spence ed., (Irvine, CA: The Art Gallery, University of California at Irvine, 1999) 13-15. Ader shares a clear affinity with both Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden in terms of investigating how the body is articulated in space and under states of duress. See also *Colour After Klein: Re-thinking Colour in Modern and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jane Alison, (Barbican Gallery: Black Dog Publishing, 2005) 50.

---


many writers\textsuperscript{231} have commented extensively on his unconventional displacement of meaning, and his inversion of self-reference within particular works. However, the medium of photography as a predominant frame of reference has yet to be taken to task, and becomes more poignant as a subject of analysis when one acknowledges the kinship between photographic ‘effects’ and Nauman’s concern with the mind’s accumulated apperception of reality. Though I would not claim that photography has been Nauman’s central medium, I do argue that photographic thinking underscores and sets the stage for his overall corpus of production, and that series such as his \textit{Eleven Color Photographs} are propositions regarding an essential epistemological shift in art practice of the late 1960s. In this way, Nauman’s “work” challenges not simply the logic of referential language, but also of referential pictures.

One of the key ways in which they effect this challenge is through a play on and with time. Accenting the essential discontinuities that are inherent to ‘lived’ time, Nauman’s photographs exemplify the “‘Then’ Again” that is photography. The “‘Then’ Again” in the photograph is what has happened, similar to the ‘it has been’ in Barthesian terms,\textsuperscript{232} but without the certainty. “‘Then’ Again” is a proposition for re-thinking how one’s understanding of what has happened might be unhinged. Considering the “‘Then’ Again” is a challenge to linear thinking as a stable basis for understanding the world. Like Nietzsche’s claim that thinking is always untimely, photographs are not always what they seem, and yet paradoxically they do instigate and often become the supplement for the very conception of the real in the late 1960s.

\textsuperscript{231} For example Lawrence Sillars, “Bruce Nauman: Keeping Busy,” in \textit{Bruce Nauman: Make Me Think Me} (Tate Liverpool, 2006).

This ponderous disjuncture is true both in terms of mass media imagery and art practice. As mentioned earlier, perhaps the most perceptive theorization of the photograph’s role as supplement and substitute for reality at this time is Robert Smithson. His non-site projects depended on photographs to exhibit his works that were located too far outside of the traditional gallery circuit to be accessible to most viewers. Smithson understood that the photographs themselves effectively change the piece however, and that they ultimately rely on a tacit suspension of disbelief—viewers suspend questioning their own sense of reality. He noted in 1969 that through photographs “people have the experience but miss the meaning.”

According to Smithson, the photographs would allow people to believe that they grasp the site, but without visiting the actual site they would never “be confronted with the intangibility of something that appears to be very tangible.” This dialectic between experience and meaning is central to Nauman’s play with photography.

Significantly, Nauman’s photographs intervene directly into the theoretical division posited specifically by the discourse of 1960s art history, which attempted to separate the models of ‘performance’ and ‘language’ as simultaneously emergent and yet competing artistic paradigms. One of the foci of my argument in this chapter is how Bruce Nauman’s photographic documents complicate the desire to divide the bodily from the cerebral, and action and experience from ideas, while also conjecturing on the ways in which the terms of the ‘real’


234 Ibid.

and ‘authenticity’ (as accessed by both the body and the mind) in relation to photography, were contested at this time.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s conceptual art incorporated not only an assessment of language and its discursive and institutional frameworks in relation to the status of the art object in order to question the underlying conditions of aesthetic experience, but also included experiments in performance practices, which introduced connections to the body and were thus suggestive of the social construction of subjectivity more broadly. Nevertheless, from an art historical standpoint the contemporaneous discourse surrounding these works predominantly tended to emphasize a distinction between performance art in opposition to the dominant conceptual art paradigm of language, as if there was a ‘rational’ and pure version of conceptual art that was in direct contradiction to any consideration of the adulterated, and perhaps by extension ‘irrational,’ physical body.

In retrospect Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, whose foundational account of conceptual art has remained authoritative in the field of art history, has reviewed the relationship between the “linguistic paradigm” and performance in art history of the Sixties, observing that “the opposition is upheld between a victorious paradigm of Conceptualism, which represses, excludes, denigrates all other practices—which at that moment are of performance, of the body.” The privileging of language within this popular version of art history risks reifying the disembodied subject in conceptual art, and as such, bringing it much closer in resemblance to modernist painting and other abstract modes, which sought to maintain art as autonomous. The

---


237 “The Reception of the Sixties,” roundtable discussion, October, no. 69 (Summer 1994), 18.
other hazard of this formulation is that it overlooks the particularities of so many artistic practices in this moment (including that of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Dennis Oppenheim among others), which sought to conduct a critique, from within a broadly Conceptual framework, of the positivist, and even enlightening claims made for rationality in Conceptual art that denied its “burden of physicality;”\textsuperscript{238} in other words, maligning the work of artists who deliberately attempted to collapse the divide between performance and concept. More immediately, the separation of performance from language under this commonly accepted aegis ignores the ways in which even the language of rationality, can have intimately physical effects.\textsuperscript{239}

In rebellion against the bourgeois denial of the physical body, the Dadaists turned to performance. Nearly fifty years later many conceptual artists similarly sought to investigate the body as a manifestation of simultaneity rather than the refinement of one sense in isolation, and conceived of the photograph as embodied rather than embalmed. Further in Bazin’s discussion of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1967) he describes the practice of embalming as foundational to all arts, as a manifestation of the psychological drive of humans to preserve themselves against death. He goes on to theorize photography’s irrational power to reassure one’s convictions. In a variation of this suspended life “mummy-complex,” conceptual artists cast doubt on this version of delay, instead speaking of photography as possessing a highly unpredictable life of its own.

\textsuperscript{238} Mel Bochner observed tellingly, “there is no art that does not bear some burden of physicality. To deny it is to descend into irony,” “Excerpts from Speculation (1967-1970),” in Meyer, \textit{Conceptual Art}, 50.

Acknowledging the mocking contempt played out in the ‘bureaucratese’ of much conceptual art is yet another indication of indignation regarding the refusal of the erratic body in the “aesthetics of administration.” These playful acts function also as a denial against any singular philosophy of art, conceptualism, or life, articulated by the rhetoric of absolutism evident in writers/artists such as Joseph Kosuth who overlook the provocative and unsettling potential of even the most banal tautologies. The work of conceptual artists such as Nauman by contrast renounces any ability to ground the subject in hermetic Conceptual reason—leaving the subject purposefully with an undecidable and often frustrating status; Leaving the subject in the position of doubt. Inconclusively, there is no master reading of these works, as any reading is complicated by the implicit awareness that subjectivity within either the institutional frame of art or the wider public sphere is composed of “a complex ambivalence toward the uncertain determinations of subjectivity.”

THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING AND THE GRAVITY OF THE TASK

Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined. –Sol LeWitt, in “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”(1967).

Failing to Levitate in the Studio (1966) is an excellent example of Nauman’s conceptually heuristic sensibility. Like Robert Morris’s Card File (1962) or his Box with the Sound of its Own Making (1961) and other process-oriented conceptual works of the period, this image in particular describes its own making, not simply because the title explains the contents but because the object’s status as a work of art hinges on the process itself. Nauman’s Failing piece is pushed further than Morris’s propositions however by turning this equation against itself. More than the idea of the repetition of futile process that dominated much conceptual art, Failing

to Levitate is a document of the continuous failure to accomplish the thing proposed. It literally documents a trial and error process, with the title functioning as a punch-line based on a witty double-entendre, describing simultaneously exactly what is present in the photograph and what will never be.

The now iconic 1966 photograph, Failing to Levitate in the Studio is a double-exposed grainy black and white image that presents Nauman’s attempt to defy gravity through his concentrated effort to hover above his studio floor. We see the artist lying rigid, at attention, suspended between two metal folding chairs overlaid with an image of the chair pulled out from under him, legs splayed on the scrap-laden floor of his studio, his body limp and slumped to the ground with his neck in what looks to be a painful collision with the edge of the other seat. We have a document of the attempt at a transcendent feat and both its metaphysical and viscerally physical failure. Failure itself is staged and systematically documented. The awareness that Nauman is also famous for the statement and the neon work: “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths” (1967) which he installed in the storefront of his San Francisco studio, and the fact that he continued throughout his career to set himself a variety of odd if not impossible tasks, begs the question of Nauman’s sincerity. Is he being ‘true’? Is Failing to Levitate in the Studio simply a performative conceit? Not according to Nauman. Almost ironically, he claims he did not fail to levitate for lack of effort, explaining: “I was working on the exercise in the studio for a while and wanted to make a tape of it, a record, to see if you could see what was happening. When I did the things, they made me tired and I felt good when I

241 In Nauman’s two-channel video Jump (1994), the artist takes on the challenge of gravity again. This time he has a succession of very short-lived victories.

242 In other works, such as Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square (1967-68) or Bouncing in the Corner (1968), Nauman set himself commonplace tasks, turned his obsessive-compulsive attention to his repetitive scheme, and filmed the result.
finished, but they were not relaxing; they took a lot of energy and concentration and paying attention…" Nevertheless the predictable and documented failure shows the futility of his efforts. Like the concentrated meditation that does not lead to zen, the artist remains grounded, and his process in the studio is exposed. There seem to be no secrets here, no mystic truths, no confidential techniques are mythologically hidden by the sacred space of the artist’s studio. Instead there is only the realization that Nauman’s art represents the failure of transcendentalism and de-mythologizes the magic of the artist’s “work”. The process does not exceed the limits of experience, but is in fact contained by it, as we are instead confronted with the limits of the knowable world. It is imaginably for this reason that Nauman emphasizes the impact of gravity, since gravity is of course one of the more crucial and constant reminders that we are never entirely in control of our own world and in fact are always under pressure from an ultimately unknowable elsewhere. This earthly limit holds true for the artist as well, proving the very real incredibility of the lightness of being. Like many of Nauman’s later projects such as the video *Tony Sinking Into The Floor, Face Up, and Face Down* (1973) demonstrate the recurring theme in Nauman’s oeuvre and a persistent affinity to Samuel Beckett: how “the will to depict the impossible [feeds] on the futility of the very goal.” Nauman’s interrogation of his bodily identity was in part the result of being extremely influenced by formative readings of Beckett


244 Bruce Nauman, *Tony Sinking Into the Floor, Face Up, and Face Down* (1973) (60 mins., colour, sound) In this videotape, the actor's task was to imagine himself sinking into the floor. The resulting images portray him stretched out on the floor, sometimes face up, sometimes face down, in a series of dissolves. Although the mental component of the exercise is not captured, Nauman has recounted the highly charged atmosphere of the shooting session: "He was lying on his back and after about fifteen minutes he started choking and coughing. He sat up and said, 'I did it too fast and scared myself.' He didn't want to do it again, but did it anyway. At another time we were watching his hand through the camera and it was behaving very strangely. We asked him about it later and he said that he was afraid to move his hand because he thought he might lose his molecules," See Electronic Arts Intermix online catalogue, [http://www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org).

245 Christine Hoffman, 57.
along with Gestalt psychology and phenomenology. Frequently Nauman’s work has often been compared to that of the dramatist and founder of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd,’ who similarly captured a sense of life’s maddening disjunctures and humourous continuums in plays like *Waiting for Godot* (1953).

Failure, self-deprecation, and uselessness—these recurrent concepts are central to Nauman’s practice—and can often be as hilarious as they are disparaging. One aspect of the humour is derived from how such pieces play on the ‘gravity’ of the situation or lack thereof. After all, these are not really death defying feats, unlike the artistic performances of some of his contemporaries, such as Chris Burden being nailed to a volkswagen, Bas Jan Ader sailing across the Atlantic, or Yves Klein jumping out a window. They are not even situations where the stakes seem to be particularly high—in fact by contrast they seem to be mundane, banal, and ordinary. Yet the degree of effort Nauman exerts on film and in recounting the details draws attention to the disconnect between effort and product and the dialectic between gravity and levity.

Gravity refers then not just to the gravitational force that the earth exerts on animate bodies and inanimate objects alike, but also to the degree of seriousness with which the seemingly inconsequential task is undertaken. The human fallibility exposed by this dynamic is what creates the comedic effect. The artist’s impotence, his inability to levitate, is propped photographically against his stiff horizontal body. The transcendental myth of the artist is replaced by an anxious conflict between what is and is not possible. Like the playwright Beckett, who evoked the painful and yet plain drama of existence, whose evocation of laughter was often caught up in a loop of tragic paralysis, or Buster Keaton whose comedic gestures were

---

dominated by Sisyphean traps, Bruce Nauman similarly makes one laugh from a place of suspended discomfort.

The actual comic “fall-out” of the piece is connected directly to a long lineage of slapstick and pratfalls, as well as the conjunction of the ‘official’ delivery of information by the documentary photograph with the absurdity of the information contained that together produces a deadpan twist. The discontinuous image itself marks the fundamentally disruptive potential of this seemingly naive act.

A poignant connection can be made here between Nauman and Duchamp. For the question of “where is the ‘art’” in the ready-made resonates with a common accusation hedged against Nauman. In both cases, the question of where the art is, is linked tacitly to the question of where is the visible labour. In the same way that the ready-made was a rebuke to aesthetics and apparently lacked the manual skill expected of ‘art,’ Nauman’s *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* similarly shows no ‘real work’ despite the fact that it is documented in a chronophotographic style. Each ‘work’ (Nauman’s *Failing* and Duchamp’s unassisted ready-mades) is a product of intellectual/mental labour rather than craft. This shift is crucial to understanding the radical interventions these pieces set in motion. Among the dominant themes of much Duchampian scholarship, the role of intellectual labour in art is emphasized, however it is typically formulated as a witty joke at the expense of handcraft, rather than an assessment of the radical implications of art ‘unassisted’ by artistry. While this reading on the one hand rings true, one does well to suspend belief for a moment and consider the possibility that Duchamp’s gesture and by extension Nauman’s goes beyond a simple gag. The unassisted

ready-mades might resist sensuous rewards or palpable artistic labour; but does art not consist of
more than pleasure and skilled labour? The refusal to deliver the “goods” demanded by modern
art is one aspect of its unruly, and by extension avant-garde, potential. Reading these gestures
simply as dead-pan mockeries, without considering their wider reflection on the role of labour in
connection to artistic skill, deprives the work of the deeper critique such a ‘hoax’ mediates as
well as the realization that the ready-mades, far from being clever one-liners, are actually sites of
conflict and anxiety both nuanced and overt. 248 What are the other potentials of this humour?

Henri Bergson was one of the rare philosophers to deal with the phenomenon of comedy
at length and proposed a conceptual matrix with which to understand it. Bergson explained that:
“Rigidity is the comic, and laughter its corrective.” 249 In other words, according to Bergson,
“laughter is a purgative response to the threat of rigidity.” 250 Examples of this dynamic are
plainly visible in the humour of Charlie Chaplin, but also extend to the art world through
gestures like Duchamp’s and Nauman’s. Duchamp’s claim to indifference overthrows an entire
tradition of art on its head and begins a new episteme. We laugh at the extremes of the dialectic:
the concentrated dignity that strives to control gravity and the slip that undermines dignified
concentration. 251 Nauman’s exaggerated inert rigidity in Failing to Levitate in the Studio is thus
illustrated at odds with the reality of his imperfect living-self when he falls on the floor. In
trying to go beyond his natural limits, the artist bamboozles himself.

248 Ibid., 72.
250 Roberts, The Intangibilities of Form, 73.
251 See Alenka Zupancic, The Odd One In: On Comedy, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2008) for an extensive
discussion of the theoretical and practical contribution of the comedic to understanding life.
As John Roberts explains in his analysis of the deskilling of art after the ready-made, “This gap between desired outcome and actual outcome generates a comedic-effect that is central to Duchamp’s reflections on artistic skill: [namely] misjudgements of labour undertaken.”²⁵² The disproportion between the result and the labour undertaken to achieve it form one of the disjunctures Bergson describes as comedy.

Humour is the result of the fall-out between the two. Nauman’s actual fall onto the ground in Failing to Levitate, despite his concentrated efforts, is funny because of the absurdist exchange between work and failure, particularly since the failure pictured is then transposed into a ‘work’ of art that seems effortless. Nauman combines the worker who tirelessly persists at a repetitive job that never ends in the desired result, with the person who with complete indifference to their lack of skills carelessly passes off their questionable work as artful. The rub is that where one looks for effort, it will not be found; each is a trick in the act of judgement. If these works are given the benefit of the doubt, a space opens up to rethink the object and reanimate it conceptually. This is one way of considering the unremarkable/remarkable capacity of conceptual art, and certainly the ways in which the unassisted ready-made performs a nearly perfect transformation of productive labour into artistic labour, making what appears effortless become effortful. Duchamp’s importance lies then in his eradication of “the normative distinction between skill and deskilling in pre-modernist art.”²⁵³ And by extension, the subterfuge of Nauman’s artwork by way of this line of inquiry is not the dissolution of meaning but rather the exposure of “the means by which contraries can be performed and made

²⁵² Roberts, The Intangibilities of Form, 74.
²⁵³ Ibid., 81.
visible.” Nauman’s artwork, like Duchamp’s, throws the concepts of art and work into dialectical tension with one another. Rigid aspects of mind and body, system and perspective, are exposed as fallible and pliable. Both instances in this chiasmus only appear resolved based on their programmatic failure to conform to either.

Bergson himself evoked the notion of the ready-made to describe this possible paradigm shift: “It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame.” Writing in 1900, Bergson’s Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic precedes Duchamp in its formulation of the ready-made as a concept. It is not clear whether Duchamp had Bergson in mind in his indifferent selection of ready-mades, however “as a master of miscegenation and the blague, he must surely have been aware of its comedic associations.” As Louise Norton noted in “Buddha in the Bathroom”: “And there is among us today a spirit of “blague” arising out of the artist’s bitter vision of an over-institutionalized world of stagnant statistics and antique axioms.” Tellingly, following in the footsteps of both Duchamp and Nauman, a great many artists have taken up this antiheroic gesture, ranging from Mike Kelley to Irwin Wurm, and Tom Friedman to Lucy Gunning and beyond, falling into the “ready-made frame,” as obviously as slipping on a misplaced banana peel.

254 Ibid., 75.
255 Bergson, 134.
256 Roberts, The Intangibilities of Form, 73.
Viewed as a kind of motion study, the image of *Failing to Levitate* can be seen as an ironic attempt to uncover ‘the best way to do work.’ Resembling a chronophotographic image in the tradition of Jules-Etienne Marey, and later Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, *Failing to Levitate* displays action over the span of time but within a single frame, by containing both the before and after shots simultaneously.

Both Marey’s developments and the Gilbreths’ photo studies were used to buttress Frederick Taylor’s famous studies of the labour process at the end of the nineteenth century, and mark how entwined photography has been with fundamental changes in modern society, as well as how it can be used as both a tool for, or a critique of, the deskilling of productive labour that is at the very heart of Marx’s *Capital*. According to Marx there is a systematic tendency in capitalism to produce work that is repetitive and unsatisfying. As he outlines in Volume 1 of *Capital*, the development of the early manufacturing system is accompanied by the simplification and interchangeability of jobs amongst workers. Photography was a central component of this shift. As proponents of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “scientific method” and mechanized factory work, both Marey and the Gilbreths documented workers in the nineteenth century in order to decipher through visual analysis the best way for a worker to perform their task with the least amount of exertion and the most output of productivity. These motion studies were more focused on how a task was done, and how best to eliminate unneeded, fatiguing steps in any process. The link to Nauman is clear: On the one hand, in each case the

---

258 Another mocking example of this phenomenon would be the artist Mike Mandel’s *Making Good Time* (1989), a collection that pokes fun at scientific management studies by photographically producing a “good” ie. humourous time, rather than a “good” ie. speedy time.


labour of the workers in such chronophotographic images is continuously stripped of its autonomy and sensuous form.

On the other hand, these photographs were taken ostensibly as measures of work and efficiency, and in order to harness the power and ability of the machine to formulate a new kind of individual. Similar to the Gilbreth’s photographs, in Nauman’s *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* we see a process that ultimately brings about a sense of alienation and psychological anxiety—but rather than the economy of factory work, it is the economy of information and ideas. Notably, the social condition of alienation has been cited by Nauman as one of the central motivations of his practice, “My work comes out of being frustrated about the human condition. And about how people refuse to understand other people.” Based on this logic, perhaps Nauman’s *Failing to Levitate* can be seen as a success in that it refutes alienation by declining to be efficient or straightforward. Paradoxically, Nauman’s failure is his success.

Moreover, Nauman’s ‘work’ can also be read as an achievement. For example, the photographic double exposure *Failing to Levitate* provides an overlap of Nauman’s self—he is represented twice in a single frame—so while the magic trick of levitating has failed, the artist has in fact succeeded in doubling himself in space (another credibly impossible feat), compressed in a seemingly singular time, through the power of photography. On another level,

---


262 The ironies of the effortful effortlessness pictured in this image may also be related to the popularity of the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in California during the 1960s. The Maharishi was the guru of Transcendental Meditation, a program for the mind that was supposed to be spontaneous and effortless and intended to make the conscious mind aware of its infinite potential. Against the principle of ‘hard work’ the Maharishi insisted on restful states. The rhetoric and the principle sound remarkable akin to the slacker ideology, including the idea that anyone could do it without preparation. In 1962 the Maharishi dictated his book, *The Science of Being and the Art of Living*, in California. On the subject of mental exercises in Nauman’s work, See Peter Plagens and Lane Relyea, “Head Trips,” *Artforum* 33, 8 (April 1995), 62–9.
the levitation experiment is also a metaphoric success despite its physical failure in that Nauman has veritably bridged “the abyss between inner, invisible experience and visible appearances.”

The futility of the goal is fueled by the will to capture the impossible, in other words, to at once capture and embody the predetermined idea.

EASY DOES IT

_Somehow I think, I may be mistaken, I had the idea that I could just take a picture, and I wouldn’t have to think about how to draw it or something. Of course, when you take a picture, you have to think about how to take a picture, but in another sense I knew enough about painting to know that it would be a whole lot of work and I didn’t really know enough about photography to get involved in trying to make a really interesting or original photograph._ –Bruce Nauman.

Cooperatively, the images that compose Nauman’s portfolio of _Eleven Color Photographs_ (1966-67/1970) set the stage for Nauman’s larger investigations by exemplifying the interrelation between language and physical behavior overtly. The photographs were actually taken by Jack Fulton, though they remain Nauman’s art work, a fact that adds yet another dimension of complication to the issue of authorship in relation to this work in particular and art practice in general. Released by the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1970 these photographs have been called “a quasi-document of the artist in his studio.” The inability of critics to assign a single identity to the photos themselves, and the insistence that they be read together as a series or collection, reiterates the idea that Nauman’s frequent word play was transposed onto image-making. Semantics are crucial. Popularly using puns, palindromes,

---

263 Christine Hoffman, “Think-Thank,” _Bruce Nauman: Theatres of Experience, 57._

264 Bruce Nauman, interview with Michele De Angeles, 27 and 30 May, 1980. (California Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian institution), 77.

265 Laurence Sillars, “Bruce Nauman: Keeping Busy,” _Bruce Nauman: Make Me Think Me, 10._

266 Laurence Sillars, ibid, 12.
anagrams, repetition, and linguistic as well as visual strategies in this way allowed for shifting meanings and underscores the syntactical dependence of Nauman’s practice. In effect, normative or standard meaning is put into doubt.

Two of the Eleven Color Photographs look uncannily similar: Coffee Thrown Away Because It Was Too Cold (1966-7/70) and Coffee Spilled Because the Cup Was Too Hot (1966-7/70). Seeing them as “quasi-document(s),” reinforces the photograph’s liminal position between the artifact of evidence and playful artistic experimentation. Maintaining Nauman’s link to Duchampian nominalism and chance, one photograph is claimed as the result of chance, being spilled, and the other announced as the result of choice, being thrown away. The titles of these two images, similar to the others included in this series, act as the textual explication of the physical act performed, telling the viewer explicitly what they are looking at. Allowing the title to dictate the ‘sense’ of the image in this way provides what Janet Kraynak has described as a ‘performance structure’ to the work, in which linguistic signs become a vehicle with which situations can be created. The act of creation is contingent on the statement itself. This contingency also hinges on the possibility of change through time, even through the still image and its paradoxical link to duration.

One of the means by which the viewer may engage this performance is by either accepting or denying the ‘proof’ of the performance. For example, allowing that ‘it’ is what ‘it’ says it is, because ‘it’ says it is. This extension of the logic of nominalism is crucial, since it echoes an emphatic reliance on the ways in which the notion of the performative has also been

267 See Janet Kraynak, Please Pay Attention Please, 10.
used to describe the reception of the Duchampian readymade as a declarative statement. In both cases, it is in the reception that the proposition for the work is fulfilled. The individual titles read as conceptual statements, or veritable “event scores” as in the work of John Cage, and thus mimic the popular language of conceptual art, characterized by the terse works of artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt. On the other hand, (or ‘then’ again), this reliance on the titles as axiomatic also throws into question the content of the image, particularly in this example, as we view the two cups of coffee, one supposedly spilled and the other thrown away, along side one another.

How can the viewer judge which coffee was too hot and which one was too cold? Which was spilled and which was thrown? Credibly, in each do we conclude with the same result? Does the narrative matter? What do these photographs actually tell us? Do we simply take the artist’s word for it? The inability to distinguish between the ‘event’ in these two images except via the statement of the title can also be read as a play on the arbitrary distinction between chance/accident and purposefulness, as well as a derisive nod to high modernism and Jackson Pollock’s claim to control and mastery in his drip-paintings. Nauman responds with drip-photographs.

The reality that both of Nauman’s images reveal nothing regarding the state of the coffee contained—not being capable of testifying to temperature visually—we must ask ourselves what kind of proof these images actually possess. In effect, these two photographs undermine “the

268 See Thierry de Duve, “Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). The performative aspect of the readymade is also the subject of debate between Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and Thierry de Duve in the roundtable discussion, “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp,” ) October 70, Fall, 1994; see especially pages 134-136.

words’ capacity to convey finite meaning.” Nominalism here is posited as an operative structure and also challenged. Subtly, these images contradict the meaning imposed by the textual reference, and in so doing open up a space for further deliberation, leaving the viewer in a space of doubt.

In his autobiographical account, Bruce Nauman narrates the story of graduating from art school in the Sixties and finding himself with a lot of time on his hands. Alone in the studio day after day he says, “[I]t was difficult to think of things to do everyday.” The veracity of Nauman’s story is debatable. We are told only what he wants to tell us, and as such much of the mythology surrounding Nauman and his practice is based on his own selective account. Nauman continues by recounting how he began to use what he was in fact doing in the studio as his work—in other words, routine and banal activities such walking around the studio and drinking coffee became the subject matter of his work. Using his creative blockage to his advantage, his paralysis became the parameter of his art ‘work.’ Nauman states “My conclusion was that I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever it was I was doing in the studio must be art […] At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”

270 Sillars, 14.


272 Referring to his time in San Francisco, Nauman explained: “And a lot of things that I was doing in the studio didn’t make sense so I quit doing them. That left me alone in the studio; this in turn left the fundamental question of what an artist does when left alone in the studio. My conclusion was that I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art,” in Ian Wallace and Russel Keziere, “Bruce Nauman Interviewed,” Vanguard (Vancouver) 8, no. 1 (Feb. 1979), 18.
Retaining evidence of his ‘working’ process through the photograph, was used by Nauman as a means to reveal and question the nature of making art,\textsuperscript{273} exposing in a method akin once more to Marcel Duchamp and his readymades, the systems of belief which buttress the idea of art itself, including exposing the mythically charged idea of the artist’s studio, the place where ‘magic happens,’ as ordinary and certainly subject to the laws of gravity.\textsuperscript{274} Suggestively similar to Duchampian nominalism, the selective process of the artist is claimed as paramount, and ultimately put forward as a provocation of traditional boundaries of art production and reception, while also accepting the limits of artistic intent. The very ‘artlessness’ of Nauman’s photographs strategically perform the avant-garde strategy of dialectically questioning the role of ‘work’ in art. They are offered not as the results of ‘work’ or skill, but instead as the documentation of idle play. Yet another way to frame it would be as the ‘un-working’ of the space of art.

The wider implication of ‘evidence’ here is as an ontological questioning into the stability of the concept of ‘art’ specifically viewed through and as the photograph. As if the medium was unobtrusive and transparent, Nauman himself claims to have chosen to work with photography solely because it was easy. Though the photo is ontologically linked here to ‘self-evidence’, it is nevertheless not evidentiary in the ways one might conventionally expect. For ultimately, though the photographic image may be fixed, its meaning and by correlation its possible ‘proof’ and temporality are not stable. In these images the reception of time and event apprehended by photography depends very much on which narrative one chooses to believe.

\textsuperscript{273} Sillars, 20.

\textsuperscript{274} See Christine Litz, “At night all cats are grey? Mysterious elements in Bruce Nauman’s Work,” \textit{AC: Bruce Nauman} (Koln: Museum Ludwig, 2003), 21-27.
The failed, imperfect coffees here become a metaphor for the failed evidence and the failed work of art. These works reveal how the contingency of this failure is also the source of its success. In similar terms, Nauman admits to admiring the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, stating that Wittgenstein “would not throw away the failed argument, but would include it in his book.” The coffee here, like the failed argument, though seemingly ‘thrown away’, is not dismissed but instead valued for its process and instrumentality, and saved for inclusion as a photograph.

Throughout Nauman’s series of *Eleven Color Photographs* language and its relation to the visual content of the image continue to be central actors orchestrated cleverly by the artist/director. Mischievous punning simultaneously unifies and undermines the structural relationship between title and object—putting the use value of language itself on trial. The titles are dictates even as they are jokes—transformatively, the titles are challenges to the viewer’s subservience. They subtly expose how bound (and ‘bound to fail’) we are by language to understanding the functional limits of the world, and again the authoritative question of taking the artist’s ‘word for it’ is reiterated.

*Waxing Hot* for example, literally shows the artist’s hand waxing the sculptural letters “HOT.” The piece rests on a rhetorical pivot, with its questionable relationship to the literal-ness of language being put to the test. Like Nauman’s later neon signs/word games that continuously repurpose repeated words for altered meanings (which could themselves be read as photography

---

in that they are literal signs of the ‘writing of light’), Nauman’s photographs perform similar acrobatics and continue his larger investigation into language’s ability or inability to broker meaning between public and private spheres. The expression of waxing hot derives from the Latin word for ‘sincerity’- *sine cera*- meaning ‘without wax.’ By inference here ‘waxing hot’ is thus read as the opposite of sincerity, and is exposed as a method of deception and disingenuousness.

Beyond the surface of linguistic play, this piece also indexes sculptural references to artifice and artistic process, connoting the traditional wax cast technique of filling a statues’ cracks with wax that would melt on a hot day, leaving what was referred to as an ‘honest’ sculpture, rather than a ruse. Gesturing towards this tension between duplicitous process and truthful mimetic representation is also reflective of the tension inherent to the photograph, as a duplication process and as unstable evidence. The photograph gives an appearance of continuous and contained reality, even while it is suspended, partial, and fragmented. Aligned with the layering logic of the linguistic puns presented, the “functional edges” of both the photograph and language are pressed by such works. Forgoing the possibility of finite meaning,

---

276 Viewing these photographs alongside Nauman’s neon word sculptures and their material reference to the ubiquity of advertising as a form of social communication and identification, further impels a reading of Nauman’s engagement with the social construction of language and its visual translation. Not haphazardly one of his earliest neon pieces was *Suite Substitute* (1968), in which the word ‘SUITE’ flashes alternatively as a superimposition over the same letters in the word ‘SUBSTITUTE,’ revealing the construction of each by the allusion to the other. Reading this in place of the photograph, as the writing of light which alternates between being a substitute or material manifestation of language versus language being the abstract linguistic substitute for the contents of the image is one of the dimensions which is at play here.

277 Bruce Nauman has described his desire to push and prod the “functional edges” of language: “The place where it communicates best and most easily is also the place where language is the least interesting and emotionally involving—such as the functional way we understand the word ‘sing’ or the sentence ‘Pick up the pencil’,” Nauman in Christopher Cordes, “Talking with Bruce Nauman”, 1989, in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, 354.
Nauman’s photographs cannot finally be closed in on themselves, or immobilized, despite what the frame of reference might demand.

Bruce Nauman has described his desire to push and prod the “functional edges” of language, explaining how it is when words appear the most self-evidently sufficient and clear that they are most susceptible to break down and the most ordinary aspects of language become interesting; “When these functional edges are explored […] other areas of your mind make you aware of language potential.” Drawing connections between Roland Barthes’s exploration of the pleasures derived by language “when what is known rubs up against what is unknown,” to his own interests, Nauman concludes: “I think the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication is the edge where poetry or art occurs.” This investigation into the usefulness or potential uselessness of language (or work/worklessness of language) correlates in Nauman to an investigation of the use value versus the useless value of the art object.

Like language, photography has been historically taken as a given, assigned a fixed function of transparency and self-evidence, in other words as proof. Here the proposal is that nothing can be taken for granted and both structural and deconstructive analyses are as requisite for an understanding of photography as they are for the complexities of language. Not allowing for any givens instead turns the focus to what can only be understood unstably as variables. Visibly, humor is one of the many mechanisms in Nauman’s artwork through which this variability operates.

The photograph *Feet of Clay* (1966-67/70) plays on an outdated expression that denotes (or veritably stands in for) a weakness or hidden flaw in the character of a greatly admired or

---

278 Ibid.
respected person. This metaphorical reference applied to the context of Nauman’s art practice, functions as a statement that disavows the artist as both genius and source of authority. Nauman’s vision of himself with or as ‘feet of clay’ can be read as mocking his artistic authority, even anticipating his idolization as source material for a future generation of artists and art historians. On this point Pamela Lee has written a provocative piece on “Pater Nauman,” a review that discusses Nauman as a model for proceeding generations in terms of the development of the ‘slacker artist.’ Lee elaborates how “Nauman’s persona as ‘impotent father’ reverses these terms: rather than failing to idealize, it seems to idealize failure,” allowing failure to become a banalized trope as seen in work by artists such as Karen Kilimnik, Cary Leibowitz (“Aka Candy Ass”) and Sean Landers, among other contemporary practitioners. Noting “a proliferation of categories around powerlessness as a wide-ranging cultural phenomenon,” Lee marks what is visible in such works by Nauman, the ways in which failure—particularly failure situated in the body—becomes, by a dialectical turn, the deliberate anti-thesis of the virility of the expressionist artist of not only the Fifties but also the Eighties. Nauman’s extensive use of punning can also be seen in this regard, with punning being a quintessentially “lame” slacker word game. Feet of Clay trades on this rhetorical stance, and can

---

279 The phrase is from the Bible (Daniel 2: 31-40). King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. The image that appears to him has a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, and legs of iron. The feet of this image are made of iron and clay. A stone hits the feet and the whole image breaks into pieces. The prophet Daniel's interpretation of the dream is that Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold (a great king), but after him would come weaker kingdoms (like the image with feet of clay). These kingdoms would finally be replaced by the kingdom of God.


281 Among many others, I would add the artists Erwin Wurm, Urs Fischer, Ugo Rondinone, Mungo Thomson, and Sam Taylor Wood to this list as well.

282 Pamela Lee, “Pater Nauman,” 32: “By a dialectical turn, this work supercedes the virile expressionist artist of the eighties by dressing down in the persona of the loser.”
be viewed alongside a wide array of Conceptual statements, which abandon aesthetic authority, which emphatically deny uniqueness and originality, and which proclaim their ease of reproducibility as a means of renouncing their artistic control.

Rather than determination, self-defeat in favor of allowing the viewer the power to decide is strategic. According to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘utterance’, spoken words immediately become part of a dialogic relationship whose meaning is determined not at the moment it is spoken but at the point when it is received. Similarly Nauman’s photographs-as-‘utterances’ adhere to Lawrence Weiner’s 1969 dictum on conceptual art: “the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.” In this way the viewer’s position as the receiver is paramount, particularly in face of the artist/author’s lack of final control and unlimited fallibility.

Consciously, Nauman repeatedly performs the role of self-defeating artist, locating himself and the work of art in the position of failure from the outset, at the mercy of the utterance and the occasion of the receivership; his immobility being plainly made literal in photos such as *Feet of Clay*. His repeated reference to dated modes of traditional art, such as sculpture is also an aspect of his admitted helplessness—his not knowing what to do next. Acknowledging failure as his starting point, Nauman claims, “I was just sort of tied in a knot and couldn’t get


Acting out colloquialisms such as ‘waxing hot,’ ‘feet of clay’ or ‘bound to fail’ mark the constraints put on the artist even as he demonstrates his wily ways by combining sculptural form, linguistic content, and photographic staging. Tellingly, the photograph *Bound to Fail* depicts the roped torso of the artist from behind— But are we as viewers the ones being roped in? After all, we have no actual means of identifying the Hoodini-esque artist within the image, other than taking his word for it. A contemporaneous piece *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (1967), a cast sculpture based on Nauman’s body that mimics the rear view of Nauman’s back, tied-up within an oversized sweater, detailed in his photograph *Bound to Fail*, displaces and aligns Nauman’s own supposed failure with the weight of moored Modernist sculpture. Unhinged by the photograph, Henry Moore’s authority is lassoed to Nauman in an ongoing series of double binds, linking tradition and innovation, presence and absence, and weighted meaning with floating signifiers.

Continuously evoking wisecracks by visually staging verbal puns that denote weakness, error, and lack of competence, such as *Bound to Fail* or his photographs *Eating my Words*, and *Waxing Hot*, refer back not only to the artist’s limits but also to the traditions of art making—the fact that Nauman chooses to use photography, or more aptly let someone else take photographs which he claims as his own, can be compared with his return to the use of and reliance on sculptural casts and molds and his ambivalent denial and simultaneous claim to artistic mastery.

---

285 Michele de Angeles, “Interview with Bruce Nauman, May 27 and 30, 1980”, *Please Pay Attention Please*, 236.

Nauman’s prescient desire to transcend sculpture’s definition as “shapes to look at” centrally marks him as an important inaugurator of conceptual art.\(^{287}\) Other contemporaneous examples of Nauman’s prevalent use of simple casts and molds which also pivot on the idea of absence rather than presence include, *A Cast of Space under my Chair* (1965), *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* (1966)\(^{288}\), *Device for a Left Armpit* (1967) and *Hand to Mouth* (1967).\(^{289}\) These sculptures certainly have Duchamp’s *Tongue in Cheek* (1959) as influence. Art historian Anne Wagner has outlined these sculptural aids tellingly as “traditional tokens of sculptural de-skilling.”\(^{290}\) This deliberate sculptural deskilling parallels the larger deployment of ‘amateurism’ through photography in Conceptual art, and deskilling as avant-garde resistance, providing yet another instance in which the art is in the gesture, rather than the ‘gestural’.

**FOUNTAIN OF DOUBT**

*Some drink in the fountain of knowledge, some just gargle.* - Unknown.

Deciphering the codes of visual signs and signifiers bound up in each of Nauman’s photographs, (however ironically effortless or effortful the artist’s own professed input/output may be), returns inquiry to the photographic image, and to an investigation into the varied role it has played in the

---

\(^{287}\) Jane Livingston, 11, quotes Nauman as saying, “Now I wasn’t just making shapes to look at; by saying ‘these are templates of my body,’ I gave them reason enough for their existence.”

\(^{288}\) Nauman said in 1967, speaking about *Impressions of the Knees*, “I couldn’t decide who to get for artists, so I used my own knees. Making the impressions of the knees in a wax block was a way of having a large rectangular solid with marks in it. I didn’t just want to make marks in it, so I had to follow another kind of reasoning. It also had to do with trying to make the thing itself less important to look at,” in Joe Raffaele and Elizabeth Baker, “The Way Out West: Interviews with 4 San Francisco Artists,” *Art News*, Summer 1967, 5.

\(^{289}\) This cast piece by Nauman literalizes the cliché of artistic poverty, and also makes an allusion to Duchamp’s *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), which uses displacement and uselessness as its fundamental strategies. Continuing the lineage and advancing the inherent postmodern critique, Mike Kelley photographed Nauman’s piece in 2004, presenting it as his own work of art entitled, *Bruce Nauman, Hand to Mouth* (1967).

exploration of authenticity and art through performance. Counter to Fried’s defense of the aesthetically coherent, “wholly manifest” and self-sufficient art object, the Objecthood of the photograph cannot be separated from its simultaneous specificity and confusion of space and time. Defying Fried’s desire, the photograph is never entirely timeless nor entirely removable from individual experience. The photograph’s ambivalent authenticity, especially as concerns the substitution of the photo for the ‘original’ art object, dates back to scandals such as the case of R. Mutt, in which Alfred Steiglitz’s photograph of Duchamp’s *Fountain* in 1917 lives on as the only visual proof of the ‘original’ *Fountain*’s existence, marking a decisive turning point in art practice, exhibition, and reception. Duchamp’s *Fountain* literally and figuratively sets the stage for Nauman. The fact that *Fountain* is as much imagined as it is revered because of Duchamp’s clever game of photographic play demonstrates yet another facet of Duchamp’s readymade-process and its implications on art thereafter. Reading Duchamp’s gesture as primarily performative opens up a conversation regarding play and contingency, which sets his project and Nauman’s apart from Conceptual artists’ such as Joseph Kosuth who read the readymade solely as an analytic proposition, tautologically occluding its experiential and 

---


293 *Fountain* is perhaps best known for the huge historical scandal it sparked in the art world: the Richard Mutt Case. It was refused entry to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Grand Central Palace in April 1917. A huge commotion followed over the *Fountain* not being decent. The following excerpt, originally published in the *Blind Man* (a Dadaist publication), was signed with Duchamp's pseudonym "R. Mutt": The Richard Mutt Case: They say any artist who pays six dollars may exhibit. Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion, this object disappeared and was never exhibited. What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain: 1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar. 2. Others that is was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing. Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is absurd. It is a fixture which you see every day in plumbers' show windows. Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object. As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has produced are her plumbing and her bridges.
synthetic allegations.\textsuperscript{294} Significantly at the core of the rise of performance art in the late Sixties, a movement with which Nauman was closely associated,\textsuperscript{295} was indeed a critical dialogue precisely about authenticity, as expression based in the body and in a unique set of circumstances, and as a non-reproducible, non-marketable art form.\textsuperscript{296} Performance art in the late Sixties thus returns to the crux of Duchamp’s ready-made provocation. Notably, the tension between performance as real and authentic versus staged and ephemeral reiterates many of Duchamp’s questions regarding the art object, truth, nominalism, and value, particularly seeing as both cases (that of R. Mutt and that of Bruce Nauman) are contingent on the reception of the photograph.

The trope of the fountain, traditionally associated with knowledge, has been central to sculptural history, from the works of Gian Lorenzo Bernini to Marcel Duchamp. The theme of the fountain with all of its cultural baggage has been recurrent in Nauman’s work since 1966, with his text piece \textit{The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain}, which comes with instructions on how this sentence could be installed in any space, or translated (albeit with the chance of inexact interpretation) in any language. This piece has been aptly described by Robert Storr as “as emblem of vatic illumination; a question without a question mark.”\textsuperscript{297} Storr’s comments reinforce my view of Nauman’s as a provocateur who alludes to Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain}

\textsuperscript{294} See Buchloh, “Aesthetics of Administration” for a deft critique of Kosuth in this regard.

\textsuperscript{295} In 1968, Nauman met dancer-choreographer Meredith Monk and composer Steve Reich, and he became aware of the work of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, all of whom influenced his experiments in time-based, performance work, (\textit{Bruce Nauman: Theatres of Experience}, 63).

\textsuperscript{296} Karen Henry, 73.

as an act that exceeds nominalist assertion and can also be understood as an inquisitive proposition in the form of a statement.

Nauman’s re-enactment/embodiment of Duchamp’s *Fountain* in the photograph *Self-portrait as Fountain* (1966-67/70) is crucial then as not simply as a wink to Duchampian avant-garde tactics but also as a bold reformulation of Duchamp’s questions *through* the body of the artist. Linguistically the connection is evident and yet the formal allusion to Duchamp’s earlier and infamous work is tenuous since for example Nauman’s features spouting water whereas Duchamp’s fountain is ‘not in service’ so-to-speak. Nevertheless, the conceptual bonds between the two pieces are striking. In Nauman’s the body is put in the place of the ready-made object, and moreover, as a visceral stand-in for the object, it is the body of the artist that is highlighted and problematized. Thus, even if photography is the medium, the other conduit is the body, and integral to the piece is their mutually contingent relationship in the construction and understanding of what is ‘real,’ which has emphatic importance considering performance art’s popular dependence on photography for visible evidence and historical record. Similarly, the critical reading of Duchamp’s oeuvre has been greatly informed by his performed and often photographed persona.

Nauman’s derisive performance as water nymph throws both the body and photography into limbo. Playfully he evokes corporeal necessities and contingencies. Seeing Nauman figured in place of the *Fountain*, or veritable urinal, suggests that Nauman’s water expulsion here might also be read as the artist ‘relieving himself’ confrontationally in the direction of the viewer. Drawing comparisons again to the expressiveness of Jackson Pollock ‘drip paintings’,

298 “I would say my interest in Duchamp has to do with his use of objects to stand in for ideas,” Bruce Nauman, in Jane Livingston, 11. In my study it is photographs in Nauman that stand in for ideas.
both in their substance and their figurative allusions, Nauman, like Duchamp before him, turns the legacy of the heroic and individualist artist on its head.

This defiant opposition to the legacy of Abstract Expressionism is essential to the logic of Nauman’s ‘works’. Despite the dominance of Clement Greenberg’s criticism, other critical options were circulating already in the early 1950s that would lend themselves to Nauman’s insolent reformulation of the Expressionist project with a revitalized interest in Duchamp. As the critic Harold Rosenberg’s account of Abstract Expressionism explains, “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than a space in which to reproduce, re-design or “express” an object… What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”

Nauman’s work embraces the idea of the event and the action of art as fundamentally performative, albeit minus the canvas. Importantly, Nauman’s disavowal of the contemplative process of aesthetic decision-making and judgment, along with traditional modes of art making such as painting, is in favor of indifference and photography. By extension, his performances more often than not centre on failure and purposelessness as opposed to valiant action. This reinterpretation of Pollock as open to chance rather than artistic control bears a resemblance to other neo-avantgarde readings of his work, such as that of Allan Kaprow, Fluxus, or the Gutai, who similarly saw in Pollock’s art an opportunity to transgress media boundaries, deny concerns with Modernist opticality, reconfigure artist-audience relations, and experiment with the dynamism inherent in the spaces and objects of everyday life.

---


300 Allan Kaprow explicitly marked these connections in relation to his Happenings, seeing two avenues opening up within postwar art. One would continue to reinstate Modernism, while the other would radically “give up the
Nauman’s mocking tone in *Self-Portrait as Fountain* further registers as an exposure of photography’s status in the Sixties as literally performative in that it reflects how photography represented an extension of the body as the legitimate site of experience and knowledge at this time. It also posits the idea of the subject as object while emphasizing how the photograph convincingly shared the same ‘non-object’ space as performance,\(^{301}\) in part because it was perceived as more ‘real’ than other mediums.

Again in riposte to Duchamp’s inert sculpture, Nauman is static only through the power of photography, which documents him *in action*, in the act of spitting water at the camera/viewer, a further act of irreverence. Or even perhaps a connotation, as suggested earlier, of “that other stream emanating from farther down the body.”\(^{302}\) This gesture can further be read as a deliberate evocation of degrading ideas of high culture in conjunction with elevating notions of low nature, in order words reformulating art in conjunction with the baseness of the body, which also connects back to Bakhtin’s writings on the lower body stratum. The urgency of urination combined with the myth of spontaneous artistic creation further connotes the phallus here and is reminiscent of Hegel’s observation from his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807):

The *depth* which Spirit brings forth from within… and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and low which, in the living being,

making of paintings entirely—I mean the single flat rectangle or oval as we know it… Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life,” Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock”, *Art News*, 57, no. 6, 1958.

\(^{301}\) Henry, 77.

\(^{302}\) Christine Hoffman, “Think-Thank/ Denk-Dank” in *Bruce Nauman: Theatres of Experience*, 52.
Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination.\textsuperscript{303} Playing irreverently on this dialectic of the ‘urinal’ in *Fountain*, Nauman extends Duchamp’s linguistic play, exposing further how the gesture of *Fountain* alters the terms of traditional subjectivity and receptivity in art. In performing the “urinal” Nauman emphasizes the theatrical implications of “You’re in All.”\textsuperscript{304} Given Nauman’s interest in the mercurial possibilities of language, this reference provides yet another demonstration of Nauman’s increasing assimilation of literary and verbal ideas in his artwork after 1966\textsuperscript{305} as well as a further latent homage to Duchamp. “You’re in All” functions by association; We are all implicated. As viewers we are by default participants in the piece, and in making meaning. This move can also be read as another critique of Fried’s appraisal of Minimalism. Fried derisively described the “complicity that the [Minimalist] work extorts from the beholder.”\textsuperscript{306} Indeed the performance of the ‘urinal’ as “You’re in All” exaggerates Fried’s notion of ‘literalism’ as well as the idea that “stage presence” is the “negation of art,”\textsuperscript{307} turning expected meanings against themselves to expose the reversal embedded within this model of Modernism itself. Nauman’s evocation of Duchampian disruption and disorientation, repeatedly shows art to be a site of conflict, and also links the context of pre-war aesthetics in Europe to that of nineteen sixties aesthetics in America, each historical moment marked by extreme cultural anxiety, threatened by rigidity and in need of cathartic disaffirmation.


\textsuperscript{304} I thank Louis Kaplan for bringing this productive word play to my attention.


\textsuperscript{306} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” (1967).

\textsuperscript{307} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” (1967), 153; 155.
Jeffrey Weiss has argued in *The Popular Culture of Modern Art* (1994) that Duchamp’s rejection of craft (for example that of Cubist painting) is indebted to three main critical forces which shaped much of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular French culture’s mediation of high-culture: the *blagueur* (the hoaxer), the *rate* (the embittered bohemian artist *manqué*, who strives for the immortal ‘put down’) and the *mystificateur*, who derived humor from the ‘official’ delivery of absurd information.\(^\text{308}\) In fact, the blagueur, mystificateur and rate become key parts of the avant-garde armoury in its war of attrition with the forces of bourgeois culture: positivism and propriety; and perhaps more pertinently, with the official guardians of modern art. Nauman insightfully continues the legacy of these avant-garde positionings and their comedic associations.

Testing the boundaries of the ‘real’ literally and figuratively is also integral to the images *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (1966-67/70) and *Finger Touch Number I* (1966-67/70). Both photographs comment on the process of art as metamorphosis and vanity, through reading the references implicit to Ovid’s *Narcissus*. These images are incongruous and intertextual, setting an oscillation of meaning(s) in motion, which contradicts the ability to read these statements (either photographic or linguistic) as indexical. The subject, ironically, one cannot ultimately put one’s finger on. Symmetry is suggested but frustrated.

The index in these images is represented literally—as a trace of a trace, tracing the trace—we see the artist’s fingers pointing, and touching their limits. Recalling that Narcissus became entranced by his reflection in a pool of water, not realizing it was himself he was looking at, exposes yet another aspect of the mythologizing function of photography as well as its

---

psychoanalytic dimension. Contemplating himself and unable to apprehend the ‘stranger’ reflected in the pool, (like the artist here, and by implication like the viewer), Narcissus was positioned in a kind self-imposed closed-circuit; here Nauman is effectively Narcissus. This photographic example also provides a productive link to thinking about Nauman’s move to video at this time in the late Sixties. These images illustrate “the double effect of performance-for-the-monitor” that Rosalind Krauss identifies as the Narcissistic quality of video. Though Krauss reads this recurrent reflexivity in contemporary art (such as Vito Acconci, Nancy Holt, and Lynda Bengalis) as an extension of modernist consciousness doubling back on itself, we would do well to consider Narcissus or Nauman’s position as alienated artist in this piece, characterized “as the unchanging condition of a perpetual frustration.” The fact that the proposition is left without resolution is crucial. When Narcissus reached out to touch the image before him, he was transformed through his touch into a flower forever fixated to place. Dexterity, deception, and delusion are all put into play in these two photographs by Nauman—which though formally not exact, do share the affects of semblance and link the viewer in this sequence of mirrors.

Nauman’s artwork both illustrates and embodies the idea that performance and photography have lost their credible or direct referents. Instead they have become integral parts of “the fictions that artists create in order to work with the underlying illusions of representation,” and by extension provide a means through which the artwork functions as a proposition. By blurring the disciplinary borders, the work constructs a situation in which one might imagine performance through photography and contemplate the performance of

310 Ibid., 58.
311 Henry, 78.
photography, interminably sorting through the variable histories of gesture and meaning, particularly in relation to the status of the photograph as art object. Photography’s precarious entry into the pantheon of artistic mediums in the late Sixties, a time of great uncertainty, is but one more testimony to the possibility that photography is in itself a form of disruption as well as a paradoxical litmus test of unpredictability rather than functioning as a stable index of the real.

Ultimately Bruce Nauman’s photographs act out. They also act on the viewer, and they jointly demand the viewer act too, whether in the service of suspending disbelief or asserting incredulity. Like Wittgenstein, Nauman finds the investigation more important than its conclusion. Within the ethos of Nauman’s open-ended inquiries, the unfixed ontologies of both performance and photography are ultimately cast under suspicion, reinforcing the recurring question of whether one accepts the artist’s word for “it.” The irony in the end is that Nauman also submits to eating his own words (performed in photographs such as “Eating My Words” (1966-67/70) where the artist is shown spreading jam on pale unappetizing bread letters forming “w- o- r- d” on his plate). As viewers we are ultimately left without proof of whether or not he swallows them whole.
Chapter 3
Definitively Dubious Documents:
On Douglas Huebler’s Photographs

The distinction between art and photography, historically fraught with anxieties, has ceased to be one of definition; nevertheless, it continues to bug us... For every photographer who clamors to make it as an artist, there is an artist running a grave risk of turning into a photographer.
–Nancy Foote (1976) 312

The properties of photographic imagery which have made it a privileged medium in postmodern art are precisely those which for generations art photographers have been concerned to disavow. –Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1984) 313

Douglas Huebler (1924-1997) was an American conceptual artist who based his work in photography beginning in the late 1960s. Coming from a personal history of abstract expressionist painting and Minimalist sculpture, 314 he developed unique installations of photographs often involving maps and text in order to explore social environments and the affective interchange between time, location, and subject as related to the idea of art, documentary photography, the traditions of portraiture, and cataloguing systems. Each of these facets of exploration poses infinite questions rather than proposing finite resolutions, and as such Huebler’s practice is representative of the deliberate suspension of belief enacted through photography under conceptual art, perhaps more so than any other emerging artist of the late Sixties.

Like many conceptual artists, Douglas Huebler conceived of the photograph as a ready-made. Emphasizing “taking” as opposed to “making,” through their play on and with

314 Huebler was notably included in the seminal Primary Structures exhibit in 1966 at the Jewish Museum in New York.
photography, Huebler’s projects highlight the tension between the proposed ideological liberation and simultaneous foreclosure inherent in photography’s power as an economic and social agent. In Huebler’s own often quoted words: “I use the camera as a ‘dumb’ copying device that only serves to document whatever phenomena appears before it through the conditions set by a system.” This remark highlights one of the central internal contradictions of Huebler’s practice, that he at once disavows technological determination as a modus operandi and rescinds his own control as artistic producer. As a result the question remains, who or what “makes” the art when photography is only for the ‘taking’? From Huebler’s point of view the answer seems to be anyone and everyone: ultimately anonymous individuals (in the positions of both subjects and viewers) in relation to the system(s) in which they operate and are implicitly orchestrated. In every instance, Huebler’s Locations, Durations, and Variable pieces reveal much about the political, social, and aesthetic systems in which photography and its subjects are enmeshed by addressing not only their a priori conditions but also their a posteriori reception in the postmodern sense, moving from a study of objects to the consideration (or performance) of effects, thus approaching an “art after philosophy” to ironically appropriate Joseph Kosuth’s phrase.

ON THE DIALECTICS OF ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Location Piece #1, New York-Los Angeles, 1969

In February 1969 the airspace over each of the thirteen states between New York and Los Angeles was documented by a photograph made as the camera was pointed more or less straight out the airplane window (with no interesting view intended). The photographs

315 In statement accompanying the 1969 group show “Prospect ‘69” at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf.
join together the east and west coast of the United States as each serves to “mark” one of the thirteen states flown over during that particular flight. The photographs are not, however, “keyed” to the state over which they were made, but only exist as documents that join with an American Airlines System Map and this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

In Location Piece #1, New York-Los Angeles (1969), Huebler is mimicking art photography miming painting’s pictorialism, self-consciously marking the ways art photography took painting as its model before conceptual art. We can recognize the precedent of Alfred Steiglitz and the work of the Photo-Secessionists (though it is an inversion of Steiglitz, seen here as an aerial view), as well as the allusion to atmospheric perspective in painting made “real” by the art of the camera. It is also an elucidating example of what Huebler meant when he claimed, using language that resonates with Duchamp’s convention of the “snapshot effect,” to want to “document whatever phenomena appears before it through the conditions set by a system.” A sequence of mimetic resemblances is set in motion that ultimately devolve into uncanniness—where the references are familiar, while also producing the very aspects that allow the system to resist being coherently unified or identified. This is a recurrent thematic in Huebler’s work. Each image, or unit, is a separate and differentiated part of a larger whole, cleverly crossing what Walter Benjamin sensed in photography as the hybrid of the gambler with the assembly-line, using chance alongside determinacy and systematic mechanics, and revealing not simply photography’s compound interest in the arbitrary and the automated, but also their relevance to the greater social matrix.

---

316 Benjamin’s most complete portrait of the gambler is offered in the essay “Some motifs on Baudelaire,” commenting the poem Le jeu, GS I, 15-16.
Despite the fact that Huebler’s series flips Stieglitz’s work, in that it is an “ungrounded” aerial view rather than shots taken from the ground up, there are many productive affinities between the two projects. In recalling Stieglitz’s interest in “Equivalents,” his famous series of cloud photographs to which he devoted nine years from 1923 to 1931, and with which Stieglitz hoped to convey his symbolist belief that photographs could express spiritual experience in visual terms with the ends of capturing the “real” and the “beautiful,” Huebler is demonstrating his acute awareness of photographic history. For Stieglitz, intangible, constantly metamorphosing subjects, like clouds, provided the ideal subject matter for a photographer interested in metaphor. By contrast, Huebler’s project is a question of “variations” “durations” and “locations” as opposed to a matter of “equivalence” or correspondences. Whereas “equivalences” validate one another by proving their “truth” through interchangeability and relative sameness, Huebler uses the principles of equivalence to expose the variability that disavows any singular truth and instead covets doubt. Whereas Stieglitz mobilizes metaphor in the service of equivalence, thus repressing the impossibility of it ever being ‘exactly the same,’ Huebler exposes the ways in which metaphor always leaves remainders and doubts, and does not function in a closed system. Additionally, the tradition of mimesis and imitating the master is taken to task in Huebler, for his images at once do and do not “look like” Stieglitz’s photos or

317 Stieglitz’s use of the term “Equivalents” certainly has the nineteenth century French Symbolist poet and critic Charles Baudelaire embedded in its unconscious, namely via Stieglitz’s oblique reference to Baudelaire’s concept of “correspondences.”

318 A number of other conceptual artists also investigated the sky, air and clouds via photography, see for example John Baldessari’s Cigar Smoke to Match Clouds That Are the Same (by Sight—Side View) (1972–73), Bruce Nauman’s artist book L’Air (1970), and Airshow (1967) by Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin. The latter conceptual work declared one square mile of air to be art. These works may be read with others, such as Robert Barry’s Inert Gas Series (1969) as literalizations and complications of the very idea of the dematerialization of the art object.
like one another, “with no interesting view intended,” making them the perfect example of an anti-aesthetic project running counter to Stieglitz’s aims.

In a provocative essay of 1979 entitled “Stieglitz/Equivalents,” Rosalind Krauss begins by addressing the turn to photography in the late Sixties, not only as a subject of inquiry for artists but also (somewhat ironically) as a subject of reassurance for critics and art historians. Krauss describes the anxiety that seemed perpetually inherent to engaging with modernist painting and sculpture, how it “forced us to consider our connection to the world only through the mediation of an abstract language,” by contrast to photography which “seems to offer a direct, transparent relationship to experience, to the objects of one’s experience.” This position is revealing, as it exemplifies some of the earlier attitudes towards the ontology of photographic imaging. Arguably, more than any other medium photography was (and to a certain extent continues to be) invested with notions of its credibility: namely, the topos of photography as truth, photography as a respite from questioning, photography as a stable object with the ability to objectify other objects and experiences so as to centre or ground one’s sense of the world. As art historian Joel Snyder has argued for example, “the index […] isn’t seriously intended to engage questions about photography; it is meant to put an end to questions.” Also for Huebler, photography enacts something completely contrary to the notion of an indexical anchor, yet it is its link to such idealistic transparency that gives its ‘true’ nature its critical force, and its potential to disrupt subjectivity and ideology.

---

320 Ibid., 129.
For Krauss, it is (at least initially) modernist painting and sculpture that hounds us “with questions about how we can claim to know what we know, how we can think we see what we see.” Accordingly, out of exhaustion and frustration from these existential questions we turn to photography. Following this hypothesis, Krauss goes on to discuss how we can consider the ironic symmetry between the development of photography and modernism, in that they share nearly the same time span and yet, while modernism was “steadily draining the world out of the frame of the image,” photography was working progressively to fill it back up. Huebler’s work, as I will argue in this chapter, oscillates between these two positions, engaging the tension between accumulation and dematerialization, fullness and emptiness, presence and absence.

If photography and modernism are said to share anything beyond historical berth and chronological birth, the thing “they share is perhaps a curse, perhaps a threat, perhaps in the end a source of aesthetic strength. It is the problem of fraudulence.” Evoking the writings of the aesthetician Stanley Cavell for support, Krauss elaborates on the idea of fraudulence as the inherent condition of modernism, explaining: “The issue is rather that within the art itself, once it is cut free from a certain relation to tradition, it is difficult to establish the difference between the fake and the genuine; that is, there seems to be no ground on which to establish the authenticity as art of, say, one white painted square from another.” This slippage was extremely useful to conceptual artists, in the wake of Duchampian problematics, which insisted on the risk of the ‘blague’ or hoax, based in the difficulty of ‘telling the difference.’ This is

323 Ibid.
324 Ibid.
325 Ibid, 130.
especially true for those who employed photography in this uncertain service since photography’s capacity to produce identical multiples always negates the value of the so-called ‘original.’ To push the arbitrary nature of the photograph further one need only look at Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* for support. Stieglitz himself admitted that in many of his photographs, any one of the four sides might possibly serve as the “top.”

It is not haphazard the Hubler’s cloud photographs present a similar logistical and thus epistemological challenge.

Building on this contrary common sense, with the art itself being deliberately unfastened from conventional logic, the subject matter in Huebler’s photographs is far from accidental. Seen at once as nearly transcendental material, these clouds perform a reversal by simultaneously referencing and disavowing claims of photography’s transparent legibility. For one thing, their serene aspect is interrupted by technical *faux-pas*. The fact that clouds are always in a state of flux, gradually morphing, proposes that if these photos were snapped thirty seconds earlier or thirty seconds later, they would not look the same. As such, though they would remain representations of clouds, they demonstrate how the “real” morphs and shifts at any given moment. These photographs of clouds are the ideal marker of the disappearing and unstable referent, literally and figuratively.

The question of seeing and believing in regard to the notion of photographic truth gains resonance when thinking about clouds as subject matter. Symbolically they represent the stuff of daydreams and connote the idea of seeing things in the clouds. Whether or not seeing clouds as something other than themselves, for example as shapes that look like faces or animals, is merely a kind hypnotic or hopeful delusionary reaction to their suspended airiness, to their shape-

shifting capacity, the only thing we know for certain is that we often see in these apparitions what we want to see. Similar to the fascination with photographic truth, the obsession with clouds as more than clouds runs deep. In fact this accounts for a contemporary group known as the “Cloud Appreciation Society”327 with currently nearly 15000 members, whose main activity is collecting a gallery of photographs titled “Clouds that look like other things,” and thereby they continue the Stieglitz symbolist tradition in a popular context.

The other significant attribute of clouds in relation to photography runs counter to metaphor: namely their synechdochic signification, with each cloud being a part that refers to a greater whole. Playing on the associative capacity of human perception and memory both clouds and photographs never give us the whole picture. Clouds connote the sky and photographs connote the world, but they are always incomplete, only transitory representations of a larger reality and a much larger provenance. Always more than the eye can see. Stanley Cavell’s reading of the ontology of the photograph is relevant here. Cavell writes: “What happens in a photograph is that it comes to an end. A photograph is cropped, not necessarily by a paper cutter or by masking but by the camera itself….The camera, being finite, crops a portion from an indefinitely larger field….When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut out. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential to the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.”328 The partiality of the photograph and of clouds is essential to their being. Returning to the example of Steiglitz and Huebler, the realization in each project that the sky is immense, paired with the reality that any particular cloud and any particular photograph are only a limited part of it, performs a dislocation. Any

327 http://cloudappreciationsociety.org/
presence in a photograph also marks an absence. Each image appears as an un-analyzable whole, disorienting the viewer even further by their repetition and difference without coherent sequence. No photograph is ever really the same twice, just as no photograph tells an impartial truth.

The sky itself is essentially not composed, (much like Bruce Nauman’s *Messes* of 1967.) In Huebler as in Steiglitz, “there is a sense not merely of found or fortuitous composition, the luck of some accidental arrangement. There is, rather, a sense of the object’s resistance to internal arrangement, a positing of the irrelevance of composition, in much the same way that, for example, a Duchampian ready-made short-circuits any discussion of the internal relationships between its parts.”

The link to Duchampian chance and resistance is for Huebler a particularly crucial issue. In each case, Huebler emphasizes the randomness of his selections, even in face of the mediation proposed by his written statement accompanying the piece.

On the occasion of Huebler’s exhibition at the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels (1997), curator Anne Pontegnie wrote of how Huebler’s artwork should be understood in relation to its deep attachment to experience. Read along these lines, Huebler’s work functions against the disenchantment effected by much conceptual art that reduces the work to a tautological, reductivist or rationalist statement. Instead for Huebler the statements that accompany his work are vital and valued for their refusal to allow any single representation to generalize singular experience. It is for these reasons that “the play of equivalence between [the] photographs and the statement that accompanies them is disturbed by a disjunction which allows


330 The organization of this exhibition was underway during Huebler’s lifetime. Unfortunately the artist passed way from cancer before the show opened.
chance and disorder to enter the system.” It is a deliberate means of encouraging deliberation. The seeming dependence and visible discord within the experiment, namely the interplay between the description of the system as procedure and the results, are precisely that which divulge the failure of equivalence, and hence Stieglitz’s idealist assumptions. The apparent scientific precision of the text is important only in so far as without it the chronological disorder which structures Huebler’s work would not be as apparent. The text does not emphasize order as much as it highlights chance. The viewer must therefore constantly shift one’s ground to make meaning, realizing that they can be certain of nothing, except that meaning is constantly fluctuating.

Huebler and Duchamp share this critical commitment to the openness of ideas and the absence of concrete conclusions. Particularly Huebler’s repeated mention in numerous pieces that the photographs are not “keyed” to the thing they are said to represent seems to echo serendipitously the very words Yves Arman has aptly used to describe the aporetic openness of Duchamp’s larger project, a description I would argue could be applied just as well to Huebler: "How can one key be complex enough to adapt to every idea Duchamp has confronted us with? After having spent a lot of time trying most of the keys cast by Duchamp's critics and admirers, I realized that maybe the only key is to accept an absence of a key." The irony of the lock without a key that nevertheless remains open is a metaphor that applies to the work of both artists as well as serving as a metaphor that acknowledges a surplus of meaning. For Huebler

332 Ibid., 142.
this instability of meaning and openness of narrative connects\textsuperscript{334} to the multiple upheavals that
the habits of representation and narration were going through contemporaneously in the late
1960s, which are manifestly visible for example in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet\textsuperscript{335} and the
films of Jean-Luc Godard.\textsuperscript{336} The upheavals to which I am referring resulted of course primarily
from a refusal to impose a coherent truth or to objectify meaning. As Huebler summarized in an
interview “Whatever inferences a particular piece produces, the visual images presented remain
[…] indifferent to human purpose, or as Alain Robbe-Grillet says in \textit{For The New Novel}: “Man
looks at the world but the world does not look back at man.”\textsuperscript{337} This view subverts any logic of
domination that desires to impose a fixed order on the world.

Huebler’s cloud photographs are both in relation to the terra firma below, contingent on
the “idea” of the thirteen distinct states beneath the plane he is flying in, and also completely
separate from that grounded reality, or to repeat Huebler’s assertion once more, the photos are
not “keyed” to the states below but rather (and even then only partially) in relation to the
American Airlines System Map exhibited with the photographs and its attendant statement,
which is of course itself an abstraction. These photographs, like Steiglitz’s \textit{Equivalents} are
without grounds. Up and down are not map-able, and thus we lose our relation to the horizon as
a traditional means of organizing our sense of space and place. We lose our relation to the earth,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[334] See both Anne Pontegnie and Lucy Soutter.
\item[335] “It is not the anecdote that is lacking, it is only its character of certainty, its tranquility, its innocence,” in Robbe-
\item[336] “Cinema is not one image after another, it is one image plus another making a third, the third moreover being
made by the spectator,” Jean-Luc Godard, \textit{Propos Rompus}, in \textit{Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard} (Paris: 
\item[337] Douglas Huebler, \textit{Origin and Destination}, 134.
\end{footnotes}
and, unable to situate ourselves as viewers and by extension as beings in the world, we are left in a gravity-less situation.

As a location piece, it represents the theme of Huebler’s location pieces overall: despite the idea that the photograph will ground our greater sense of reality, the photographs actually confront one with epistemological doubt. These photographs refuse to be compasses. Huebler’s photographs exemplify the mutiny of photography against rationale and the capacity of the photograph to transmute our experience of the world.

Huebler’s clouds show a range of formations, and document their changing movement through spatial and temporal dimensions—resisting equivalence despite the frame’s insistence on uniformity (the photographs are all developed at the same scale and conform to the same rectangle shape). In addition, they exceed the confines of their clichéd “arty” subject matter, by lacking the specificity expected of even the most amateur fine art. Their resolution is atrocious, with prints streaked and flawed as if through accidents in the film’s processing. And while these interventions might recall the ways the Secessionists privileged the hand of the artist over content in order to raise photography to the level of art viewed as an independent artistic medium, Huebler in contrast here disavows the “art” of photography. Veritably, Huebler’s photographs are deliberately “artless” at least by the standards of his day. And this point is crucial because perhaps one could even go so far as to say that their “deliberation” on artlessness provides the intellectual labor that would (in Duchampian terms) allow for them to be art, thus furthering the aporetic benefit of the doubt and yielding to a paradoxical state.
These pictures of clouds connote transcendence in a manner not only different from, but actually in opposition to that of Stieglitz.\textsuperscript{338} For while the Photo-Secessionist emphasis on the artifice of photography as a means to attain the “real” seems to accord with many of Huebler’s own impulses, the Secessionists used photography as akin to painting precisely in order to work \textit{against} the democratization of photography in the context of the proliferation of Kodak snapshots in the early Twentieth Century. Huebler on the other hand was extremely committed to the idea that anyone could be an artist, and participation and decision-making in the sphere of art were also free and equal.

Titling his series \textit{Equivalents}, Stieglitz knowingly invokes “the language of symbolism, with its notions of correspondence and hieroglyph.”\textsuperscript{339} As a meta-reference to the photograph itself as an index that is always a stand-in for something other than what it actually is, symbolism resonates here in an even more profound sense, in the way that “symbolism [is] an understanding of language as a form of radical absence—the absence, that is, of the world and its objects, supplanted by the presence of the sign,”\textsuperscript{340} in other words replaced by the representation. Moreover, the medium of photography presses questions of representation more so than any other medium because it demonstrates most clearly how absence is the condition of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{338} Like the photograph more broadly, clouds are the antithesis of “hard facts.” A cloud is also like a photograph in that they are both traces. The cloud is the trace of something invisible until it is exposed to light, namely, the atmosphere. The photograph similarly comes into visible being only through light. Clouds are a natural phenomenon that appear even more other-worldly when framed by the cultural construct of the photograph, epitomizing how photography itself is not transparent, neither does it ever perfectly give us the real; in fact, on the contrary it often gives us a transposition of reality under the guise of being ‘natural.’

\textsuperscript{339} Krauss, 140.

\textsuperscript{340} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
representation. It is the presence of the photograph as a sign of absence that most characteristically marks photography as a truly postmodern activity. It is an absence paradoxically predicated on a presence, but an absence nevertheless, and a presence of the sort summoned by Douglas Crimp in “Pictures” (1979) when he quotes Henry James’s false tautology, playing on the double, antithetical meaning of the word presence: “The presence before him was a presence.” This absence also marks the end of aura as Walter Benjamin described it, the absence or dissolution of aura being one of the central means with which photography irrevocably overturned the judgment-seat of art.

Huebler deliberately refuses to engage with the question of whether or not photography is an art. By declining to answer the question of “how can photography be art when there is not enough ‘work’ involved in the making of an image that is initiated by the pushing of a button?”, Huebler successfully undermines the “merely mechanical” accusations leveled at photography. This is exactly the opposite approach of movements like pictorialism, in which practitioners who considered themselves artists before and beyond photographers, such as Edward Steichen, Clarence H. White, and Alvin Langdon Coburn, obsessively “worked” to rescue photography from such mechanistic indictments by overtly attempting to legitimate the “art of photography” by displaying clearly the “work” involved in selecting film and lens type, or how the laborious details of the darkroom process inflect the image. However, by responding with such intensive

342 Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” October, no. 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88.
physical work and in effect using the vocabulary of painting, these practitioners reinforced the clichés themselves and gave weight to the very stigma against which they “worked.”

On the other hand, Huebler’s art was also not without efforts. Achieving such a complex reticence of the visual image is not as easy as it looks. As one author has noted “Huebler [went] out of his way to make the photographs look arbitrary.” Drawing the viewer’s attention to the surface of the image, and ultimately its opacity, as opposed to allowing one the reverie of the allegedly transparent photograph, involved a sophisticated thinking through of the function of photography. Undermining authorship and mastery, as well as the pleasures of easy legibility, involved creating seemingly haphazard documents that would map out the paradigmatic schema of the piece. For example here, the cloud photographs connote the infinite, while simultaneously showing us its limits, for though the expanse of the sky is itself framed, even mapped out cartographically, it remains fugitive and representationally ungrounded. The camera’s role as omniscient and omnipotent in the photographic universe is proposed but also exposed as possessing the ability to cloud judgment.

MAPPING THE SUBJECT: LIMITS AND DISLOCATIONS

“Camus goes on to say that Man, like Sisyphus, must accept the absurdity inherent in that truth, and then conquer it through creative activity whereby he, or she, exists in a state of rebellious acceptance, a transcendence that refuses resignation, especially during the time when a creative object is being produced.”—Douglas Huebler

344 Soutter, 120.

345 Huebler is referring here to the irreconcilable concepts of “living on” and the “certainty of Death” by paraphrasing Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he contends that “Man’s struggle to wrest meaning from life is foredoomed to failure because, of course, sooner or later we all are obliged to face our mortality,” Douglas Huebler, *Destination and Origin*, 123.
Propositions featuring deliberate misrecognitions and irreconcilable differences compose the central dynamic of Huebler’s practice, particularly as he investigates the limits of mapping the subject. According to Huebler, his emphasis on projects that remain open and ‘in process’ provides him “with both reason and pleasure for producing work under the umbrella of the impossibility of ever completing its pronounced purpose.” Turning away from Minimalist sculpture in the late Sixties, he stated famously: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add anymore.” His resolve to not participate in art as defined by object-making in the traditional sense, opens his practice towards focusing on effects, and photography is the medium by which this change is manifest. Arguably, and nearly paradoxically, it is precisely this moment that bookends his most prolific period of artistic production. This is the moment that introduces his “rebellious acceptance” of the limits of life and the certainty of death. It marks Huebler’s move from a study of objects to the performance of effects as well as the correlative move from modernism to postmodernism. After all, it is only two years later that he announces his intention to “photographically document….. the existence of everyone alive.” How can these two statements be reconciled? Renouncing object making in the traditional sense sets the stage for his turn to photography, and moreover in the Seventies, to portraiture. Using strategies akin to those discussed in my analysis of Location Piece no. 1, Huebler’s photographic portraits speak to the impossibility of coherently mapping the individual.

346 “In the statement for Variable Piece no. 70: 1971 the parenthetical phrase ‘in process’ was included as an especially important clause that spells out the contingency built into the entire project due to the obvious fact that the continuous flux of the ‘human species’ is organically implicated in the ‘extent of the artist’s capacity’. I mean to assume neither a tragic nor heroic posture by referring again to Sisyphus engaged in an endlessly absurd task, save to say that the gods, whoever they may be, do not sentence me to make works in process, but such an idea provides me with both reason and pleasure for producing work under the umbrella of the impossibility of ever completing its pronounced purpose,” Douglas Huebler, Origin and Destination, 134.

subject or the collective whole. Photographic portraiture par excellence represents the desire to preserve life from its inevitable passing, as well as the recognition of death in every living photograph. Huebler’s declared all or nothing dialectic quixotically divulges the internal opposition that sets his practice in motion, epitomizing the dilemma of the individual, unique subject in a world that is ever increasingly indifferent, systematized and globalized.

In describing *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global*, a full announcement of the project is often left out.

**Variable Piece no. 70 (In Process) Global** “Throughout the remainder of the artist’s lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.

Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: ‘100,000 people,’ ‘1,000,000 people,’ ‘10,000,000 people,’ ‘people known by the artist,’ ‘look-alikes,’ overlap,’ etc.

November 1971    --Douglas Huebler

In noting “to the extent of his capacity” as the limit of this enterprise, Huebler admits the human (and thus fallible and mortal) boundary to the project’s completion: namely the limit of experience itself. As Huebler has explained, “For one thing people are dying and being born faster than any one person could click the shutter of a camera.”

The *Everyone Alive* project (as it has come to be known) depends not simply on the artist’s mortality but also his capacity, “to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.” Documenting “everyone alive” is a paradoxical endeavor; for how

---


349 The project continued until Huebler’s death in 1997.
would this pseudo-scientific experiment ever be verified? What could the photograph possibly prove in the end? Even the contingency of being “alive” is challenged by the suspension of the photograph, with its ontology as a liminal space outside of the normal continuum of time and yet as a persistent reminder of the presence of absence described by Roland Barthes and others as the medium’s existential paradox.\(^\text{350}\) It is difficult to reconcile these questions, however it is easy to understand why this became Huebler’s most famous project, but also his most incomplete. Its success is in part predicated on its indefinite status and its openness to doubt. The title from the beginning was “In Process,” leaving this apparently humanist endeavor to be read as an anti-humanist gesture due to its grand impossibility at the outset and decidedly open-ended incompletion. This enigmatic strategy thus denies the satisfaction of ever getting the whole picture, and by implication the whole truth, thereby challenging the prescribed order of things.

The curator Charles Stainback has emphasized that, “For Huebler the idea of the overall classification and presentation of ‘everyone alive’ is without a doubt the ultimate collection of photographic documentation—an ironic yet calculated twist to the futility of scientific rigor.”\(^\text{351}\) I agree with Stainback yet would like to argue the point further, noting how Huebler’s dubious control of this “In Process” project is precisely the formula to enact the dialectic between control and chance that productively provides for the benefit of the doubt, an epistemological break that has become increasingly appreciated in a world bent on order and certainty. Living in a moment flooded with images ranging from advertising’s promise of eternal bliss through consumption to massacres in Vietnam, Huebler collected, documented, and appropriated thousands of


photographs, which compiled together, provide excessive and often contradictory information about our world, resulting overall in total confusion. Any attempt to order the meanings is bound to fail, and yet this does not negate the significance of meaning itself. All of Huebler’s photographic portraits from 1971 onwards become part and parcel of this infinitely incomplete archival project. Each person documented makes the overall project increasingly uncontainable.

Many of the works were further subtitled by the artist. This gesture emphasizes the recurring importance of language in conceptual art at this time, yet also serves to indicate a proposed categorical organization that was paradoxically driven by seemingly random characteristics. The equation is always inconclusive. A given photograph from *Variable piece no. 70* for example could be placed alongside the descriptive caption “at least one person who might feel pleased to have been made the subject of art,” or “at least one person who always has the last word.” The viewer is then given the challenge of guessing to whom the statement applies as well as the responsibility of being in the judgment seat. The aesthetics of indifference are used in Huebler’s work as a means of challenging dominant aesthetics and preconceived assumptions regarding affect itself. Questioning who the subject is and one’s own relation to the subject in the social is constantly called into question.

Among the photographic portraits by Huebler included in *Variable piece no. 70* a significant number are labeled explicitly by the artist, and yet still they remain uncanny. His series of “look-alikes” is one example, or his further grouping of photos from the “Everyone alive” project into ever increasingly obscure categories of resemblance, such people who look like “Judith” and people who look like “Holofernes”, categories which surely imply a joke regarding art historical attribution as much the relativity involved in affective readings.
Huebler’s archival impulse and pseudo-scientific ambitions to photograph everyone alive are of course not without precedent. Recalling idealistic but also dystopic parables such as Gaston Bachelard’s bureaucrat who dreams of a file cabinet large enough to store the world’s entire knowledge, this fantasy of documenting and by extension collecting “everyone” seems to be at the very heart of the photographic impulse itself. Theorists such as Allan Sekula would argue in fact that photographic desire has always been intimately related to the drive for comprehensive possession and mastery. Susan Sontag has also described this quality, “[T]he camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mode.” The ingenuous equation between photographs and knowledge is precisely the mania that occludes reflexive questioning. As such it is never enough to read photography on its own terms, within its frame, but rather it is necessary to take each photograph to task as conjugated within the parameters of a larger discourse, within the structure of deeply embedded and even unconscious ideological positions, as a result of polyvalent forces and constructs. Huebler has explained his own photographs as providing a counter-position to the photograph as comprehensive knowledge: “Having entered the socio-political arena […] it soon followed that I developed the ‘Everyone Alive’ project as a logical form through which to forward the examination of the natural/cultural dialectic that was of primary interest to me. The obvious impossibility of its declared program turns its


353 Countless photographers have used the task of accumulating a comprehensive picture of the world as the operative principle for their practice. Examples range from Cecil Beaton, The Face of the World: an international scrapbook of people and places (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957) to Googleearth.


photographic representations into free-floating signs attached to the equally readymade terms of culturally fabricated aphorisms and sayings. As in all my work this project is meant to put the question to its audience about how willing it is—and anyone else—to accept arbitrarily constructed relationships between language and appearances.”

Huebler’s awareness of the persistent desire for and yet irreconcilable discrepancy between pictures and truth, or documents and knowledge, is made visible by the degree to which he infuses his projects with whimsy and doubt, making apparent through humour and irony the futility of such projects while at the same time presenting the potential their failure offers to affirm the heterogeneity and unknowability of life. Moreover, Huebler’s anti-positivist project could not be more serious considering the increasingly “insidious relationship between objectivity and reification,” in which subjects are presented as “knowable” objects, and social relations are understood as things. This reification marks a specific form of alienation, which the photograph seems to support at first glance. As I will continue to argue however, particularly in reference to Huebler and Barthes’ thinking on photography, the subject can never be entirely fixed or knowable.

For conceptual artists of the late Sixties and early Seventies, the German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher pose an important model. Having collaborated on an elaborate international search to document vanishing industrial terrain since the 1950s, the Bechers continue to compile their extensive archive of “anonymous sculpture”. Very different from “popular, romanticized

---


Modernist views of early 20th century industrialization that transformed banal industrial sites into gleaming futuristic visions, typified by Charles Sheeler’s photographs of the Ford Motor plant in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1927, the Bechers are devoted to recording “typologies” of disappearing industrial architecture such as blast furnaces, water towers, lime kilns, and cooling towers, each marked by their increasing “uselessness” despite their historical connection to labour and productivity. Taking individual portraits of industrial architecture, their images famously bear no trace of emotion and are rather standardized shots of archetypal structures. Michael Fried, among others, has rightly compared the persistent frontality of the Bechers’ architectural photographs to the frontal pose of a subject facing the camera. Nevertheless, many art historians have argued for the “draining of subjective content” they believe is enacted by the Bechers’ photographs. This line of thought is reinforced by the fact that the Bechers’ images are always displayed in grids, which, though they enable comparative equivalences as well as comparative differences, are suggestive also of a formalist aesthetic concerned more with objectivity and self-containment. I assert by contrast that it is the trace of physiognomic and subjective depth captured by these structural arrangements that gives force to these series, and the systematic organization enforced by the grid is in effect the method by which the personalities of the industrial architecture pictured are given presence. Rather than closing down the possibility of subjective readings, the grid paradoxically exposes the need to address the subjective content as well as its implications for acknowledging what lies outside the frame. Huebler shares the Bechers’ interest in the photographic archive, and like the Bechers displays

358 Stainback, 9.


his photographs in a grid pattern. As I am arguing however, this use of the grid and the turn to portraiture moreover are not in the name of modernist aesthetics as so many critics have claimed. Instead, Huebler and the Bechers expose the “objectivity” of the grid as a strategy for mapping the contradictions of their subjects. In fact it is the grid formation’s proposal of non-hierarchical order, founded on its modular, mathematic, and repetitive structure that allows exponentially for infinite possibilities of difference rather than finite conclusions, exposing the fact that self-containment is illusory.

In an essay written in 1979, Rosalind Krauss argued that the grid is the emblematic structure of modernist visual arts. She begins:

Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. As such, the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech. The arts, of course, have paid dearly for this success, because the fortress they constructed on the foundation of the grid has increasingly become a ghetto.\(^{361}\)

Krauss goes on to argue that the grid announces the "modernity of modern art" in two ways, namely the spatial and the temporal. Regarding the spatial she says: "the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal."\(^{362}\) In the flatness of the grid, Krauss asserts, the dimensions and objects of the real are "crowded out" and replaced by the "lateral spread of a single surface."\(^{363}\) Though Krauss does


\(^{362}\) Ibid.

\(^{363}\) Ibid.
not discuss photography in this essay, I believe the display of photographs in a grid distinctly challenges this modernist sensibility. The photograph’s indexical connection to the real as well as its inherent mimetic drive confounds the reductive order of the grid. Rather than an exclusive engagement with visuality, the structure of language and the interrogatory power of discourse are set in motion by the play within a series, by the connections and disjunctures between images. The subject of the photograph, particularly when that subject is posed as a portrait, returns artistic inquiry to the cacophony that the grid cannot contain. Notably, the Bechers and Huebler’s photographic portraiture moves beyond the reading of any single photograph, and instead enacts an affective logic by evoking the play between series and sequence, uniqueness and difference, suggesting that any individual photograph is both part and parcel of a larger undefined whole. Using photography as a means akin to Michel Foucault’s understanding of the relativity of language as a system of representation, Huebler puts to the test “the heart of the affirmative discourse on which resemblance rests.” As such, Huebler reveals the constitutive illiteracy of the physiognomic face as a means of allowing for subjective uniqueness and affirming the irrepressible affect of any and all individual subjects, even within a standardized system.

In his often cited essay ““Marks of Indifference”: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art” (1995) Jeff Wall contends that photography occupied Conceptual artists as a means for photography to realize itself as a modernist art. For Wall and others the evocation of the grid as an organizational format for many photoconceptual artists, including Sol LeWitt or

---


Jan Dibbets, is but one way that he sees this manifestation. More significantly for Wall, and this concerns specifically the work of Huebler, the seemingly arbitrary parameters of the “project” involving “systems of documentation” were exactly that: arbitrary. Wall claims, “The more the assignment is emptied of what could normatively [be] considered to be compelling social subject matter, the more visible it is simply as an instance of structure, an order, and the more clearly it can be experienced as a model of relationships between writing and photography. By emptying subject matter from his practice of photography, Huebler recapitulates important aspects of the development of modernist painting.” For Wall Huebler’s works are models of modernist abstract art in that their subject matter in effect is nothing more and nothing less than the idea of art.

It is at this point that Wall introduces Piet Mondrian as Huebler’s aesthetic kin. Wall envisions them both as artists who moved away from representation to “only a residual depictive value” and eventually to abstraction as a means to escape subjectivity and instead to investigate the limits of the medium itself and to think of art, not as concerned with questions of representation, but as engaged with internal structural relations with the ends of negating the subject. The link to Mondrian may at first seem a stretch, especially since Huebler’s use of photography ties him directly to representational and figurative art. Nevertheless there are persuasive aspects to Wall’s argument, particularly if one ignores the actual content of the photographs, which Wall dismisses outright by claiming these pictures are about the “program” or attendant statements, since the photographs in effect are otherwise aesthetically amateurish and, according to Wall, they decree only that “there is nothing of significance to depict.”

The lack of significance that Wall notes in the Huebler’s photographic portraits reveals his own

---

ideological position and its refusal to take seriously the contingent and unstable role of the subject in the social as an artistic question that far exceeds aesthetic concerns.

Wall cites *Duration Piece no. 7, Rome, March 1973* to make his case. This particular piece involves photographs of the Trevi Fountain taken at 30-second intervals, which according to the attendant statement are intended “to document specific changes in the relationship between two aspects of the water falling from the rocks in one area of the Fountain of Trevi.” Wall fails to acknowledge the actual content of the image, claiming only that it is “emptied of what could normatively be considered to be compelling social subject matter.”367 A critical counter-reading to this would be to consider Huebler’s statement (at least in part) as facetious, especially bearing in mind that these photographs depict groups of tourists posing for souvenir photos in varying and often exaggerated positions and with varying degrees of comportment ranging from seriousness to comedic parodies in front of Bernini’s masterpiece. How can one ignore these figures and their theatre so easily as Wall does? Especially considering how some of them appear to be working very purposefully for the camera’s, and by extension the viewer’s, attention? Their inclusion in the piece, though seemingly haphazard, cannot be completely overlooked. As emblems of tourism and tourist photography they engage questions regarding yet another economy of the photograph that bypasses any attempt at modernist reductionism, while also exposing an alternative version of photography’s promise and failure to capture and contain the world outside of the parameters of fine art.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has contended that Huebler’s *Duration Piece no. 7* is exemplary of the artist’s use of a metonymical structure that “illustrates the incompleteness – reflexiveness –

367 Ibid.
of ordinary perceptual experience in a way that is newly clear.” 368 As I have been demonstrating with my discussion of other works by Huebler throughout this chapter, Huebler’s work functions as a quest to push limits, to exceed boundaries, to propose the unknowable. By contrast to the modernism Wall desires to align Huebler with, Huebler’s work playfully presses the certainty of the modernist program and the modernist grid to the point where its infinite ungroundedness becomes apparent, thereby opening up unto the space of postmodernism and the space of doubt. Noting how Huebler is “methodical rather than formulaic” 369 Gilbert-Rolfe states emphatically that, “Huebler’s work is about the ‘deconstruction’ of the familiar.” 370 This observation allows for a comparison with certain readings of abstract art and a segue back to Huebler’s possible connection to Mondrian.

Krauss further remarks on the “curious paradoxes by which the use of the grid is marked at every turn,” 371 including its ability to be read in opposing and even contradictory ways. Not surprisingly Mondrian is the artist evoked by Krauss to illustrate this, demonstrating that the grid can function in both “centrifugal” and “centripedal” ways. In the centrifugal reading the grid presents the given work of art “as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric… operat[ing] from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame.” 372 The centripetal reading works from the

369 Ibid., 160.
370 Ibid., 158. Deconstruction is a particularly postmodernist act in that it is meant to undermine the frame of reference and the assumptions and claims to authority that underpin a given text.
372 Ibid., 18.
frame inwards, declaratively separating the work of art from the world.\textsuperscript{373} Wall sees only the
centripetal reading, and for him this is the connection between Huebler’s art and Mondrian’s. That is only part of the picture however. Arguably the art of both Huebler and Mondrian can be read quite convincingly as both centripetal \textit{and} centrifugal, a tension that suspends their work from any essential understanding. Krauss mentions Mondrian’s \textit{Composition IA} (1930); an example which functions similarly to \textit{Painting I (Composition in White and Black)} (1926), the work that Meyer Shapiro uses to buttress his claims in “Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting,” (1978) included in his \textit{On the Humanity of Abstract Painting} (1995). This correlation is useful because it is precisely “humanity” and its fallibility that Wall dismisses in both artists. Instead, in using Mondrian as an example of an inflexible commitment to art for arts sake, Wall neglects the works by Mondrian that by contrast propose questions regarding life outside the frame of art. Mondrian wrote that his goal was to achieve an art of “pure relations”, however many of his works in fact suggest that there is no knowable absolute or comprehensive purity in art.

\begin{quote}
The works cited by Krauss and Shapiro for example seem “at first glance [as] a square set within a diamond square,” yet “[become] to the probing eye a complex design with a subtly balanced asymmetry of unequal lines.”\textsuperscript{374} A caesura in understanding occurs, in which the whole is recognized “as a cropped representation… The missing parts are cut off from view at the limits of the diamond field,”\textsuperscript{375} and the illusion of autonomy is shattered. One is confronted
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 19.


\textsuperscript{375} Shapiro, 29.
with the incompleteness of the forms, as well as how the forms exceed the limits of the frame, causing what seemed at first legible and clear to become discontinuous and problematic. I am proposing that a similar dynamic occurs in Huebler’s projects, and that his dubious documents moreover ask the viewer to question their own preconceptions. The photograph in particular implies a contained space because of its geometric and modular form, however, as the comparison with Mondrian reveals, counter to Wall’s reading, the pronounced asymmetries and the continuation of the work into an unknown space beyond the frame can never entirely be repressed.

Considering the doubt this casts on the concept of objectivity, it becomes apparent why the grid was attractive to conceptual artists as a means of addressing accumulation and defying categories. Measured and deliberately banal, the logic of the Bechers’ archival project moreover, including its use of the grid as an organizing principle, appealed to conceptualists who saw their project as a format with which to challenge the institutional rhetoric it is predominantly associated with by turning it in against itself. To extend this genealogical lineage even further, it is obvious that both the Bechers and Huebler were influenced by the precedent of the early twentieth century portrait photographer August Sander, and his famous attempt to record a pictorial sociology of faces of the German people compiled under the title *Face of Our Time* (1929). Stating that "[w]e know that people are formed by the light and air, by their inherited traits, and their actions. We can tell from appearance the work someone does or does not do; we can read in his face whether he is happy or troubled," Sander photographed subjects from all walks of life and created a typological catalogue of more than six hundred photographs of the
Although the Nazis banned the portraits in the 1930s because the subjects did not adhere to the ideal Aryan type, calling the project “anti-social,” Sander continued his photographic archive until his death. Sander’s project, though it was intended to be a comprehensive “picture” of the German people, resulted instead by revealing the incompleteness theorem of the photograph and the archive. The project ultimately displayed the differences that could not be assimilated or categorically contained rather than providing a readable map of the nation. This archive of portraits, like Huebler’s *Variable Piece no. 70*, was never finished, and remained a work in progress as long as Sander lived. The impracticality and obsessive seriality of such projects were one of the main fascinations for conceptualists, many of whom, like Huebler, were devoted to dissembling and disassembling conventional organizational, linguistic, and visual systems of representation via their own internal principles.

Using these methods of collection and uniformity were a means of challenging dominant understandings of typologies as well as the construct of history. In fact, the positivist belief that history can be explained if an exhaustive account is accumulated provides a rich counter-point to Huebler’s aspirations for democratic representation enacted via photography’s phenomenological and epistemological questioning. With his distinct disavowal of the “art” of photography, Huebler avoids the “Equivalences” of the Photo-Secessionists, as I have demonstrated earlier, which had worked specifically, and in some ways ironically, against the democratic promises


378 The first posthumous publication appeared in 1980 and was realized by Gunther Sander (ed.), *August Sander. Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts. Portraitphotographien 1892-1952*, with text by Ulrich Keller, Munich 1980. A faithful reconstruction of the original in seven volumes, in accordance with the groups defined by Sander, was published in 2002 by the Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, since 1992 the owners of the August Sander Archive (edited and newly compiled by Susanne Lange, Gabriele Conrath-Scholl and Gerd Sander, Munich 2002).
offered by the ascent of Kodak and the snapshot. His snapshots instead are consistently interested in life beyond the frame. As Huebler explained, “I have never been as “correct” or pure, as my friends Barry, Weiner, and Kosuth. I have always been interested in social/political content within the subject matter of the work. The “everyone alive” format has provided me with a strategy whereby I can make a bridge between “art” and ongoing social reality.”

By contrast to the other artists who also exhibited under the leadership of the gallerist Seth Siegelaub between 1968 and 1970, Huebler was not known for either a committed rejection of visuality or a strict emphasis on dematerialization in favor of language. Instead Huebler explored the boundaries of language, visuality, and experience in the social world. The egalitarian potential of photography was the ideal means for this investigation. With the emphasis placed on the “potential” without illusions of actually achieving the professed goal. Like the Bechers’ documents, Huebler’s photographs were nearly exclusively mounted in a comparable grid-like pattern, with the assembled images arranged in systematic series, seeming to propose a function akin to Jorge Luis Borges’ magic realist map of the world with the 1:1 ratio. In the Argentine

379 Letter to Dr. Giuseppe Panza di Biurno, Nov. 3, 1981. Special Collections, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, Panza Archive (90004, IIA. 133.22).
writer’s tale “Of Exactitude in Science,” a map of the kingdom becomes so detailed that it covers the whole kingdom, only to lose its usefulness.

Similarly, Huebler’s photographs deny the use-value of physiognomy, complicate the legibility of photographic representation, and challenge the sense of photography Susan Sontag summed up as, “To collect photographs is to collect the world.” These photographs are also documents of their time in that they evoke Frederic Jameson’s insightful description of the fate of the referent under pressure from the structural concept of the sign in the 1960s. According to Jameson, representation was pushed “to the point of imagining a map so rigorous and referential that it becomes coterminous with its object;” in other words it collapses upon itself. Much like this excessive mapping, Huebler’s radical and obsessive practice interrogates the equation between how “ways of knowing and ways of representing merge and inform one another.”

---

380 Of Exactitude in Science

...In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome, and, not without Irreverence, they abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation, no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography. From Travels of Praiseworthy Men (1658) by J. A. Suarez Miranda; The piece was written by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares under the pseudonym J. A. Suarez Miranda. English translation quoted from J. L. Borges, A Universal History of Infamy, Penguin Books, London, 1975.

381 See Petra Kuppers, “Visions of Anatomy,” Scars of Visibility (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 36-37. Kuppers also notes that “as a man writing after his first cataract operations, and as one who would eventually be blind, Borges might have been sensitive to these issues of visual information, mapmaking, and their relation to sense impression,” 36.

382 Susan Sontag, On Photography, 3.

The photograph, like the map, does indeed put one “into a certain relation with the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.” Huebler noted the fallibility of this correlation, explaining:

Of course, by making a dot on a map, you are really covering perhaps twenty or forty square feet, or circular feet. And there’s no proof that when you get there you’re pointing your camera, or putting your marker on the exact spot, which of course is the point too. It doesn’t matter, you see. It could have been three or four feet over, or you could have miscalculated just because your pencil was too thick… any number of things. So what it finally comes back to is the idea of these locations, the idea of the system.

The map, like the photograph, is ultimately unable to truly cohere with real lived experience. In both cases it may seem that one can hold the world in one’s hands, but this is illusory. Mapping as a methodological approach reappears repeatedly throughout Huebler’s work, primarily as a duplicitous way of denying, rather than granting, access to the real. The equivalences similarly offered by the fiction of Borges’ map as a measure, reveal the discrepancies between perceived reality and objectivity itself. The non-identical status between any two corresponding images is precisely what becomes most obvious in the cases of Huebler, the Bechers, and Sander. As much as a leveling out of the playing field is enacted through the photographic frame, it is also the exposure of difference within those parameters that occurs, making apparent the inimitability of the subject that cannot be assimilated.

---


The map as topos also connects to the fact that early photoconceptualism was in part a result of the hybrid between the photograph and travel, an effect of “the photograph creating a world of accelerated transience,”\(^\text{387}\) while also representing the possibility, as previously mentioned, of representing the whole world. The photograph in effect was perceived as the abolition of time and space for many— in fact, according to Marshall McLuhan, citing the Museum of Modern Art’s *The Family of Man* exhibition and catalogue of 1955, the “logic of the photograph politically speaking is to wipe out national frontiers and cultural barriers regardless of any particular point of view.”\(^\text{388}\) It is revealing to compare *The Family of Man*, that earlier definitive exhibition of photography organized by Edward Steichen, involving 503 photographs from 68 countries with Huebler’s *Variable Piece no. 70 (In Process) Global.*

Huebler’s aspiration for democratic representation as a photo-project becomes even more poignant considered alongside the monolithic vision of the “photo-globe” posited by *The Family of Man* exhibition, which toured the world for a decade following its opening in New York. Its particular ideological attempt to attain and contain completeness blatantly demonstrates the positivist belief that history can be explained if an exhaustive account is accumulated. Christopher Phillips has described the exhibition as an instance of the “familiar mass-cultural phenomenon whereby very real social and political anxieties are initially conjured up, only to be quickly transformed and furnished with positive (imaginary) resolutions.”\(^\text{389}\) Scholars such as Louis Kaplan have insightfully pointed to the risks such liberal humanism runs as it seeks to not

---


\(^{388}\) Ibid.

only map and reify the shape of the globe but also to “sentimentalize[ ] photography as utopian myth,” in effect universalizing meaning by understanding photography as a project of global domination.

Alan Sekula’s 1981 essay “The Traffic in Photographs” famously confronted what he saw in The Family of Man as “an aestheticized job of global accounting, a careful Cold War effort to bring about the ideological alignment of the neo-colonial peripheries with the imperial centre.” Even Hilton Kramer derided the exhibition from the beginning as “a self-congratulatory means for obscuring the urgency of real problems under a blanket of ideology which takes for granted essential goodness, innocence, and moral superiority of the international ‘little man,’ ‘the man on the street,’ the abstract disembodied hero of a world-view which regards itself as superior to mere politics.” This “humanist Trojan horse” sought to reconcile difference by reducing people to what Steichen conceived as the most basic common denominators of humanity: namely that we are all born and all die, all experience emotions ranging from happiness to sadness, and are all part of “families.” The details of these experiences were not important for Steichen; the details of such experiences, no matter how idiosyncratic or seemingly insignificant, are precisely what preoccupy Huebler’s “global” photo-archive. The Family of Man assumed that the “private realm of individual life […] could trump

393 Blake Stimson, Pivot of the World, 67.
the public realm of politics and economics. Terms such as “family” and its unique understanding within varying contexts was elided, as Steichen justified this homogeneous view of the world “as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life—as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.”

Art historian Blake Stimson, rather than reiterating Sekula’s ideological critique of global capital, performs a close reading of the exhibition’s reception by audiences, noting the power of “recognition” exerted by the inanimate photographs on beholders and vice versa. Stimson considers the valences of Steichen’s view of the photographs as a mirror, and how “beholders and beheld not only recognize each other in the manner of a face-off between two opposites, between an I and a thou or an us and a them; they each enter into the space of the other—they both become part of a common crowd.” In *The Family of Man* the beholder was asked to identify with not a single picture but each and every photograph in the exhibition. Images with the captions such as “I too will be old” or “I am just like everybody else in the world because I also have a mother,” or “We two form a multitude” suggested the viewer “feel the pleasure of self-discovery in any and all contexts,” overlooking the junctures inherent in the “contradictory certainty” of not just being in the picture, but being in every picture. Huebler’s project by contrast did not function as a mirror in this way, instead his photographic works construct an interrogatory mode of viewing the every day crowd, in which the beholder’s identity

---

394 Ibid., 68.
395 Ibid., 71.
396 Ibid.
397 Ibid., 84.
398 Ibid., 85.
is dissembled even as one searches for the lynchpin within the ordinariness of Huebler’s many laissez-faire street photographs.  

Take for example 19/ Variable Piece no. 70: 1971:

In November 1971 a number of photographs were made in New York City to document various aspects of ‘Everyone Alive’; from those one was selected to represent:

AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO MIGHT FEEL PLEASED TO HAVE BEEN MADE THE SUBJECT OF ART.

That photograph and a contact proof print join with this statement to constitute the form of this work.
November 1977, Douglas Huebler

The attendant photograph is a grainy picture of a street scene. Pedestrians moving to and fro swarm the intersection in front of a movie theatre’s marquee. Who amidst this crowd does the caption identify? Is our attention drawn to the man in the suit and tie, or the man in denim holding a cigarette, or the laughing woman with glasses in the right hand corner, or someone whose back is to us? The unexceptional photograph does not seem to mark anyone more or less than anyone else, and yet we are told that there is a specific quality to look for... maybe. After all the text does say “might,” indicating a direct connection to the interrogative mode. Even the caption, though formulated as a statement, is in fact a question. It gives an impression that is seemingly non-consequential of a seemingly trivial subject, whereas observers of The Family of Man had “the feeling of having stepped into the Grand Canyon or the Carlsbad Caverns or

399 The practices of various contemporary photographers ranging from Gillian Wearing to Philip Lorca di Corcia can be viewed as inspired by Huebler’s distinctive street photography.
something equally monumental.”

Huebler’s photo-archive displays the world through what is unremarkable which is the source of its radical political drive. Being propelled into a position of uncertainty rather than the comforts of liberal humanist values gives momentum to a politics that can take nothing for granted and must acknowledge the discrepancies that resist sentimental anchoring.

“The model of the archive, of the quantitative ensemble of images, is a powerful one in photographic discourse. The model exerts a basic influence on the character of the truths and pleasures experienced in looking at photographs.”

Huebler’s exhaustive account plays with the truth of photography and accentuates the pleasure it provides. The artist self-consciously applied categories only to reveal their arbitrary if not absurd incapacity to frame the subject. Categories for Huebler were a means of referring in varying degrees to real lived experience, rather than to empirical finitudes.

Rather than a project of rationalizing difference, Huebler’s posits the irrational factors that logic cannot account for. It plays on the identification process, producing laughter when one discovers that the cliché proposed (such as “at least one person who knows that life is unfair” or “at least one person who had to be coaxed into having his picture taken”) requires a negotiation of meaning that questions one’s own identity far more than providing a fixed understanding of the subjects in the image.

__________________________


The exhibition presciently titled *Information* and curated by Kynaston McShine in 1970 at the MoMA similarly stressed an antiwar position and endorsed the notion of shared global interests. McShine, like Steichen, conceived of the exhibition’s catalogue as an *instance* of the exhibition, not merely as a record of images shown, but rather that the catalogue itself could be the primary information. By contrast to Steichen however, “information” in McShine’s show was not considered transparent. Instead it took to task the very concept of photography as a universal language. As has been noted perceptively by Ken Allan, “Perhaps *Information* may be seen as a disenchanted avant-garde *Family of Man*.”

One of Douglas Huebler’s inclusions for *Information* was *Location Piece No. 6—National (June 4, 1970)*; an example that offers yet another instance of the great variety of conditions that Huebler devised for consolidating otherwise unseen aspects of reality within an indivisible whole, reflective of the realities of living not only in a global village but also in a time affected by the temporality of the photograph. Conceived specifically for the *Information* exhibition, this piece concerns the breadth and diversity of information processed by the news media. For the work’s realization, Huebler requested that one randomly selected newspaper from each of the United States send him a press photo. The photographs, Huebler’s letter, a list of the invited newspapers, and the artist’s typed and signed statement are shown together.

---

403 The following is an example of Steichen’s quintessential belief in the universalizing capacity of photography: “We have in photography a medium which communicates not only to us English-speaking peoples, but communicates equally to everybody throughout the world. It is the only universal language we have, the one requiring no translation,” Edward Steichen, “Photography: Witness and Recorder of Humanity,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 41 (Spring 1958), 160.


405 This piece demonstrates direct affinities with the previously discussed mapping piece, *Location Piece no. 1, New York- Los Angeles (1969)*.
Each of the media events, captured in a single shot, are thus united in a work that ties together temporally connected, but visibly unconnected events. Huebler’s verbal stipulations prearrange—without predicting—the visual results of a work that make thematically possible the concept of all inclusiveness, while also exposing the impossibility of coherently containing the heterogeneous subjects.

Akin to Huebler’s project, most of the works included in *Information* involved situations that were instigated but not controlled by the artist. Each of these, to varying degrees, addresses the fleeting aspect of visible phenomena particularly as it occurs across time and space. A number of artists submitted pieces that seemed to propose a mastery of the visible world, only in order to dissemble that reality entirely. Dan Graham, who was been called a photojournalist by Marcel Duchamp, did not include photography per say in the exhibition, but rather a piece entitled “March 31, 1966” which features measurements of varying distances, from the closest point of proximity to the literal and figural vanishing point at the ends of the universe. This can be read as a variation on a photographic moment, which without showing us anything visually is itself a spatial and temporal capsule of information. Graham’s almost magical play of numbers are used less to communicate clarity of reason or transcendental calculations and more to denote the potential irrationality of ‘so-called’ logical systems.

Dan Graham’s essay, “Information,” published in 1969 in *End Moments* (one of the recommended readings in the *Information* catalogue) provides useful cultural associations and further insight into the context within which Huebler was working. In it, Graham discusses Jorge Luis Borges’ story of “The Library of Babel,” a library that holds all knowledge, all truths,

406 Anne Rorimer, “Phoography: Restructuring the Pictorial,” *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 139-140.
and their refutations. The reference to Babel has a strange relevance to Information and to Huebler’s Variable Piece no. 70, Global, which were ultimately both contemporary gatherings of nationalities for common communicative purpose, however unintelligible some of these interactions may be. 407 Huebler’s attempts to map the subject in the social suggest the photograph functions similarly to a map, as something that proposes ease of mastery and understanding as a kind of universal language, in which, as Huebler makes clear, paradoxically no one is truly fluent.

COUNTER-FIgurations

“Or put it this way. Nothing happens until it’s consumed. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura. A man cuts himself shaving and someone is signed up to write the biography of the cut. All the material in every life is channeled into the glow. Here I am in your lens. Already I see myself differently. Twice over or once removed,” Don DeLillo. 408

In an era characterized by an unprecedented casualness towards picture making, public and private images have become increasingly elided and Andy Warhol’s prediction that everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes has become increasingly prescient. The uniqueness of fame is countered by the ubiquity of the photograph, even as the photograph is the very means by which that fame is generated. How can we understand this desire for the photograph and the strange relations it provokes?

In his 1958 essay on “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” the French film critic and journalist André Bazin traced what he called the “mummy complex” of the plastic arts,

namely that drive to preserve life by a representation of life, or in other words, a view of the
development of artistic methods over time as the advancement of progressive insurance policies
against death. One of the under riding questions is how much ‘life’ can, in any case, be
preserved. In a footnote, Bazin briefly mentions the contest between photographic reporting and
the use of drawings in illustrative magazines during the early twentieth century, saying that the
latter drawings fulfilled a “baroque need for the dramatic.” By contrast he explains photographs
functioned as documents of objective information, irrevocably tied to the plainness of reality
through their automatic genesis, rather than having the ability to evoke as persuasively as
drawing or painting the suggestive nuances of either comedy or tragedy in life. Bazin states
explicitly that “[a] feeling for the photographic document developed only gradually.”

This curious statement further incites my inquiry into photographic portraiture under the
aegis of conceptual art in the late 1960s, and specifically into the projects of the American artist
Douglas Huebler. The question of photography’s theatrical power and affective wiles remained
relevant, for even in 1970 it seemed that this “feeling for the photographic document” that Bazin
noted was still nascent. In order to “feel photography” in opposition to, or at least in conjunction
with, thinking photography, the medium needed to have the boundaries of its “resemblance
complex” investigated and to be considered by extension as akin to language, as messages of
relative affect, having meaning only in relation to others. Each photograph possesses a
singularity but is also intimately and ontologically connected to all other photographs, and thus
needs to be read amongst others if any convincing legibility is to be gained. This actuality

C410 Ibid., 6.
C411 Ibid., 7.
acquires even more resonance when considering portraits. Moreover, any inquiry into the affective logic of photography needs to consider the complex relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in photography.

Affect in photography generally cleaves to subject matter as a means of understanding the subject. Be it the pained or elated look of a face, or the pleasure or poignancy in a gesture, these are the signs and symptoms that one looks for to read the image. But this cleaving between the affect and the subject plays provocatively on the polysemic significance of “to cleave”: meaning at once brought together, tied as one, as well as separated and wrought apart. The instability of this verb itself makes it the perfect fit for describing Huebler’s paradoxical photographs and his portraits’ affective logic. Ultimately what we might believe we understand in one moment is contradicted in the next, playing on assumptions, playing on the deceptive nature of reality and the ontology of the photograph. By analyzing photographic representations that claim technologically to “capture” emotion, I argue for the radical potential of Huebler’s practice as a deliberate working against the commodification of feeling presented by popular advertising and as a counter-discourse to the version of ‘rationalized’ dematerialization that is often attributed to conceptual art.

A direct example of the “influential” connection between Huebler and the Bechers, which goes beyond the formal logic that I have already discussed and that gives insight into the counter-discourse offered by Huebler, is *Variable Piece #101, West Germany, March 1973*, on the occasion of Huebler taking photographs of Bernd Becher as he asked him to act out stereotypes of various roles, including a ‘priest,’ a ‘criminal,’ a ‘spy,’ a ‘philosopher,’ a ‘nice guy’ a ‘police man,’ and a ‘lover’. In a clever and nearly anachronistic reversal of roles the question becomes: who’s under the influence? For it has been suggested that this piece be read
as two friends getting drunk together. And yes, images and concepts are indeed as contorted as Bernd’s face. Bernd Becher as an icon of deadpan seriousness and the advent of early photoconceptualism here becomes the embodiment of serial typologies. Read as an inebriated friend, these images playfully challenge the sobriety of Sander and Neue Sachlichkeit, here exposing objectivity in photographic terms as always compromised, and with one’s perceptual subjectivity continuously questioned and contingent. It becomes nearly impossible to trace the stereotypes to their corresponding representations. The portraits are shot “straight-on” in a manner similar to the assiduousness of the Bechers’ photographs, yet they do so in order to challenge the Bechers and other photographers’ who claim that they do “not hide or exaggerate or depict anything in an untrue fashion.”

Huebler’s counter-figurations point instead to an overriding inability to map any singular identity with or within any particular system. Whereas in Sander, the documentation of faces was systematized with the goal of being comprehensive, here these grimaces present themselves as fragments of a greater whole, and mimic the very of idea of a system by pushing the limits of a singular subject’s multiplicity of identities. In performing this system, they reveal the absurdity of the system itself.

These portraits, together with a written statement, constitute the final form of the piece. Two months after the shoot, Huebler mailed the photographs to Bernd, asking him to order them in relation to the list of verbal terms he had been asked to portray. His acting out for the camera and the word to image correlation are never clearly retraced however. Humourously, they seem only to become increasingly mixed up, as they play provocatively on the viewer’s desire to

believe the associations based on our own conventions of these terms. This game of mismatched identities lacks coherence. The chronology of the system is disturbed by chance, interrupted by time, and it is hard to sort through which images might be more convincingly natural (eg. ‘artist’ or Bernd Becher’) and which are more staged (eg. ‘spy’ or ‘criminal’). Twice removed and once doubled, Bernd Becher then tries to decipher which photographs of himself are which, or more aptly who’s who? Who am I?

As clichés, repetitions and resemblances are pushed to their limits, and meaning is multiplied in Huebler’s work; the moment is always indecisive. These grimaces captured by the photograph remain fugitive. They collapse “the structure of the system into an undifferentiated system of indifference;”\textsuperscript{414} in other words, despite the orderly grid and the conventional frame, the subject is always on the loose, once more reinforcing the operative principle of the aesthetics of indifference.

These images mock the expressive qualities of contemporaneous photographers of the New York School such as Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus, and William Klein. Yet they also poke fun at the systems-based categorical photography that has become Bernd and Hilla Becher’s signature, along with their claims to objective photography. Like the larger premise of the “everyone alive” project (of which the series is a part), this piece is underpinned by a profoundly anti-positivist bent: more information can sometimes mean less knowledge rather than a presumed positivist equivalence between accumulation and understanding.

Huebler’s Variable Piece no. 28, Truro, Massachusetts (1970) is a foil to the work with Bernd Becher as pliable subject. Huebler’s daughter posed for a series of close-up portraits, being instructed to keep a “straight face” while her siblings, outside the frame of the image, tried to make her laugh. The failure of this piece, the recording of the laughing child, is again the source of the piece’s conceptual and humorous success.

Challenging the legibility of the physiognomic subject, Huebler repeatedly exposes the vulnerability of people in front of the camera, which in effect may produce a picture that is more true, or perhaps more false. In performing these systems, the photographs reveal the absurdity of the system itself. Presenting the photographs in the form of documentation alongside the text does not allow one to map out certainty. The format might suggest that rationalism underpins this information; yet the text and the images tell us otherwise. Instead each of these pieces as a whole is playful and open-ended, revealing a profound suspicion of dogmatism, and unfastening the very idea that meaning can be decisive.

Huebler’s desire to frustrate legibility, to simultaneously challenge and contradict affective logic manifests itself (as I am describing) through numerous strategies. One of the most dominant ways, which we see here in the Becher piece, is the seemingly arbitrary shuffling of photographs out of sequence so that their meanings can never be entirely resolved. The “one thing after another” sequential logic of serial and systems-based art coming out of Minimalism is deliberately confused by Huebler, highlighting the succession of temporal disjunctures that inhabit all photographs, neglect of the order in which they are presented and particularly exacerbated when that order is shuffled. As Huebler wrote in an exhibition statement at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels in 1997: “The photographs which have been made in sequence are presented in a scrambled order,” thereby challenging the structure of the system with the
irrepressibility of difference.\textsuperscript{415} This rupture in Huebler, in contrast to the interpretations of many writers on the subject, is about more than exposing the enclosed logic of the system however. Notably, after 1970 Huebler works almost exclusively with photographic portraiture, forcing the question of the very human affects of systems. Using faces instead of impersonal structures such as blocks or numbers is not haphazard, even if the order of the work overall is given up to chance.

As Sol LeWitt wrote in 1966 in order to explain his view of serial difference, “The differences between the parts are the subject of the composition.”\textsuperscript{416} What happens when this subject of difference is a person or multiple people? Thus here, and this may be the most striking implication of the shift from Minimalist practices in the late 1960s to Conceptual ones, that “blank form”\textsuperscript{417} and “specific objects”\textsuperscript{418} were no longer understood as sufficient in the critique against Modernist orthodoxies. The move from the object games of Minimalism to the subject games of Conceptual art signaled an increasingly direct engagement with the “illusionism” of representation rather than an oblique critique of it.

As opposed to allowing the subject of photography a sense of being a unified whole, Huebler’s images resonate with both Walter Benjamin and Sigfried Kracauer’s observations that

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid. Also cited in Gordon Hughes, 56.


\textsuperscript{418} See Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” \textit{Artnum} 1965.
the increasing technological sophistication of photography divests both the object and the subject of uniqueness. In Huebler’s propositions this “stripping bare the object” further possesses the counter-effect of divesting the entire social system that produces the sameness of things of its façade of conformity and control. Instead the subject is reinvested with its own disposition within the system, rather than emptied out like the subject position in the Warholian sense.

Further to the camera’s claims to scientific objectivity, it is important to note how the link between photography and physiognomy, particularly in Germany, are being marked and mocked in *Variable piece no. 101*. Physiognomy, the discredited pseudo-science of reading difference across images, implicates photography in a slippery history of surveillance culture and categorization that includes eugenics and therefore racist and racialist typologies. As a mode of resistance, Huebler consistently destabilizes the photo’s documentary status by pointing to the kinds of information it cannot convey. In refusing to take themselves too seriously, these photographs deliberately provide comic relief from modernism’s solipsistic position; they are denial of any concept of “true” knowledge grounded in the self.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of the self as constituted publicly through shared language can provide an additional argument for further understanding the work of conceptual artists such as Huebler—as taking place in language as well as image, and thus in a shared, public domain. Photography, like a universal language that no one can speak, a veritable Library of Babel, repeatedly proves resilient to transparent readings, and when employed as Huebler’s palimpsest becomes even more opaque. As Roland Barthes remarked, “The ‘I’ which

---


approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts,” meaning that subjectivity itself is a “fake plenitude.” Barthes goes on to say that the ‘I’ is composed of codes, so that ultimately “subjectivity has the generality of stereotypes.”421 Thereby caught within a bind of uniqueness and stereotype, facility and obscurity, as well as the paradoxical exchanges between the positions of subject and object, photoconceptualism intervenes in the conventions of “art photography,” through its deliberate use of amateur or snapshot techniques, while simultaneously raising the bar of theoretical inquiry by insistently grappling with the paradigm of the text though the work itself. Playing on photography’s “uncanny ability to exceed, erode, and unfix […] static visual certainties,”422 Huebler’s ethics of decentering perform a continual unsettling of hierarchical social relations. His destabilizing of the Modernist values of purity, autonomy, originality, uniqueness and authorship evidence his avant-garde resistance against aesthetic standards and his complete disinterest in an evolutionary model of the photographic medium.

Employed as a seemingly innocent form of documentation, artists like Huebler utilized the camera’s instantaneous to their advantage. Without artistic considerations of form and composition, lighting and lenses, Variable Piece #34, Bradford, Massachusetts, December 1970 is like a sociological survey, but very different from Sander’s. Less overt than Bernd Becher’s theatre for Huebler’s camera, but nevertheless performative, random anonymous people on the street were photographed in the exact instant after each had been told “You have a beautiful face”. Bringing to mind Barthes’ comments on the self-conscious feeling of being photographed and becoming other in that instant, Variable Piece #34 documents the interaction of the self with

the other, and the self-as-other, in social space. Barthes also marked what he called “a cunning 

dissociation of consciousness from identity,” that was chiefly enacted not within a singular 

photograph, but as a result of any photograph. This complication suggests that while 

photography might be inherently an index of the real, it does not preclude the difficulty of 

putting one’s finger on that “real”. Photography’s referential function is ultimately 

indeterminate.

The arbitrary selection of subjects, because of the a priori decision that every face is beautiful 

simply because it is a human face, is yet another Duchampian gesture that leads to an an-

aesthetic situation, which exemplifies the tension between individuality and universality. This 

affirmative rhetorical intervention also works against the reigning social principles of 

advertising, which incessantly remind us of what we lack as opposed to reassuring our individual 

wholeness. Here, all typologies are obfuscated even as the presentation of these portraits is 

systematized, allowing for a situation in which all individuals may be regarded as equally 

beautiful rather than erratically lacking. Their seriality as images works to show how meaning is 

(or is not) constructed across signifieds, while further critiquing the Modernist values of purity, 

autonomy, and beauty.

An essential property of this project for Huebler was recording the reactive positioning of 

those confronted with his camera and his flattery, or in other words, how they composed 

themselves in the moment of exposure. “In order to turn [the ] situation inside out I designed a 

project which I thought would relieve the subject of the classic anxiety associated with posing 

for the camera: I asked passersby on public streets if I could photograph them for a study that I 

was making of faces (I never mention ‘art’ when doing such projects), and to those willing to 

pose I would say at just the instant before clicking the shutter, “you have a beautiful face…” or,
“an interesting face…”, or whatever seemed appropriate to say in each case. My objective was to record the look on the face of the subject when his or her normal anxiety was alleviated by highly supportive comments which filled in for the missing ‘mirror.’ Furthermore, I felt that the camera had been transformed from an instrument of intimidation into a means of mediating the usual social distance that exists between strangers.”

Yet another blatant contrast to *The Family of Man*, Huebler’s mention of the “missing ‘mirror’” acknowledges that the affirmation of one’s identity will not be found in the photograph.

The category of “beauty” is brought to the fore, as an aesthetic equivalent that is here challenged by the process of random selection. The photographic archive of beauty harkens back to yet another project of Neue Sachlichkeit photography: that of Albert Renger-Patzch’s book “The World is Beautiful,” (1928) in which the photographer systematically monumentalized the factory. Significantly, Bertolt Brecht criticized of the image of the factory for telling us next to nothing about the conditions of production. I argue that Huebler’s documentation that “the world is beautiful” as constituted by humans as opposed to machines, tell us important things about social relations well beyond those of production or aesthetic judgment. Because Huebler’s photographs seek to expose visibly constructed meaning, through

---


a combination of textual inscription and photography, the “surface coherence” that was seen as an accessory to reification is ruined.

FAMILIAR RESEMBLANCES AND IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. –Susan Sontag.

Location Piece #17, Turin, Italy (1973) similarly plays with the tension between equivalence and difference by using the devices of resemblance and make-believe.

Location Piece #17

Turin, Italy

After photographing an arbitrarily chosen location lying just beyond the limits of ordinary perception, the artist walked directly to the site (the corner of Via Cosmo and Via Villa d. Regina) to learn what might actually be seen there. After taking one photograph he left, with no expectation of ever visiting that location again.

When, at a much later time, the film was processed it revealed the fact that at the instant when the second photograph was taken a man was looking directly at the artist, a man bearing a strong resemblance to the artist— at least more so than almost everyone else in the world.

March/December, 1973

\[425\] Kracauer argued that in order for photography to achieve its revolutionary potential the “surface coherence of the photograph must be destroyed,” “Photography” Mass Ornament ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 52

\[426\] Susan Sontag, On Photography, 5.
Here, Huebler dramatizes *vraisemblance’s* mask-like ability to conceal its own internal laws and regulations, while exposing the laws the reader is expected to take as reality. The task of the viewer then becomes to connect the narrative dots, despite the confessed randomness of the overall project. Again, an allusion to the traditions of street photography is made—but the fleeting of the “decisive moment” remains unremarked until after the development process as opposed to before the clicking of the camera’s shutter. With a small map included, as in many other pieces, the unreliability of mapping positions is again exposed. For while the map acts as an instrument of analysis, like the photograph, which is able to pinpoint exactitudes and locations, it is also like the photograph, or the value of the art object, inescapably linked to a kind of self-deception in order to be believable. In a 1969 interview, Huebler observed that the map is “never really a real thing, and yet we begin to assume it is a real thing. Most people experience maps or clocks or charts and so forth as very real life-defining phenomena, or whatever.”⁴²⁷ Recurrently invoking the map and the photograph as ready-mades in this way draws attention to the prevalent understanding of the term “information” at this time, as endowed with directness, objectivity and transparency. By contrast, we are made aware of the fact that pointing to something on a map or a photograph makes that point as abstract as it does concrete. All of the empirical investments of such mediums show themselves to be pseudo-scientific and disorienting in the end, exponentially setting into motion a series of doubts alongside a series of proposed certainties.

The basic doubling effect of photography, as well as its intimate relation to doubt, is further philosophically nuanced by this piece. For while “doubling” is in effect the common

denominator of all photographic devices, here the doubling specifically of the artist further complicates the easy absorption of the subject. The frisson of the uncanny created by the doppelganger effects the nomination of the artist: He could be someone else. He could be a stranger. He could be the subject. In a reversal of fortunes, he could be almost everyone else in the world, and thus anyone else could be the artist. The position of the perceiving subject asked to evaluate these claims and make judgments regarding the narrator’s reliability not only decentres authorship in this piece, but moreover sets in orbit various chances operations and possible resemblances. This piece, like Huebler’s other definitively dubious documents does not simply represent social reality, but rather is part of social reality.

A broad critique of categorical photography is embodied by Huebler’s practice, using photography and the portrait genre in particular to constitute a radical destabilization of the Cartesian subject. Asking the viewer to question subjective and objective identities occurs again and again in Huebler’s photographs, and in every instance the uncanny seems to remain at large. Take for example, *Duration Piece no. 15, Global, September 1969*, in which Huebler reproduced an FBI “Wanted” poster as a ready-made, joined with a text in which Huebler personally offers to pay a $1,100 reward to anyone who apprehends the criminal. The piece is for sale for $1000 and the reward offered by the artist shrinks by $100 per month from the starting date of January 1, 1970; thus the artist risks losing money if the criminal is apprehended in the first three months. It is a game of risk. The man arrested by the camera remains a fugitive. His crime is as a suspected bank robber, but we are also told that he works as a

---

428 See Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Roca, “Notes on Love and Photography,” *October* 116, Spring 2006, 3-34. They discuss the effects and affects of photography on and of the subject, stating “Photography—and the portrait as its genre *par excellence*—constitutes a radical and absolute destabilization of the Cartesian subject[…].” 8.
commercial artist and as a silkscreen worker, details that sound stranger than fiction but may very well be fact.

Using this ready-made from the official authorities draws attention again to the prevalent understanding of the term “information” at this juncture, and particularly “official information,” as endowed with directness, objectivity and transparency— indelibly linked to the photograph itself. On the contrary however this piece solicits the viewer’s participation to test the believability of the wanted poster and by extension the photograph. Notice for example the discrepancies between the two frontal portraits bookending the profile shot. The caption claims that one was taken in 1966 while the other was photographed in 1968. The photos appear to be the same person, but only in the most superficial way. After looking at them for a few moments, irreconcilable differences begin to emerge, forcing one to question one’s own perception and judgement. Calling attention to the ubiquity of law enforcement, surveillance culture, and the ways in which photography assists these judicial systems in public space, re-familiarizes the viewer with that which is perhaps most familiar and thus most readily invisible: the everyday and its intricate and underlying social relations. Connoting associations to Andy Warhol’s silkscreen of 13 Most Wanted at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, the accusations pointed at these neutrally-gridded images similarly show the system itself to be far from innocent.

These photographs belong to the arsenal of categorical photography and judicial regimes, as a means of exposing not only inassimilable characteristics, but also inassimilable characters in the greater social system. For example, those who break laws. This unknown and anonymous

---

429 The “Wanted Poster” as a format for positing the artist as outlaw while also playing on conceptual questions of criminality, aesthetics, and identity can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp’s infamous “ Wanted” poster of 1921. John Baldessari also used this trope as a conceptual strategy. Duchamp’s precedent will be discussed more explicitly in the following chapter on John Baldessari.
man is caught by the frame of the photograph and suggestively “framed,” but still at large. The concept of the work recalls how Barthes described the effect of photography on the self. Using language that is far from haphazard, Barthes expressed how photography “seized” him. The following observation by Huebler makes clear his shared understanding of the aggressive and disciplinary potential of photography:

Indeed, I began to understand that for most people the camera represents a ‘threat’ of a certain kind, with which I could identify, that being a profound feeling of vulnerability in front of the camera because it symbolizes a one-way mirror, an eye that sees its subject in an unconditional manner while denying him or her any possibility of seeing his or her ‘reflection’: in front of an everyday mirror one can pose until his or her ‘best face’ is reflected, but too often the camera kidnaps one’s worst face. Like other floating signifiers, and as a kind of meta-commentary on photography itself, the subject “captured” by Duration Piece no. 15 exemplifies how all photographs evidence a presence only as a trace, while actually marking the absence of any concrete entity. To appropriate Bazin’s analysis of the ontology of the photographic image once more: The photograph as such and the subject in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. The displayed series of ten blurry fingerprints, which accompany these photos to complete the piece, resemble the clouds from Location piece no. 1 and further exacerbate this meta-commentary on the photograph as an ‘outlaw’ index.

BODIES IN MOTION REMAIN IN MOTION

And the way we deal with the world, if we locate ourselves, really is a matter in the head.

430 Douglas Huebler, Origin and Destination, 129.

431 Bazin, 8; “The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint.”
Variable Piece #20

Bradford, Massachusetts

On January 23, 1971, for eleven minutes, the specific physical location of the artist was photographically documented at exact 30 second intervals as, at each of those instants, he relocated himself within an extremely fluid spatial environment.

23 photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

January 1971.

Variable piece #20 (1971) was shot at set 30 second intervals for an 11 minute period, then shuffled out of sequence, vexing the original order and dislocating the viewer’s ability to easily reconstruct the history of events. The work tracks (and in a sense maps) the specific physical location of the artist playing basketball, as he moves through a changing spatial environment. Despite, and in part due to, the 23 photographs joined with a statement to constitute the form of this piece, the work is never “wholly manifest”—working against the criteria Michael Fried insisted on for modernist art and turning the modernist reverence for “presentness” against itself. As one attempts to reconstruct the narrative, the contradictions internal to the notion of autonomy are revealed. Huebler has explained, “The fact of knowing where a thing is implies everything else;” each movement requires a new negotiation of meaning and identity.433

Like the pivot of the basketball player who by regulation is only able to take two steps while holding the ball before he must choose to either pass or shoot, Huebler’s photographic projects hinge on not only his split second decision making but also the reception of the other

433 Anne Pontegnie, 147.
players. For while Huebler’s practice shares many similarities with Duchampian moves, his regime is nevertheless very distinct from Marcel Duchamp’s obsessive relation to the game of chess. Huebler continues the legacy that invokes chance procedures and plays with the rules, but his is a team sport.

Huebler deliberately frustrates the Taylorism of motion studies, disavowing the ideology of efficiency in modern work, by disorienting chronological coherence and picturing play rather than work. Simultaneously, these images are uncomfortable reminders of the surveillance and inculcation of all processes—including leisure—into larger systems of dominance and control. Again, it is a proposition that exposes the logic of expanding globalism and challenges that logic at the same time.

The phenomenological doubt that is the act of photography leaves the documentary claims of any single image tenuous and incomplete. The multiplication of possible viewpoints only amplifies photography’s potential to challenge the limits of empirical reality, so that all claims to ultimate knowing prove only to be experiments that collapse against the weight of their own foundational logic. This antagonism between the proliferation of meaning and its confinement is the political economy of the photo. The contemporary artist Mike Kelley, once a student of Huebler’s at Cal Arts, has described Variable Piece no. 70 as “impossibly democratic,” a comment that revealingly marks the contradictory and utopian ambitions of the project. The work’s contradictions make it the basis for a proliferation of democracy. Significantly, the affective logic of this work does not depend on the subject matter’s rationality, but on distinctions among images, a kind of playful noise discovered in the process of viewing.

Huebler’s photographic portraits are less about knowledge and possession and more about questions and sharing. His quixotic archive poses an important epistemological break in “thinking photography” by opening a space for “feeling photography,” a gesture which returns to the fallible and finite contingencies of unique and shared corporealities as well as to a reconsideration of the conceptual categories that at once cleave us together and tear us apart.

With the collaboration of photography and conceptualism, art might no longer have been dependent primarily upon objectness, or upon visual representation, but nowhere in the dispersed and expanded field of so-called post-object art was the potentiality of either object or image finally outlawed. Photoconceptualism transformed the very idea of the document into a contest of meaning, obliging current acts of writing and thinking through the history of conceptual art, and in particular its relationship to photography, to grapple with the pressures this places on the methodologies of art history within this suspended, and often equivocal, yet intensely productive state of openness. As I propose here, one foray into this matrix might be to seriously have a “sense of Huebler” thereby illuminating the benefit of the doubt.

---


Chapter 4
Suspension of Belief:
John Baldessari’s Skeptical Photography

*There is a serious unseriousness going on... I see a kinship there, I feel I understand what [Duchamp’s] about.* –John Baldessari, 1973.437

As early as 1963, John Baldessari was producing works that emphasized process, de-emphasized the end product, and decentralized the role of the artist.438 Beginning with a pre-conceived proposition, like much conceptual art of the time, his work was open to the effects of chance, to the elements of life that the artist cannot control. *The Back of All the Trucks Passed While Driving from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January 1963* (1963) is prescient in this regard. Its title sounds like a straightforward statement of the facts and yet the photographs that compose the end piece seem nevertheless uncanny and inconclusive despite their categorical seriality. Reminiscent of Edward Ruscha’s programmatic, banal, and yet absurdly surprising photographic books, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964), and later *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966), Baldessari’s work shows itself as inextricably linked to the contexts of California conceptualism from the outset, including the subversive attempt to contest the popular perception of the experience of reality as governed by pictures and promulgated by the movie industry. His is an art practice open to the contingency of partial knowledge rather than complete mastery. On this point Baldessari has elaborated, stating, “Everybody knows a different world, and only part of it. We communicate


only by chance, as nobody knows the whole, only where overlapping takes place.”439 The fugitive overlaps and disjunctures of everyday life are what preoccupy Baldessari, and it is photography’s means of exposing sameness and difference, coherence and simultaneous confusion that he uses to set his propositions in play.

Originally a painter, throughout the 1960s Baldessari’s art challengingly continued to take on questions regarding how the discourse that surrounds art (as concerns the circuitry of practice, exhibition, and dissemination) impact the way one is able to ‘know’ what art in fact is. An overwhelming inability to adhere to any single definition became Baldessari’s signature, as he somewhat paradoxically used his pedagogical position as an art teacher as means to interrogate whether or not ‘art’ was something a person could ever ‘know,’ let alone learn or teach. Uncertainty characterizes Baldessari’s heuristic practice, uncertainty in the form of irony at times, satirical literalness at others, or in other words, “a serious unseriousness.” Like the familiar paradox attributed to the Greek philosopher Socrates, *scio me nihil scire*, which translates imprecisely into “I know that I know nothing,” Baldessari similarly ponders the formative role of questioning in the pursuit of knowledge, in this case specifically through art. Socrates’ statement is not actually about the impossibility of knowing anything, but rather it is the assertion of complexly knowing through unknowing that nothing can be known with absolute certainty. Socrates’ statement is essentially the question that begins Western philosophy. Baldessari’s statements use a similar approach to offer a contemporary engagement with the question of questions in art that returns art to its philosophical beginnings. Socrates’ formulation that all wisdom begins with wondering, accepts the fact that all knowing must begin with

admitting one’s own essential ignorance. Baldessari takes up the relevance of immanent ignorance in the late twentieth-century by considering the tensions between art and any concept of understanding, as a means of redressing the problematic foundations of Western aesthetics. This chapter will discuss Baldessari’s use of the benefit of the doubt as a critical means of art practice by specifically considering his use of photography under the aegis of conceptual art in the late 1960s. Increasingly engaged with industrial modes of reproduction over the course of his prolific career, after 1970 Baldessari relied almost emphatically on mechanical reproduction, and in particular photography, as means to question originality, perception, value, and the intelligibility of the art object in relation to the discourse of art itself.

I THINK THEREFORE I ART

A photograph of John Baldessari from 1966 opens Max Kozloff’s 1975 article “Pygmalion Reversed.” This image of Baldessari entitled The Artist as Renaissance Man is the first thing that strikes the viewer before they read Kozloff’s account of body art and performance. A picture of the artist, looming large at the unusually tall height of 6’7” in a pose reminiscent of Leonardo daVinci’s Vitruvian Man (c. 1487), his body doubled, one posture overlaid on another, is captured in a single frame photograph. Kozloff opens with a query: “Question: can a work of art ever be in pain? Answer: yes, if it is incarnated in a body; if, somehow, the body acts as the ground upon which an art meaning may be inscribed.” Though it is never entirely clear in the following article what Kozloff refers to as “art meaning” he does recognize that in body art, the “hidden instrumentality of the work becomes, not so much its visible motif, but the receptacle of

441 Ibid., 30.
the art action, the corporeal base that has been acted upon by the artist’s process.” With this statement he acknowledges the radical potential of body artists’ to unveil the “hidden instrumentality” of the modernist artistic subject, but then, by a contradictory twist, Kozloff reinstates a much more conservative point of view by describing the body as a “corporeal base” that is “acted upon.” The article continues by discussing in detail performances by Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Hermann Nitsch, and others, all artists who famously combined violence and the body to test the limits of “art meaning” located in the body. In this respect, the inclusion of Baldessari’s photograph seems to be an anomaly. How does Baldessari’s emblematic photograph re-present a “corporeal base” to be “acted upon”? And how is it that he enters into the scene of a discussion of body art and the artist when he does not normally think of himself as striking such a pose?

Kozloff at no point engages the image or relates Baldessari’s practice to the other “corporeal” works he addresses, instances where “the animate body […] doubles back into inanimate art.” The action of doubling back is imaged via superimposition in this photograph and yet not addressed as an action that either explicitly relates to, or evidences, Kozloff’s claims. The inclusion, though baffling in terms of Kozloff’s thesis, is an important clue to understanding Baldessari’s artwork. He is not an artist commonly associated with performance, and yet here he is; he is not an artist often named in association with body art, in fact he is more often discussed in terms of conceptual art as disembodied and as a challenge to materiality. Obviously

442 Ibid.
444 Kozloff, 37.
something in this formulation is missing. How does materiality figure in Baldessari’s so-called
dematerialized art?

At first glance it may seem that Baldessari’s imitation of the Vitruvian Man is flawed, the
subject/artist’s feet slightly akimbo, one foot turned out and the other facing forward. However
by comparing this image to daVinci’s original, it becomes clear that Baldessari’s imitation is
indeed a studied replica. The original Vitruvian Man has the same slightly askew stance. Da
Vinci’s “Canon of proportions” (or Vituvian Man) is a drawing in pen and ink on paper,
depicting a male figure in two superimposed positions with his arms and his legs apart, inscribed
in a square within a circle. Or is it a circle within a square? The drawing is based on the
correlations of ideal human proportions with geometric measurements described by the ancient
Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius in Book III of his treatise De Architectura. Baldessari’s
image includes the circle while the square is not present at all. The square in fact is only present
through the stand-in of the generic square frame of the photograph. Perhaps it was not
considered necessary, for the reference is clear enough, and added prompts might be forcing the
issue. But what is at issue? The image as a representative of the blend of art and science that
characterized the Renaissance worldview is plain, and brought into the present, with its weighty
symbolic signification and implication that man remains the measure of all things. This iconic
image affirms the belief that the workings of the human body can be an analogy for the workings
of the universe, that investigations into the material form of the body can be a means of
understanding the world. This study of proportion proposes to fuse artistic and scientific
objectives, as Leonardo, not Vitruvius, provides one of his simplest illustrations of a shifting
‘centre of magnitude’ without a corresponding change to the ‘centre of normal gravity.’

Baldessari, as I will explain, similarly investigates the limits of the body and materiality through photography, yet his reason for doing so is distinct. For Baldessari it is a means of confronting traditional divisions between art as form and art as idea with a profound sense of doubt, moving from a consideration of objects to a performance of effects.

As the formalists had rejected conceptual elements from their work, the conceptualists, wanting to emphasize their break from the traditional practices of painting and sculpture, rejected physical elements in favor of conceptual ones. This in turn created a solipsistic and seemingly impassable situation, and by 1974 conceptual art appeared dominated by linguistic form. Artists such as Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, and others in fact offered theoretical essays on art as works of conceptual art: “In moving to reclaim the intellect, artists seemed to have incorporated the role of the critic.”

Baldessari however never fully accepted the separation of the two—neither concept from form, or mind from body. Rather for him, as illustrated by the portrait of *The Artist as a Renaissance Man* (1966), Baldessari is interested in the overlap between categories—both imagined and imaged. Like the ‘Renaissance Man’ he highlights his ability to move through and across disciplinary borders. In this way, this gesture employs the form of the artist’s own body as an ironic anti-formalist refutation of Greenberg’s doctrine of medium specificity.

---


446 Thomas McEvilley, “I Think Therefore I Art,” *Artforum* 23, no. 10 (Summer 1985), 75.

447 Ibid.
Baldessari moreover is interested in what exceeds all iterable categories, and therefore challenges the stability of the ‘order of things,’ particularly in the instance that man is the measure. Another version of Baldessari’s *Renaissance Man* appeared on the poster announcing his 1966 exhibition *Fragments* at the La Jolla Museum of Art. The show centered on the question “When is a part a whole, and when is a whole a part?” This question tellingly is one that has concerned thinking on photography nearly since its inception, namely focusing on the illusion that individual photographs suggest that they contain whole worlds, and yet are actually only fragments which deny any view of the whole, in other words existing as what Jacques Derrida termed “abyssal synecdoches.”

Baldessari felt that the double-exposed photograph of himself inside a drawn circle, outstretched as the axis, was representative of his theme. In Baldessari’s image Vitruvius’s code of ideal proportions is mocked by the uncontainable body of the artist, he is pictured as the veritable embodiment of the rule-breaker. With one arm longer than the other, his body refuses to fit into a calculated geometric form. Instead, in order to accentuate this ‘flaw’ further, Baldessari humorously corrects da Vinci’s circle by distorting its line to accommodate his body.

In opposition to the Cartesian world-view, derived from Plato’s mind-body dualism, Baldessari redresses the flaw Thomas McEvilley sees in the division between the material body and the supposedly immaterial mind, namely that since Rene Descartes offers no overlap between these categories, “there is no way of accounting for the communication between them

448 Baldessari quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, 21.

that was implied by the famous *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am.”\(^{450}\) The
formal/material qualities of thought are easily demonstrated when one thinks of logic or
mathematics for example: “Every thought or concept is actually an object, and every object has
form and esthetic presence.”\(^{451}\) In other words, thoughts and concepts have their own forms and
thus formalism. In an earlier article Kozloff had complained, “conceptual art’s questioning has
no form.”\(^{452}\) Baldessari’s artwork refuses this material/immaterial dualism and gives form to
thought and thought to form. Perhaps his most powerful way of doing so is by evoking
overlapping meanings and overlapping categories, which is by extension the (pre) occupation of
the ‘Renaissance Man.’

The relationship between the mind and the body can never be fully rationalized, and this
is precisely the fodder for Baldessari’s transgressive wit. His humour functions through the
interchange between sets of relationships that unpredictably reveal themselves as something
other than one first expects, including the impossibility of actually separating material form from
conceptual thought. The tendency to resist the aesthetics of thought belongs to “those who insist
on [the] certainty of knowledge,” avoiding the form of thought and remaining attached to the
Kantian separation of the senses from judgment “since it casts doubt on the distinction between
truth and beauty (again a disguised form of mind-body dualism) and especially on the category
of truth in and by itself.”\(^{453}\)

\(^{450}\) McEvilley, 75.

\(^{451}\) Ibid., 76.


\(^{453}\) McEvilley, 76.
A number of early works by Baldessari address the body of the artist, but not as a presence. Rather, they address the body of the artist as an absence in tension with an assumed presence. Tellingly the main vehicle for these works is the photograph. One of the first pieces that can be associated explicitly with the conundrum of the missing body of the artist is *Art Disaster: Evidence* (1971); a piece which Peter Wollen has argued engages the forensic gaze, a motif that has become prevalent in contemporary art practice. Staging the piece as a scene of a crime, however equivocal the so-called crime, reflects a brand of Hollywood melodrama and film noir aesthetic that Baldessari has continuously been interested in. In turning these tropes specifically to the context of art, Baldessari accentuates “an art of enigmatic traces, reduplicating the already enigmatic traces of the real life crime scene.”

This play on the aestheticization of the neutral and purportedly evidentiary document is not haphazard. This tactic has its roots in conceptual art, building off of Minimalism’s investigations into objectivity, and deliberately calling into question anything that claims to be unmediated.

*Art Disaster: Evidence* consists of a photograph of a broken bowl dusted with lampblack powder, showing four of the Baldessari’s fingerprints. Immediately the discourse of traditional art predicated on the hand of the artist as a trace of authenticity, originality, and authorship is evoked. Now considered the stuff of myth, the artist’s touch has been said to connote the individual artist’s brush strokes as the mark of true artfulness. Rather than simply asserting the artist’s presence however, Baldessari’s *Art Disaster: Evidence* emphasizes the fact that the artist has fled the scene. The absence evoked by Baldessari’s piece indicates by contrast that

---


455 Wollen, 32.
“evidence [is] needed to confirm the artist’s physical existence and, in a last-gasp effort, assert his unique identity.”

Thus enters, stage left, the trace as photography’s figure of itself.

A common trope in art of the late sixties was works that announced the artist’s absence, including the artist’s increasingly nomadic character, while simultaneously offering reassurance of their existence and presence via traces and statements. On Kawara’s “I Got Up...” postcard project begun in 1968 is exemplary in this respect. Each postcard featured the precise time (e.g. 7:48 A.M.) the artist woke up each day, functioning as “a kind of self-reassurance that the artist does in fact exist.” The fact that On Kawara’s postcards were then mailed quotidianly to his friends indicates that this reassurance was not entirely for the benefit of the artist, or at the very least his existence was not entirely affirmed unless its fact was shared with others.

Baldessari’s piece also displays this need for public affirmation beyond private assertions, yet is even less stable. Though On Kawara’s postcard inscriptions are rubber-stamped, not allowing the hand of the artist to actually be traced, Baldessari’s use of his actual fingerprints, despite the implication of the ‘hand of the artist,’ nevertheless remains no more expressive, locatable, or certain. His evidence of the self is deliberately cast in doubt. The title and the material of the work suggest that we as viewers are witnesses to the remaining evidence of an “art disaster”—yet what is the disaster? The circumstance is never clear and, in this case, neither is the context. Perhaps that is the point. After all, how can we even be certain these are actually Baldessari’s prints? Subtly Baldessari suggests the presumptions that inevitably enter the act of looking at art

456 Ralph Rugoff, Scene of the Crime, 106.

457 Begun on 10 May 1968 and ends on 17 September 1979; I Got Up consists of twelve volumes which total 4160 pages.

and making art. Baldessari’s installation “cannily conflates a means of criminal identification with an ironic commentary on the artist’s signature “touch”,”\textsuperscript{459} challenging the myth of the singular artist with suggestive, albeit inconclusive, nuances.

As a photograph, it highlights further the question of photographic indexicality, which is both physical and metaphysical, or as Rosalind Krauss has described, “By index I mean that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples.”\textsuperscript{460} The photograph is moved from a discourse of truth-telling to one of having the potential for lying, so that photography is inevitably staged, recalling Benjamin’s observations, as the scene of the crime.\textsuperscript{461} Similarly, Baldessari calls documents into question, and in so doing, undermines the possibility of viewing photography under conceptual art as neutral, or innocent in any context for that matter. Instead, Baldessari shows that the camera, the photograph, and traces in general (which photography is inseparable from), are not simply suspect but moreover run the risk of incrimination.

It was the plural practices of conceptual art that put the notion of the document at the centre of contemporary art, de-stabilizing and disavowing the privileged position of painting. Often this move was a performative one, as if modernist certainty was literally pushed over the edge. It is not haphazard that Jackson Pollock therefore recurs in art after 1960 as the iconic

\textsuperscript{459} Rugoff, 77.


\textsuperscript{461} In his discussion of the shift from cult value to exhibition value, Walter Benjamin writes, “But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. To have pinpointed this new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence,” in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” \textit{Illuminations}, 226.
artist to contend with or at least to ironicize. As elaborated in my chapter on Bruce Nauman, the exposure of Pollock’s agency and artwork as a gateway to radical performance as noted by Harold Rosenberg and Allan Kaprow marked not only a gesture towards performance, but also a revealing glimpse of the performance and theatricality that underscores all art. In *White Shape* (1984) Baldessari appropriates a famous Hans Namuth documentary photograph of Pollock ‘performing’ for the camera. It is difficult not to read this piece as Baldessari’s exposure of the larger implications of Pollock’s work as well as the significance of Pollock as an artistic figure for conceptual art. In this refashioned photograph by Baldessari, the artist is literally and figuratively missing in action. Where Pollock’s figure had been, there is now only white vinyl paint, an outline of the “heroic” artist at work, or, as Pollock might have formulated it, *in* his work. Because this photograph pictures Pollock posing in his studio between a “drip” painting on the floor and one on the wall behind him it is nearly impossible not to read the man and the art in tandem, as part and parcel. This blanking out of the artist/protagonist however, opens a space in which to consider the enframing capacity, rather than the artist, as central. The parergonality of both Baldessari’s piece and Pollock’s are brought into focus for questioning.

In taking what was central to the appropriated photograph, the elements that even Pollock could not control are exposed. Pollock, who famously stated, “I deny the accident” and all chance operations in his work, claimed with bravado that he was in complete control. Pollock deliberately occluded any “allusions to the social forces that might make the body seem an endangered artifact,” despite the truth that by the mid-1940s the “reign of mass media spectacle

---

462 The act of whiting out the artist/author/creator can be linked to the deconstructive strategy of outing under erasure.

was already firmly in place,” shading all corporeal and empirical experience in uncertainty. Here Pollock, who became the artist as celebrity in mass media spectacle, seems to stand for the apparition of this very shadow, the shadow of doubt.

Considering the fact that Pollock’s art emphasized its function as the trace of a physical action further connects the body of the artist to the work of art. However there remains a way to read this connection as actually disaffirming the artist’s control and mastery. Linking the artist’s living existence to the art object means allowing human fallibility and certainly mortality to enter the equation. No one lives forever. This unavoidable human vulnerability by extension challenges the idea of timeless and immortal art, and calls into question the ways that conventions of traditional art depend on deliberate misrecognitions in order to be believable, in order to avoid acknowledging the ominous limits of art.

Baldessari’s *White Shape* further alludes to this problematic paradox. More than literalizing the abstraction of the figure heralded by Abstract-Expressionism, the body of the artist is obliterated, rubbed out so-to-speak. Picturing Pollock’s body blotted out in white contradicts Pollock own proclamations by affirming the accident, picturing the arena as though it is an accident or crime scene, in that the white outline blatantly recalls the chalk outline of a victim’s body. Moreover, given the formal affinity of the artist’s paintings with blood-spattered floors and walls, particularly as arranged in this particular black and white photograph, “the altered photograph hints that the linking of art and action subtly transforms the studio into a forensic site.” The idea of the chalk outline implies also the double-bind of the photograph as

---

464 Rugoff, 106.
465 Ibid.
evidence: it is always a ghostly presence combined with a concealed absence. The visual
allusion of Pollock’s white form to the clichéd image of a ghost is compelling in this regard as
well. Notably, suspicious and suspiciously blanked out figures recur throughout Baldessari’s
oeuvre. Though not always whited-out, and in fact more frequently colored in vibrant hues,
Baldessari repeatedly plays with the suggestive qualities of this strategy, sometimes applying it
only to faces rather than full bodies.\textsuperscript{466} In either case the omissions suggest an ominous cover-
up, and what is covered up is absence and contingency. Fittingly, these photographs offer only
partial and limited truths.

In order to highlight the contingency of perception and its basis in experience, Baldessari
has frequently created pieces that revolve around different versions of stories, and photographic
images that contain inconsistencies in order to push the viewer into a place where it becomes
difficult to keep their story straight as they recount what they were, or are, witnesses to. This
inability to pin down a singular truth forms the groundwork (or framework) of pieces such as
*Story with 24 Versions* (1974), the artist’s book *Brutus Killed Ceasar* (1976), *A Sentence of
Thirteen Parts (with Twelve Alternative Verbs) Ending in FABLE* (1977), and countless other
works that evoke the concept of “versions” in the title, or “tales,” (eg. *Close-Cropped Tales*,
artist book (1981)), which test the reliability of, and correlation between, experience and
documentation. This emphasis on investigation as a mode of viewing, counter to passive

\textsuperscript{466} For example, *Double Man and Seal* (1988) or *Two Stories* (1987). This tactic becomes a more prevalent device
in Baldessari’s work beginning in the 1980s. Since Baldessari most common source material was appropriated and
found photographs, this technique may have also developed out of a concern for copyright issues: “I think on the
one hand I was a little bit worried about using someone’s face, as I did not want to get sued, and I didn’t know
exactly where these photographs were coming from, so I used stickers I had lying around to obliterate the faces; and
I felt so good I just kept on doing it,” quoted in van Bruggen, 185. Baldessari has also connected his interest in
blotting out or breaking up parts to an interest in r uptures of continuity inspired by his memories of the plaster
fillings for missing shards in the Greek vases that he saw on his visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New
York in 1965 (See van Bruggen, 184). Baldessari has always been interested in what is missing, and especially in
what is hidden in plain sight.
looking, further challenges the modernist paradigm of the viewer. Even when the titles seem to
be forthright in declaring the puzzle they pose or the duplicity they contain (for example, *A
Sentence with Hidden Meaning* in *The Way We Do Art Now and Other Sacred Tales*, (1973) or
*Binary Code Series: Lily (Yes/No)* (1974)), these series nevertheless provoke our instincts to try
and assemble the pieces, divine coherence, and make sense of our experiences by matching them
with the images presented. Often these works by Baldessari are sardonic in tone: is he playing
with us, or with us? In other words, are we participants with Baldessari, or subordinates to his
puppetry?

*Police Drawing* (1970) is another piece in which the body of the artist is at stake, at least
in so far as our ability to affirm and locate it is concerned, and the perception of viewers is again
put to the test. Like Baldessari’s other projects based in photography, there is a sense of
indeterminacy around the framing of the work, and certainly of the subject. The viewers in this
instance assist in the creation of the work both during and after its execution. In a game of
perception and memory, once more staged as a kind of ambiguous art crime, John Baldessari
made an unannounced visit to an instructor friend’s art class in San Diego for fifteen minutes.
After his departure, a police artist was called in, and the students were asked to describe him as
they would a suspect or perpetrator, so that a “wanted” sketch could be drawn. A full-length
photograph of Baldessari, a photograph of the police artist talking to the students, a photograph
of the police artist drawing, the resultant conté drawing, as well as a thirty minute videotape of
the exercise combine to form the final piece. Like the role of the trace in *Evidence*, the other
forms of documentation of the artist’s existence corroborate the photograph at the same time that
media are put in tension with one another vying for the role of proof. We are shown how
photography always contains a trace of the thing that was once there;\(^{467}\) as a result, “it’s all about the return of the departed…. The spectral is the essence of photography.”\(^{468}\) This observation clearly resonates with *White Shape* also. As is frequently the case in conceptual photography it is not a remarkable aesthetic that preoccupies the viewer, but rather a typically unremarkable one, which encourages the frustrating sense that something is missing.

Following in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp, these works are more cerebral than retinal, with the focus remaining always on the issue of information through documentation and the process of understanding that this information does or does not engage in relation to one’s experiences. Aesthetics are not a priority. Describing these works from the 1970s, Coosje van Bruggen has referred to Baldessari’s work as “mind games,” in which the artist leaves clues for the spectators “to decipher the crime, or the art.”\(^{469}\) This so-called crime, or the idea of the art as crime, is of course speculative. Baldessari recounts how he was motivated by the story of a friend of his, who had worked in the photography archive of the San Diego Police Department, eventually quitting because he found the constant inspection of pictures of traffic accidents, murder cases, and so on “too eerie”: “I think that story got me interested in photographs that weren’t done to be beautiful, and the whole idea of photographs as document rather than as art began to emerge.”\(^{470}\) The coy ordinariness of the photograph as an object takes on disconcerting meanings, sometimes as a result of what is missing rather than what is present. The photograph

\(^{467}\) Martin Jay “Phallogocentrism,” 521.


\(^{469}\) van Bruggen, 57.

\(^{470}\) Ibid.; Quote from Baldessari also from this page.
is at once evidence to assure us of the artist’s existence, as a sign of life, as well as evidence that suggests what or who has vanished, echoing Walter Benjamin’s axiom: “To live means to leave traces.”

This photographic observation stages a crucial aporia. Without traces, our lives are thrown into doubt (i.e. we would not know who we are); and yet paradoxically traces are also source material for the existential doubt that demands interpretation and that always contains missing pieces.

Baldessari’s *Free Rolling Tire* (1972) pushes the concept of the photograph as evidence to the next level, a violent and threatening level, and again insinuates that the artist is a culpable escape artist, with life hanging in the balance. This conceptual performance piece and its attendant documentation calls Ruscha to mind again, namely connecting to his free-flying typewriter and looming shadows in the documentation of *Royal Road Test* (1967). In *Free Rolling Tire*, which indeed has an experimental and experiential dimension akin to *Police Drawing*, it is once more ambiguous if the body of the artist is in danger, as it would most likely be in Chris Burden and Vito Acconci as discussed by Max Kozloff. Instead the threat and target seem untethered, and pointed outwards. Building on the Surrealist tradition of objects that gather meanings that seem to have little to do with their everyday use, Baldessari’s meanings seem even more excessively random. *Free Rolling Tire* was among the artist’s first works to use hidden hostility as a motif, and is suggestive once more of the fine line between an accident and a crime, or chance and premeditated action. Consisting of five juxtaposed snapshots of a rolling tire with

---

a newspaper clipping about a fatal collision between a perilous tire truck and a pedestrian, “we are left to ponder whether the tire in the snapshots is a potential agent of death or a harmless object; its definition, as Baldessari wryly implies, cannot be based on “inherent” characteristics, but instead is contingent on how it “behaves.” Like the photograph, function and context inform meaning at least as much as material or content. Interested in the open ‘character’ of objects, Baldessari has commented: “We tend to live too much with our heads. A thing, for instance a garbage can, has no life. I know that it is only a receptacle, but I also think of a garbage can as having a life. Anything around me can be invested with lifelike qualities.” This unpredictable quality of living experience confounds rational expectations and resonates with the uncanny expectations projected onto photographs.

A connection between *Free-Rolling Tire* and Andy Warhol’s deadpan delivery of fatalistic information in his *Death and Disaster Series* of the early sixties is obvious. Warhol’s series included an array of seemingly despondent subjects such as race riots, car crashes, and nuclear explosions. All were cropped, removed from their journalistic framework, and silk-screened into the context of art. Using monochrome colors and repetitive patterns, Warhol made these tragedies appear as mundane and decorative as wallpaper. Certain images in the series connect more blatantly to Baldessari than others, namely those images that picture the dark-side of ordinary life, pointing to the nearly absurd terrors lurking in ordinary objects. An analogy to

---

472 The clipping reads: “A free-rolling truck tire struck and killed a pedestrian in Delano, according to the California Highway Patrol. As Francisco Ramirez, 30, drove north on California 99, a tire came off his truck, crossed the north and southbound lanes, and hit Don Edwin Yarbrough, 21, of Denton, Tex. The C.H.P. said. Yarbrough was reported dead at the scene.”

473 Rugoff, 82.

474 Quoted in van Bruggen, 214.
the prints for Warhol’s *Tuna Fish Disaster* (1963) is a touchstone in this regard. Warhol’s piece, like *Free-Rolling Tire*, demonstrates the vital joints between life-threatening danger and absurdity. Warhol’s smiling portraits of Mrs. McCarthy and Mrs. Brown, two housewives that died from poisoned tuna purchased at their local A&P, are overlaid with images of toxic tuna and text that reads “Seized shipment: Did a leak kill…” This piece exposes the anxiety of ordinary objects. Delivered in a seemingly affectless tone, they exemplify the irony of Warhol’s reticence to explain his work, saying duplicitously that all anyone needed to know about Warhol or his artworks was already there, “on the surface.” Like the cans of tuna fish imaged, the surface is never really a sufficient source of information. The incredibility of photographs is ironically alluded to in Warhol’s rumination on the subject of death; “I don’t believe in it because you’re not around to know that it’s happened.”475 Despite the photograph’s claim to truth and reportage, it is always removed from the moment before and after, like death. We may desire the photograph to bear witness, but there is always a delay, and what inevitably takes place after that singular instant throws the picture itself into uncertainty. How can one believe in the photograph, when the photograph alone never provides the conclusive presence to know what happened? In the case of both death and the photograph, direct experience is not possible.

The most mundane objects and details show themselves to be filled with excessive and uncontainable meanings and possibilities, ones that implicate life and death stakes. In this way, the postmodern sensibilities of objects in the world and specifically objects in Baldessari’s art practice are exposed –demonstrating their uncanny ability to shift between opposing and contradictory categories. As Philip Kerr has observed, detectives have always been postmodern

investigators (a role Baldessari often assigns his viewers), since to the detective “a cigarette end was never just a cigarette end: it was also sometimes a sign, a clue, a piece in a puzzle awaiting connection with something else.”

Baldessari creates a Hitchcock-like ambiance, insinuating that something dangerous is always around the corner, something is always about to happen, everything is under suspicion, and therefore the viewer like the detective must pay attention to the signs. Pulp-fiction sleuth allusions reappear throughout Baldessari’s career, nearly exclusively in photographic form: For example Six Gags (male) (1991), Violent Space Series: Six Vignetted Portraits of Guns Aligned and Equipoised (Violet) (1976), Violent Space Series: Six Situations with Guns Aligned (Guns Sequenced Small to Large) (1976), Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (For Malevich) (1976), Six Colorful Inside Jobs (1977) (16 mm color film, 35 minutes). Each of these is playful and yet foreboding. Scenes staged expressly for investigative purposes, sites of interrogation abound, for example Light and Dark (1986) and Two Crowds (With Shape of Reason Missing) (1984).

Baldessari’s attraction to what is missing is repeatedly put in tension with the viewer’s desire and inclination to fill in the blanks. His Thaumatrope Series (1975) is another case in point that plays upon a perceptive crisis in meaning and representation. Baldessari’s photoworks pivot on ruptures in logic, and gaps in legibility, using photography to suggest wholeness and yet expose its limits and unknowns. In other words, Baldessari at once offers and takes away the given. This tension and the desire to deduce the missing link is here orchestrated by Baldessari’s version of the Victorian toy first popularized in London by Dr. John Paris in 1925, known as the thaumatrope. The thaumatrope (literally meaning “wonder-turner”) has been described by Jonathan Crary as a device designed for science and sold as popular entertainment, a

---

“‘philosophical toy’ [that] made unequivocally clear both the fabricated and hallucinatory nature of its image and the rupture between perception and its object.”

Using a card with a photographic image on both sides, for example a bird on one side and a cage on the other, with a piece of string attached to each side, the strings are twirled quickly between the fingers causing the two pictures to appear to combine into a single image due to the persistence of vision, the phenomenon in which an ‘afterimage’ remains on the retina for one twenty-fifth of a second after viewing. One of the important developments of this discovery in the nineteenth century was an understanding of how our minds are able to believe motion in motion pictures, despite the fact that they are constructed out of still images. Another significant contribution is a greater understanding of the movement of cognitive experience, which reveals how perception is temporal rather than instantaneous, and inseparable from desire and memory rather than exclusively objective.

In addition, this “mind game” reveals that vision is not as simple as light passing through a lens, since the brain has to make sense of the visual data the eye provides and construct a coherent picture of reality. To further debunk the age-old analogy that the eye is a camera, Baldessari has added: “And always remember that you are not a photographic film.”

Baldessari’s Thaumatrope Series: Two Gangsters (One with Scar and Gun) (1975) creates a gestalt of a scene of violence, the assailant and the victim are held in seemingly static wholeness.

---


479 See Crary, 97-106.

when the strings spin the card, or separated and inconclusive when the thaumatrope is inactive. Our minds want to make the connection between the two images concrete and our imaginations make a conceptual leap in order to do so. This conceptual leap into the void characterizes Baldessari’s art, exposing the paradoxical subjectivity of purportedly objective vision and vice versa, building on the legacy of conceptualists such as Marcel Duchamp and Yves Klein who recognized that what is absent or unseen is as least as significant as what is present and visible. In this example, the thaumatrope image can be viewed as a kind of forced clue, in that it is constructed out of motion rather than objective truth. It exposes, like Baldessari’s other conceptual photographs, that truth is relative.

ON PAINTING, POINTING, AND THE LAWS OF LOOKING

*I would like to see it [photography] make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable.* –Marcel Duchamp

By the 1960s, painting was at its apotheosis and the authority of Abstract Expressionism had become nearly cliché. Photography of this time often acted as painting’s character foil. Baldessari, admittedly trained as a painter, nevertheless sought to push the boundaries of painting’s and High Modernist criticism’s hold on the art world, thorough what I would argue was photographic thinking. Photographs such as Baldessari’s *Born to Paint* (1968) showing the artist from behind dressed in a motorcycle jacket decaled with a skull and flames, and the tag line “Born to Paint” can be seen as parodying this rebellion.

Baldessari’s practice is a complex case. Despite his reservations about painting, Baldessari never entirely let go of the medium or its influence. Instead, he used the conventions of painting that equated painting to Art as if formed in nature as his basis for questioning the culturally constructed status of the art object. This is significant, because even though Baldessari moves from painting in the early 1960s to mechanical reproduction and photographic investigation in the late 1960s, he retains an interest in the conceptual dialectic between these two mediums which arguably is yet another testament to his rejection of the discourse of medium specificity as well as Baldessari’s development of his own version of Sol LeWitt’s injunction of 1967 that "In Conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work...the execution is a perfunctory affair."

Like Jasper Johns, who used commonplace objects as his subject, challenging both the index and the icon, while criticizing the completeness of any singular system, Baldessari’s art was also less matter-of-fact than his work at first appeared. Certainly, as James Collins has described, “If works of art are a hypothesis about what art can be, Baldessari has shown that objects don’t have to be without reference, tedious, or difficult to be important—and interesting.” Both Johns and Baldessari were interested in a reorientation of the picture to “a site for the reception of signs rather than as a screen for the projection of views.” As Johns himself perceptively declared, “Nothing in art is so true that its opposite cannot be made

---

482 Jasper Johns looked to Duchamp for inspiration in a way akin to Baldessari’s admiration for him, noting that Duchamp “moved his work through the retinal boundaries which had been established with Impressionism into a field where language, thought and vision act upon one another,” quoted in *Art Since 1900: modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 404.


Truth is posited as relative and, potentially, reversible. This postmodernist shift and the potential exchangeability between true and false presciently suggested an alternative to Clement Greenberg’s formalist criticism.

Frank Stella, in contrast to Johns or Baldessari, was not amused by ambiguities, instead he saw them “as “dilemmas to resolve rather than paradoxes to indulge.” Wanting completely to expunge the figure-ground relation he famously stated in 1964, “what you see is what you see.” But of course seeing Stella’s work as the eradication of the figure-ground relation is only one point of view, namely the one advocated by Greenberg’s disciple, Michael Fried. A counter-point to Fried’s orthodoxy and his call for autonomy would be Carl Andre’s writings in the sixties which characterized Stella as the move to Minimalism, an argument that would become increasingly convincing when Stella began to shape his canvases. In either case, Stella’s terse dean-pan delivery that “what you see is what you see” lacks the insightful humour of Baldessari’s witty aphorisms. Baldessari’s This Is Not To Be Looked At (1968) presents an appropriated image of an Artforum cover from 1966-67 showcasing Stella’s painting, Union III (1966), and is an ironic example of Baldessari’s challenge to both didacticism and hermetic readings of art, covertly suggesting that what you do not see, what lies beyond the frame, matters.

---


486 Art Since 1900, 409.


as well. Moreover, it challenges presence and painting, and the presence of painting, as the ‘be all and end all’ in art.

_This Is Not To Be Looked At_ is among Baldessari’s early works, from a series featuring what Peter Schjeldahl has called “banal photographs blown up on canvas with gnomic captions lettered by a professional sign painter.” The perpetuation of the canvas for these works is significant, since Baldessari has explicitly stated (somewhat sarcastically) that he wanted to retain the “sign” of art. The use of a “professional” sign painter for the text further ironizes the missing hand of the artist and also, despite its plainness and the regularity of the sans serif text, is suggestive of the paradoxical and inescapable aesthetic dimension of language itself.

This piece significantly contains numerous “signs” of painting—foremost being the canvas and the reproduction of Stella’s painting printed on it. The fact that part of Baldessari’s canvas is left bare and the rendering of Stella’s reproduced reproduction (the photographic image of Stella’s work on the cover of _Artforum_) is shoddy due to the photoemulsion with which it has been placed on the canvas multiplies exponentially the ways of understanding what we are in fact looking at. This observation is the tip of the semiotic iceberg, especially considering the ban on looking that the caption demands.

---

489 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles fortuitously owns both Baldessari’s _This Is Not To Be Looked At_ (donated by Joel Wachs in 2005) and Stella’s _Union III_ (donated by collector Robert Rowan in 1980); See Jeremy Strick, “Director’s Foreword,” _This Is Not To Be Looked At: Highlights from the Permanent Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles_ (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 8.


491 “I thought, I’m not using paint, its photographic process, and so you can’t claim that they’re paintings. Rauschenberg had done overlaps of paint and screened photographic images, one over the other onto the canvas in a transfer method he had invented himself. But I wanted to be less artful than Rauschenberg and Warhol: this is a photograph, here’s a text. That’s it. And I thought, because they’re done on canvas, they might be equated with art,” John Baldessari in Coosje van Bruggen, 29.
This may be interpreted in deconstructionist terms, as a call not to look but to read. Deconstruction exposes the beneficial impossibility of self-sufficiency—the work cannot stand alone; rather, “It looks as though all the hammering of the notions of self-evidence, clarity, and property,” that modernist criticism propelled into orbit, “was meant to resound very loudly to prevent us from hearing that nothing here is clear, or self-evident, or proper to anyone or anything whatever.” By contrast, delving into the overlooked aspects of image and text and image as text, we are encouraged to pursue an analysis as Jacques Derrida has emphasized, that recognizes that “photography” should be understood as writing, which has to be read as well as viewed.

According to Derrida, photography’s referential function is precisely why it necessitates distancing more than any other medium, in order to read the work within and without the frame, rather than allowing oneself to believe in the self-sufficiency of mere perceptual seeing, or to suspend the disbelief required to accept that “what you see is what you see.” Here, Baldessari exploits not only photography’s need for distance, but also its potential creation of distance. By reproducing a photograph of a Stella painting Baldessari denigrates vision as the epitome of access to art at the same time that he creates the necessary distance for the viewer to think about the system he is presenting to them—including the nexus of entanglements between Stella, modernist painting, modernist criticism, Artforum, painting more broadly, mechanical reproduction, etc. It also humorously addresses one of the central aporias of conceptual art, namely the tension between ideation and the visual form. Baldessari’s stated prohibition on


looking ironizes Conceptual art as an alternative to “the optical richness of post-painterly abstraction, the literalist physicality of minimalist sculpture, or the appropriated mass media imagery of pop.”  

It is also suggestive of the backlash against Artforum’s move from California to New York in the summer of 1967.  

The list of possible considerations and inflections grows exponentially as one steps back to contemplate the text. As Derrida explained in The Deaths of Roland Barthes (1988), “Where the referent is itself framed within the photographic frames, the index of the completely other, however marked it may be, nonetheless makes reference endlessly refer. The notion of the chimera is then admissible. If there is an art in photography… it is here. Not that it suspends reference, but that it indefinitely defers a certain type of reality, that of the perceptible referent.”  

Much like the conspicuous instability of the body as subject and the frame as context in White Shape or Free-Rolling Tire, this indefinite deferral again marks the inability to secure or fix meaning as well as the dubious character of perception.

This shift also acknowledges the ways that linguistic text, especially in the form of titles and captions (here they are colluded), mediates our understanding of artworks. Our look is filtered through the caption, This Is Not To Be Looked At, which, in its forbiddance of our looking may in fact provoke our desire to look all the more. Combined the caption/title and the image exemplify the inadequacy of language and images to ground one’s understanding of the world. Though terse text in Baldessari presents itself as self-evident, the words, like the images,

---


are more frequently the signs of illiteracy, or certainly the limits of literacy. This accounts for their ‘gnomic’ status, they are paradoxically straight and seemingly transparent at the same time that they are opaque. Though these texts trade in appropriations from popular culture and the history of art, ranging from Hollywood film stills to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, they do so to undermine the myths that circulate around and within these images/texts when taken as a “given,” by exposing the very layered construction of meanings therein, demonstrating how vision is always lodged within larger epistemological issues. Walter Benjamin of course was the first to mark the risk of this precarious ignorance, particularly in relation to photography, writing in “A Short History of Photography” (1931):

The illiterate of the future" it has been said, "will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph.” But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?497

Building on Benjamin’s invocation of the role of the caption to ground the image, for both the photographer and the viewer, Baldessari exposes how naively trusting we have become in relation to directives on looking and, by extension, cognition.498 As a result, the hermeneutic, essentialist self is deconstructed. The coherent Cartesian subject is dislocated.

The lack of quality in this particular printed image, re-presenting Artforum re-presenting Stella who represents the then dominant paradigm of modernist painting, further complicates legibility in Baldessari’s image. On the one hand its mechanically reproduced image could be a wink at photography imitating painting in order to attain the status of art by appearing more


498 Numerous works by Baldessari problematize “directional looking” and invectives or signs on where to look. For example, A Movie: Directional Piece Where People Are Looking (1972-73) a montage composed of 28 still photographs.
'painterly,' on the other hand it could be the exposure of a mechanical impulse behind Stella’s own production. This is not the only instance in which Baldessari has appropriated Stella’s work. Yet another ironic reproduction of a ‘signature’ Stella is the focus of Baldessari’s *A 1968 Painting* (1968). Perhaps the repeated use of Stella is precisely due to its recognizable status (and commodity status) as art at the time, useful in that it also functions as a means of engaging a counter-discourse in relation to the “presentness” that Michael Fried insisted on as “grace.”

Against the “perpetual present” that Fried discusses, Baldessari sees duration as valuable in art, believing that all art exists in temporal space and is thus subject to changing perceptions: The present itself is always in the midst of change. Nietzsche wrote that, “Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is different and new in an impression.” In other words, seeing differently requires going beyond one’s comfort zone. Thus Baldessari’s in practice, medium and subject matter put the viewer in the place of

———

499 “I intended to do one of these each year for the rest of my life. It would be a history of style/fashion, like saying “that’s a ‘70s movie.” I would also be able to compare the history of my own work to this “art of the year” choice in the style of *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” cover. Like an art history quiz—“student, in what year would you place this painting if you didn’t know it or the artist?””, John Baldessari, quote in Coosje van Bruggen, 33.

500 The centrality of Stella’s work to the artworld at this time is concurrent with the dominance of *Artforum*’s discourse. As David Antin has described retrospectively, “Pop Art, Minimalist Sculpture, and Hard Edge painting were trying to marry American commercial culture and were celebrated each month in the pages of *Artforum.*” Contemporaneously Baldessari jokingly advised Marcia Tucker that if she wanted to find artists working outside the modes of the central scene for the Whitney Biennial, all she would have to do is “look up all the people whose subscriptions to *Artforum* have lapsed,” See David Antin, “Eight Stories for John Baldessari,” *John Baldessari: National City* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 16-17.

501 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” (1967), *Art and Objecthood*, 168. Another Baldessari work of 1966-67 focuses in on the right hand corner of the *Artforum* cover featuring Stella’s *Union III*, this corner is blown-up and reproduced with photoemulsion on canvas.

discomfort rather than complacency. They interrogate the status of subjectivity. As the piece *The Spectator Is Compelled to Look Directly Down the Road and Into the Middle of the Picture* (1967-68) expresses, viewers are not merely guided but even more forcefully dictated by culturally constructed perspective and habit to look at art in a particular way. Ironically in the aforementioned work a figure (the body of the artist) is literally placed in the middle of the road with their back to the viewer, obscuring our vision despite the picture’s rigorous Cartesian perspective. Even when it is “right” it is wrong. Another way of interpreting this verso of a figure in the middle of the suburban landscape is as an ironic reference back to the traditions of German Romantic landscape painting, such as the painting of Caspar David Friedrich in which the figures turn their backs on the reality of the viewer, turned instead to face towards the infinity of the landscape in front of them.\(^{503}\) The infinite implications of the vanishing point in Baldessari’s image thus become more of a dead-pan dead-end to the viewer’s perception rather than an experience of the sublime.

Similarly in *Wrong* (1967), another contemporaneous phototext canvas, with the same standard 59” by 45” measurements (the dimensions determined by the size of the door of the artist’s Volkswagen bus),\(^{504}\) Baldessari again plays with the conventions of so-called correct composition. Here the artist is pictured standing in front of a palm tree, which through a trick of cognition and seemingly accidental composition appears to be growing out of his head. It is a


\(^{504}\) van Bruggen, 29-30.
blatant violation of the basic rules that even an amateur photographer obeys. *Wrong* seems to say that this is neither good nor correct photography, let alone art. The caption is at once bold and confusing. In these images visual pleasure is rendered absurd at the same time that the image is elevated to the status of high art via the symbolic weight of the canvas. Baldessari’s work is not “anti-art” as it has popularly been dubbed, but rather the sign of a cultural shift in the re-definition of art. For if *Wrong* continues to have its humourous effect upon each viewing, if “Baldessari’s deadpan if deceptively casual expulsion of centuries of aesthetic precepts still carries its punch, [it is] because aestheticism, not withstanding its aggregate onslaughts from Dada through various postmodernisms, is still alive and kicking.”*\(^506\) *Wrong*, and other works such as *This Is Not To Be Looked At* (1967-68), can also be viewed as challenges to consider why or what is wrong and in this way to move towards the aesthetics of indifference advocated by Duchamp which questions the rules of art.

Uncomfortable and obscured vision forms the crux of *This Is Not To Be Looked At*. Rather than grace we encounter disconcerting anxiety fashioned by Baldessari taking the photograph from one source and the text from another, creating compounded signification. While the Stella clad *Artforum* may appear harmless, the title *This Is Not To Be Looked At* is in fact appropriated from an etching in Francisco Goya’s affecting *Disasters of War* series, produced during the Napoleonic invasion of Spain and the Peninsula War of 1808-1814. *Disasters of War* is comprised of 85 images of graphic exploitation, which merge sadism with empathy, and as a collection has become a touchstone in Western art in terms of the history of

---

\(^{505}\) Baldessari remade this in 1996, where he appears bearded and bald, but unchanged as the source of a palm tree and with the title *Wrong (Version #2).*

representations of violence and vulnerable bodies.\textsuperscript{507} It is a series that affectively questions the viewer’s engagement in such images. As Lela Graybill has eloquently argued, Goya’s images trace the shift in cultural attitudes of his time towards the body, namely: “the rejection of an epistemology of pain wherein truth was seen to be lodged in the physical body, where meaning was thought to be discoverable by a mastering gaze attuned to reading the language of the suffering body.”\textsuperscript{508} Both Goya’s series and Baldesarri’s early work mark shifts in their cultural and political context, which impacts the body as well as the mind.

Examining the Goya’s original etching provides clues to Baldessari’s logic in appropriating this particular statement. Plate 26 of Goya’s series describes an execution scene, by picturing the moment before. Its dramatic frieze and the emotional reactions of the victims pictured anticipate the moment of execution, and the captioned title beneath reads: “No se puede mirar,” or “This is not to be looked at,” which has also been translated as “One can’t look.”\textsuperscript{509} The act of looking itself links power to violence and, as this slippage in translation points out, one’s subjective choice as a viewer is called into question. We do not see the executioners, however, though their bayonets enter the frame from the right, marking their presence and our own “contingent field of vision,”\textsuperscript{510} thereby problematizing the very act of looking. As precursors to the war photography of figures such as Robert Capa and Eddie Adams as discussed by Susan Sontag in her poignant book \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others} (2003), Goya’s etchings in


\textsuperscript{508} Ibid., 3.


\textsuperscript{510} Graybill, 4.
this series exemplify the painful limits of representation, particularly when looking at atrocities. Though they are etchings they connect directly to histories of the photographic embodiment of atrocity. The viewer is always at a distance, a distance enforced by both the representation as well as imposed by the viewer’s own defenses, looking through a lens, haunted by the inability to ever fully assimilate the information seen as an image before us. The violence in such images suspends the ability to ever fully understand, because the horror suppresses the social and historical context and meanings as well as the realities of the body. This repression shares an affinity with Modern art’s refusal to acknowledge that all cultural practices, objects, and subjects, are embedded in society, an observation made more poignant since “it is the body that inexorably links the subject to his or her social environment.”\(^5\)\(^1\) This point becomes increasingly affecting when one considers the war raging in Vietnam between 1959 and 1975 and the images Baldessari would have seen at home in the Unites States depicting the violence perpetrated by Americans against the North Vietnamese. In substituting Goya’s image with Stella’s painting in photographic form on canvas, Baldessari challenges the facile link between disinterest and the disembodied subject. Interpreting the work in connection to Baldessari’s lived experience of the time, one can read this substitution as a critique of the insular and ineffective position of the art world. His highlighting of Stella’s iconic emphasis on the frame becomes an ironic analogy to the American political policy of containment, so that when we look at Stella we might envision an image covering over the Goya, which in Baldessari’s context would be the Vietnam War. Furthermore, as I will continue to argue, Goya’s work, like Baldessari’s and in contrast to Stella’s, seeks to disassemble the disembodied \textit{cogito} of Descartes philosophy of being.

\(^5\)\(^1\) Amelia Jones, \textit{The Artists’ Body}, 20.
The captions in Goya’s series, and this specific invocation here in Baldessari, do not tell us what the images are but how they are to be seen, complicated by the paradox that we are repeatedly reminded “that the scene is always subject to a multiplicity of looks and is thus never wholly visible to our own contingent sight.”\textsuperscript{512} This is made ever more intricate when an injunction against looking formulates the very directive of viewing: This is not to be looked at. As viewers we are conscripted as witnesses, integral to confirming the scene, yet we are never master of it as “wholly present” nor are we ever completely in control of its meaning. Like the deferring function of the referent in photography, the violence is ultimately un-locatable. In fact, it appears that what we do not see controls the image. This unseen threat can also be connected, as mentioned, to the intensive circulation of photographs reporting the gruesome violence in Vietnam at this time and the absence of its literally visceral presence in Modernist art. Moreover, the restriction against imagery, let alone suffering, in Modernist art would be eventually paralleled by the government censorship of war photography. Baldessari’s appropriation of these meanings suggests the confusing seriality of the violence of looking itself. Counter to the Modernist proscription, it disrupts us from our absorption. As a work of conceptual art, Baldessari’s \textit{This Is Not To Be Looked At} subtly uses morbid humor to question whether or not the “execution” is indeed “a perfunctory affair.”

Michel Foucault’s interrogation of the empire of the gaze in his discussion of surveillance in \textit{Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison} (1979),\textsuperscript{513} demonstrates how power in the nineteenth century was intertwined and veritably equated with the concepts of seeing and

\textsuperscript{512} Graybill, 6.

knowing (eg. *voir, savoir, pouvoir*). Goya’s etchings similarly put these stakes on the line, but they do so in a way that problematizes their evidential function. Foucault of course wrote ironically of “self-evidence” to emphasize the artifice of visual experience; stating that “what was self-evident, taken for granted as natural, was precisely what had to be called into question.”

The composition of Goya’s etching, and by extension Baldessari’s artwork, points outside the frame literally and figuratively to what one cannot see. Combined with the injunction against looking, “[t]he frame makes a work of supplementary *desoeuvrement*. It cuts out but also sews back together.”

A remarkable and unresolvable tension is created between the bayonets pointing our gaze inwards and the strained visages of the victims facing outwards, directing our gaze to the menace beyond the frame. Stella’s famed reliance on the frame to organize his composition is parodied as a means of exposing the exclusions. Baldessari literalizes this reliance and makes the viewer think about what supports prop up not simply the internal structure of Stella’s work but also its external currency.

Much akin to Rene Magritte’s conceptual painting, Baldessari is exploring “the treachery of images,” as it applies to his specific context. Both Baldessari and Magritte have made works that complicate the frame and combine an intermedia approach to understanding or dismantling cognition. Both artists are preoccupied by an epistemological skepticism, or as Magritte has explained it, “I produce pictures in which the eye must “think” in a completely different way from the usual one.”

Magritte’s famous caption/title “ceci n’est pas une pipe” (in *The


Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe) (1929)) is at once true and false. It demystifies the painted image of a pipe as reality at the same time that it exposes the mechanisms of artistic deception, which in its own evocation of the suspension of disbelief composes its artistic turn. Magritte’s handling of paint is perfectly smooth, while Baldessari’s photographic reproduction is sketchy and haphazard in appearance. Yet both call attention to the suggested transparency or believability of both mimetic painting and photography respectively.\footnote{Michel Draguet has compared Magritte’s The Treachery of Images to Joan Miro’s Photo: This Is the Color of My Dreams (1925), another Surrealist work that draws a close connection between the experiential realities of painting and photography. According to Draguet, Magritte’s Treachery “served as a tool for penetrating the surrealist circle” to which he aspired to join. See Michel Draguet, “The Treachery of Images: Keys for A Pop Reading of the Work of Magritte,” Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Ghent: Ludion; New York: Distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 33.} Both are at once plain and enigmatic. Each plays on the contrast between what is seen as obvious and what the text finally comes to deny. Because of the underlying violence alluded to in Baldessari the stakes seem higher, however both works parsimoniously demonstrate and interrogate moments when the choice to suspend reason is tempting—namely, in the realm of art and in the realm of violence. With a metaphysical quality that defies reason men in bowler hats have interiors consisting of sky in Magritte’s paintings, while Baldessari’s has self-portraits with palm trees growing out of his head, or the presence of a Stella that marks the absence of context and the violence of looking. Notably, the Surrealist artist similarly used photography as the basis of his works, though the final products are regarded primarily as paintings.\footnote{Not surprisingly Baldessari was enlisted to design the installation of a large-scale exhibition of Magritte’s art entitled Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images (2006) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Baldessari created “clouds on the carpet and images of freeways on the ceiling, which is the sort of conceit that likely would have pleased the Belgian artist,” See Robert L. Pincus Witten, “Art Review: L.A. Show Pays Homage to an Influential Man,” San Diego Union-Tribune, December 3, 2006.} In these commonalities, Baldessari’s link to Surrealist strategies is evident. As opposed to being able to understand the photograph as proof or confirmation, representation itself is problematized and denounced. It is
not that mimetic art’s opacity forbids all correlation to reality; on the contrary it is its overt
transparence, its surface effect, which prevaricates representation.

Both Magritte and Baldessari use the seemingly contradictory devices of simultaneously
pointing to and yet obfuscating understanding in their artwork. Baldessari however literalizes
this indexical game of pointing by his a matter-of-fact delivery of information. Particularly in
the late Sixties, the argument was that these were devoid of aesthetic sensibility. His use of
photography is closer to Ruscha’s unspectacular deadpan approach, rather than posing his
epistemological investigation with any aesthetic connection to the Surrealist marvelous. Instead
Baldessari “routinely sacrifices” the “intrinsic value of the photograph as a well-composed
picture […] to the photograph’s extrinsic value as a plain representation of reality,” or as the
artist has said “things pretty much as they are.”

This naïve appearance is suspect however. His series of Commissioned Paintings are a
case in point, which pivot on their apparent banality. They are deceptively ordinary, featuring
fourteen paintings in which a different object is shown in conjunction with a pointing finger in
each. Uniform in size and principle, a caption beneath each painting reads “A Painting by [the
person’s name],” in the lower frame of the canvas. For example, A Painting by Helene Morris
shows an index finger pointing at cord and wires in an ordinary looking cardboard box; A
Painting by Dante Guido shows an index finger pointing at two commonplace lightbulbs in a
recessed hole in a wall, (one on and one off); A Painting by Jane Moore shows an index finger
pointing at two conventional deep-set stovetop elements. This series developed out of what

519 Dave Hickey, “Still Wrong After All These Years: Tips For Looking at the Work of John Baldessari,” John
Baldessari has referred to as his fascination with Sunday painters. He had his friend George Nicoladis randomly point out things that interested him, and then Baldessari would photograph George in the act of pointing. Like the process of the readymade, the documentary slides of these excursions were concerned with selection rather than beauty. Baldessari then commissioned fourteen “Sunday painters” he had met while visiting art fairs in Southern California to “copy” a slide from the series. Each painter had the choice of a handful of slides. Duplicated as precisely as possible, in a kitschy photo-realistic style, the paintings in the *Commissioned Paintings* function more akin to photographs than paintings. In this respect they expose the latent photographic impulses of representational painting. They also expose the framing conventions of photography as inherited by the history of painting. Baldessari’s involvement as documentary photographer, while exempting himself from the selection as well as from the final execution of the piece (including the painting (done by a “Sunday painter”) and the text (done by a professional sign painter)), the artist stages issues regarding the implied and complicated contingency between decision-making and artistry, democracy and order, lest we forget that the initial parameters of this pseudo-performance piece are outlined by Baldessari himself.

---

521 “The procedure: First I visited many art exhibits. When I discovered a painter I asked if he would do a painting on commission. Then I delivered a standard canvas with an area delineated to the proportions of a 35-mm transparency. The problem of providing interesting subject matter (to avoid their usual choice of Schooner ships, desert cacti, moonlit oceans, etc.) was solved by a series I had just finished which involved someone walking around and pointing at things that were interesting to him. I presented each artist with approximately a dozen of these slides from which to choose. They were asked to paint a rendition as faithfully as possible; the idea being that art would emerge. Upon completion, each painting was taken to a sign painter and the artists name affixed thus “A Painting by …” The entire set was exhibited in galleries in Los Angeles and New York that dealt in recent modern art. It was important that the paintings were exhibited as a group so that the spectator could practice connoisseurship, for example comparing how the extended forefinger in each was painted. In all, the point was to organize these artists in a different context and provide them with an unhackneyed subject that would attract the attention of a viewer interested in modern art,” John Baldessari in *John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order (Arbeiten 1962-1984)* (Köln: König, 2005), 153.

The choices of supposedly interesting objects in these images seem to be haphazard. However the longer one contemplates them, the more commonalities and differences start to emerge—the thread that binds, so to speak. Two dominant aspects recur in each of these photo-based paintings: the frame and the index. Each of these dimensions is present yet under varying guises. As Dave Hickey has argued, in contemplating whether or not Baldessari is indeed a “conceptual” artist at all: “Simply stated, the “conceptual” aspect of Baldessari’s work resides in its treatment of all media as nested extensions of the body’s demonstrative gesture—Baldessari’s trademark pointing finger.” Hickey explicitly identifies the index (literally and figuratively) in Baldessari and implicitly identifies the frame by evoking the term “nested.” Each composition in Commissioned Paintings has a multiplicity of frames. Echoing the bayonets in Goya, or the centerpiece on the cover of Artforum, the gesture of pointing opposes the dictum “This is not to be looked at.” Emphatically, demonstratively, it says instead, “Look at this!” But look at what? The pictures contain only humdrum objects of everyday life. As such, they become meta-commentaries on the most basic principle of the photographic index. As Charles Pierce related “The index asserts nothing: it only says “There!”

An ensconced sequence of visual arrows and targets combine in Baldessari to at once orient and disorient the viewer. This index which directs looking underpins Baldessari’s diverse body of work, so that, for example, the thirty-three photographs which compose Lines of Force (Photos in Line) (1972-73) and the twenty-eight photos in A Movie: Directional Piece (Where People Are Looking) (1972-73) are linked by a sequential reliance on pointing and looking. The

523 Dave Hickey, 26.
two acts are nearly inseparable. Gesture and vision are connected, as are the act and the idea, always suspended within the question of the frame of reference. The index finger, that mnemonic reference to the photographic index underscores all of these pieces, just as the frame, the mnemonic reference to the quintessential properties of art is always present. The oblique critiquing of the frame and the instability of the index connect directly, and point a posteriori to his later series Choosing (1971) which I will discuss shortly.

During the 1970s, Baldessari asked himself “why photographers do one thing and painters another.” Baldessari stated: “The real reason I got deeply interested in photography was a sense of dissatisfaction with what I was seeing. I wanted to break down the rules of photography—the conventions. I began to say photographs are simply nothing but silver deposit on paper and paintings are nothing more than paint deposited on canvas, so what’s the big deal? Why should there be a separate kind of imagery for each?” With this connection in mind Baldessari returns repeatedly to an investigation of the dialectic between painting and photography as an intermedia gesture.

“Painterliness” continually seeps into Baldessari’s art, particularly through his use of color. Though most of his photographs are black and white (as was the case with most early conceptual photography), they are nevertheless typically put in conversation with color fields. Solid colored shapes evoke the monochrome even as Baldessari criticizes the disappearance of the figure in Modern Art. Two works from the Pathetic Fallacy Series, Injured Yellow and Stoic Peach (1975), present only the most minimal photographic information. Their washed-out colours connote overexposed and sun-drenched film. The titles anchor their meanings in one

---

sense, playing on the associative relation between colors and states of mind. But ultimately, how fastened are they as evidence of anything? Or as Charles Desmarais has posed, “what could they possible prove?” Rather these documents are floating signifiers, linked to emotion-charged titles. In other words: their meaning is colored or shaded, suggesting that they are in fact misleading information at best.\(^{526}\)

### VARIOUS SMALL FIRES AND OTHER “ART SIGNALS”

*By late 1965 I was finished with painting. I was weary of doing relational painting and began wondering if straight information would serve.*-- John Baldessari\(^ {527}\)

After 1965, Baldessari maintains he was searching for a means of representation that would rule out any dependence on the “art signals”\(^ {528}\) associated with painting.\(^ {529}\) This break was never as clear as he claims however. It was instead a series of trials and errors to move away from “hard-and-fast” tenets of traditional art and the “blind faith of canonical conformity.”\(^ {530}\)

Robert Pincus-Witten has connected Baldessari’s early work of the late Sixties—in particular those that included enlarged photographs of nondescript street corners of National City,\(^ {531}\) drive-by snapshots of his hometown— with the look and the pokerfaced attitude of

---


\(^{528}\) John Baldessari, Ibid.

\(^{529}\) Anne Rorimer, “Composing on/off a Canvas,” *John Baldessari: a Different Order*, 69.

\(^{530}\) Ibid.

\(^{531}\) *Wrong and The Viewer is Compelled...* are part of this series. Others from this time are even more blasé however, such as *Ryan Oldsmobile National City, Calif.* (1967-68).
Ruscha’s photographic works, which use the camera as “a sort of note-taking rather than carrying around a notebook.” Akin to what Ruscha has dubbed “capers,” Baldessari’s self-consciously narrative visual jokes are similarly expressionless enumerations of “facts.” It is in their laconic presentation that the concept is problematized. Significantly in contrast to the democratic gesture of Ruscha’s artist books however, Baldessari’s pieces at this time are printed on canvas, adding an extra dimension of irony and, by extension, questioning the photograph as art as well as the photograph as cultural sign.

Baldessari however does move closer and closer to an explicit investigation of and engagement with photography after 1970. Notably, there is a marked urgency in Baldessari’s shift to photography. As he said retrospectively in 1980, “I discovered I was more of a ‘thinking’ person than a ‘working’ person. Photography allowed me to register my ideas more rapidly than painting them. They grew out of a sense of urgency. If you’re stranded on a desert island and a plane flew over, you wouldn’t write “HELP” in Old English script.” As if desperate times called for desperate measures, Baldessari was acutely aware of the ways varying mediums influence the way meaning is imparted and understood as well as the necessity of remaining relevant.


535 Desmarais, 27.

536 Desmarais, 29.

As mentioned previously, alongside photography, language, which arguably functions structurally in a similar mode to photography, was also prolifically included in Baldessari’s artwork at this time. Baldessari’s text on canvas works, mostly executed between 1967 and 1968, appropriated increasingly sophisticated quotes borrowed from sources such as Clement Greenberg, Max Kozloff, and art historian George Kubler. In *Painting for Kubler* (1967/68) he paraphrased a passage from Kubler’s 1962 book *The Shape of Time* that expressed the notion that art is not created in a void and that works of art are always connected to other works of art.\(^{538}\) In so doing, Baldessari expanded the self-reflexive impulse of Conceptual art further, “by making art not about art, but about art theory,” thus raising “questions about the relationship of art to theory and about the extent to which clear manifestations of theory can be found in a work of art.”\(^{539}\) Moreover, like so much of Baldessari’s other work, this ‘painting’ engages questions of medium, material and context, moreover posing the systems of theory and art history themselves as contingent.

This piece was exhibited in Jack Burnham’s famous *Software: Information technology: Its Meaning for the Arts* of 1970, held at the Jewish Museum in New York. Burnham’s curatorial bent was the belief that art was moving from being object-oriented to being systems-oriented. The inclusion of Baldessari’s canvas makes for the “strange case of John Baldessari,” according to Pamela Lee who discusses the oddity of Baldessari’s piece in this particular context

---


539 Bettina Riccio Henry, 45.
as “not so much low-tech as it was “no-tech,” a flat, acrylic gray field against which a generic hand read:”  

This painting owes its existence to prior paintings. By liking this solution, you should not be blocked in your continued acceptance of prior inventions. To attain this position, ideas of former painting had to be rethought in order to transcend former work. To like this painting, you will have to understand prior work. Ultimately, this work will amalgamate the existing body of knowledge.

This “painting” plays between text and image, opening yet another inter-visual dimension. Paraphrasing from Kubler’s Shape of Time, both Baldessari and Burham were obviously interested in Kubler’s suggestion of the kinship between art and science, in which “as the solutions accumulate, the problem alters.” The possibility of objective looking is repeatedly thrown into subjective relief.

How is it that Baldessari becomes “American art’s most prolific commentator on photography’s social workings”? In another piece from 1967-1968, An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer of Facts, Which in This Case the Camera Has Had to Accept and Mechanically Record, he turns a withering eye on our assumptions about both art and photography. The art, of course, is not in the undistinguished black and white photograph of a California parking lot, greenery, with a telephone pole running straight through the centre of the

---

540 Pamela Lee, Chronophobia, 242.
542 Desmarais, 30.
picture; nor is it in the text—copied by a professional sign painter from a book. Nor is it in the “artistic” material of stretched canvas or an “artistic” arrangement of pictorial ingredients. It is in the artist’s sardonic combination of all these elements and his choice of an image that breaks the most rudimentary, photo-manual rules of composition. “By knowingly taking the role of slavish announcer, Baldessari undercuts an artspeak bromide and takes his apparently mechanical record to the level of art.”

It was as much true of Los Angeles as anywhere else in the sixties and seventies that there were clear distinctions being made between those artists who consciously saw themselves working within the traditions of photography as “photographers” in opposition to being “artists who use photography.” Baldessari for example expressed his admiration for the radical analysis of photography’s contemporary culture function implicit in Ruscha’s books, saying “I was really taken with [Twentysix Gasoline Stations]. What I liked was they wouldn’t have been seen as art if they weren’t made by an artist.” This strange separation and veritable segregation in the art world might seem unimportant in the present. However, it is significant, as Baldessari himself explained, to note how the difference was in many ways not so much theoretical as social, “You are known by the company you keep.”

Wanting to do away with traditional “art signals” Baldessari started another kind of fire--dramatizing the mortuary of painting. Or at least his own painting. This move itself echoes Ruscha’s statements regarding his own turn to photography, saying “Because of Duchamp, it

543 Ibid.
545 Ibid.
was always an option to stop [painting], and that offered me a sublime solution if I had needed it."\textsuperscript{546} For both, the first artist to be celebrated for giving up art was a source of inspiration.

_Cremation Project_ (1970) is a “performance” by Baldessari that staged not only the death of painting but also the artists’ figurative self in relation to painting. Rather than abandoning themes of painting and colour as did many of his Conceptual contemporaries, as I have been arguing, Baldessari instead sought to make visible the conceptual structure of painting that exceeds and underpins its materiality. As Rainer Fuchs has articulated, “Far from seeing the message in the medium, at a very early stage Baldessari warned against becoming fixated on media and against euphoric belief in technologies: he forecast that the problems painters were struggling with could just as easily reappear in connection with photography.”\textsuperscript{547} Baldessari has openly discussed this trade between painting and photography in his practice saying, “Educational psychologists tell us that there is very little transfer of learning when you switch paths. All this stuff that painters have gone through, well, now photographers have to go through it.”\textsuperscript{548}

In a kind of trial by fire then, Baldessari produced _Cremation Project_ (1970), in which he declared he had abandoned panel painting and thus burned most of the pictures he had painted and not sold before 1966. This action, as another variant of blotting out, does not clearly mark his transformation from a painter to a conceptualist however, because the two were linked before and after this date. His early paintings had not been devoid of language and photography and his

\textsuperscript{546} Quoted in Robert Pincus, “Quality Material…’: Duchamp Disseminated in the Sixties and Seventies” in Bonnie Clearwater, _West Coast Duchamp_ (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1991), 93.

\textsuperscript{547} Rainer Fuchs, _John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order_, 17.

\textsuperscript{548} “John Baldessari: An Interview by Nancy Drew,” in _John Baldessari_, 65.
The event took place on July 24th, 1970, and Baldessari effectively cremated all the art he had produced between May 1953 and March 1966. This event would mark his post-1966 phototext canvases as the turning point in his development as an artist.

The piece in its final form consists of a bronze plaque which reads “John Anthony Baldessari May 1953-March 1966,” an urn, a box of ashes, a newspaper clipping publicly announcing the affidavit of the cremation, and six photographs of the event. In another instantiation, some of the ashes from Cremation were transformed into cookies as a parody of digesting art. Baldessari would later refer to the piece as having “cremated a body of my paintings,” a description he evokes in Potential Print of 1970. Notably this death drive, connected insidiously to Baldessari’s body of work, would also form the thematic of his proposal to the Information exhibition that same year, entitled Cadaver Piece. In the move to see himself and his work in a different light, Baldessari’s art repeatedly signaled something morbidly dark in the state of contemporary art, even despite the California sunshine.

549 Rainer Fuchs makes a sustained argument for the links between mediums within Baldessari’s oeuvre throughout his life in John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order.


551 See A Different Order, 164.

552 Proposal for Cadaver piece reads: “Possibly an impossible project. The idea is to exhibit a cadaver, rather than a facsimile person. What is intended is a double play of sorts. One would possibly be appalled at seeing the corpse, i.e., the factor of aesthetic distance would be broken down; but by controlling the lighting, staging, etc., so that it approximates Andrea Mantegna’s Dead Christ (making it look like art, refer to what is established as art) the shock would be cancelled and one might be able to look at the tableau with little or no discomfort. The subject is not the cadaver. The subject is rather the issue of breaking and mending aesthetic distance. Special room would be built with glass peephole. Rheostat lighting, refrigerator unit would be concealed.” The proposal makes illusions to a space that comes very close to describing a camera and further implicates photographic conditions by suggesting not only the inevitability of aesthetic distance in relation to the “representation,” but also the “impossible” desire to present a “real” cadaver rather than a “facsimile.”
California, No doubt about it... --Tupac Shakur.\textsuperscript{553}

*California Map Project/Part 1: California* (1960) was the first time Baldessari employed photographs independently from canvas.\textsuperscript{554} Ten colour photographs, a photograph of a map of California, and an explanatory text comprise the work. The work is structured on the word “California,” as this name has been printed on the found map. At each of the sites where the individual letters happen to be located, he created, or found, the appropriate letter’s shape in the landscape. For example, the “C” was made of logs on a beach, “L” is created by a telephone pole and the adjacent shadow it casts along the side of the road, while “R” is formed out of rocks in a stream. As a group, the eleven photographed sites spell out “California.” The photographs are linguistically keyed to the found letters of the location, thereby serving “to bring geographically disparate segments of observed reality together in one place,”\textsuperscript{555} while also calling into question the absurd quality of maps, in opposition to their professed ability to act as objective representations. They, like photographs, are real only in so far as the meaning one attributes to them, the confidence one invests in them to provide directions at all. More than a game about the arbitrary “nature” of language however (though the letters seem nearly camouflaged in their habitat), this piece is also striking as a demarcation of the territory in which Baldessari’s art practice has itself come to be representative, namely as a pioneer of experimentation with photography in art in California.

\textsuperscript{553} Lyrics from song *California Love*, by Tupac Shakur (1995).
\textsuperscript{554} Anne Rorimer, *A Different Kind of Order*, 73.
\textsuperscript{555} Ibid.
An exhibition curated by Charles Desmarais in 1992 at the Laguna Art Museum, entitled *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960–1980* set the task of explaining the commonalities in Los Angeles art of this period by referring to the work of some forty-five artists experimenting with photography. Among the central questions underpinning the show were why so many artists were using photography the way they were on the one hand, and how were these practices distinct to a West Coast sensibility on the other. One of the conclusions Desmarais draws is the “realization that this art, ultimately, is the expression of profound doubt” as a result of the overall “unreliability of modern social and political structures, anchored in the liberating revelation that there is no such thing as proof – that we can communicate nothing but interpretation.” Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche’s late nineteenth-century adage that “there are no facts, only interpretation,” this use of photography in the sixties visibly anticipated current concerns in contemporary art.

Like much of today’s media-savvy work, these conceptual photographic practices owe a heavy debt to the Pop art of the 1960s as well as to earlier reflections on the medium in relation to cultural phenomenon, namely the writings of Walter Benjamin from the 1930s. While Douglas Crimp’s writings on pictures and the Pictures generation might lead one to believe that the brand of photo-conceptualism based in media-appropriation has its genesis in New York, 

\[\text{\textsuperscript{556}}\]

31 October 1992 – 17 January 1993 at the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California, went on to tour 5 other locations across the United States over the next couple of years including the De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, The Ansel Adams Center in San Francisco, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama, the Tampa Museum of Art in Florida, and the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{557}}\]


\[\text{\textsuperscript{558}}\]

Ibid., 11.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{559}}\]

Desmarais argues quite convincingly for a reconsideration of the origins of postmodernism in earlier Los Angeles art when by some seemingly strange coincidence of geography these photographers took up the photograph’s essence as a subject of investigation: “Searching for the answer to what the photograph is, they often tested assumptions about what it is not. Challenging its authority as repository of fact, they used it to lie, or to detect lies, or to rethink the conventional distinction between lie and truth.”\(^{560}\) Beginning with works such as Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* portfolio of 1962, the use of photography in art on the West coast has been dominated by the experience of reality governed by pictures, or to use Crimp’s observation regarding the role of pictures more broadly: “While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, now it seems that they have usurped it.”\(^{561}\) Countering the idea that art is synonymous with either stable truth or entrenched power, California artists in the late sixties tuned to photography as a means to encourage doubt and contradiction under the guise of the blasé delivery of information, working against the double sense of Nietzschean mastery. According to the German philosopher, “Our so-called will to truth is the will to power because the so-called drive for knowledge can be traced back to a drive to appropriate and conquer.”\(^{562}\) The paradox of being able to distinguish between reality and representation is however a complication to the pursuit of truth that has become a quotidian

\(^{560}\) Desmarais, 12.


reality in California. This is particularly true in Los Angeles, where “the tradition of the visual arts is the tradition of movies and television, of billboards and advertising.”

Art in California has always been deeply connected to the film industry. Whether by Walt Disney employing painters as animators during the Great Depression straight through to today when Disney funding continues to be one of the most important life-lines of the top regional art school, the California Institute of the Arts. In addition, actors and directors, and other film workers have been among the wealthiest and most vigilant collectors, counting everyone from Cary Grant to Dennis Hopper to Steve Martin. As Ed Ruscha described his attraction to Southern California, “LA possessed vulgar magic with no history except that of the movie industry.” This is the California zeitgeist of which Baldessari was part and parcel, constantly oscillating between concepts of what is ‘real’ vs. ‘illusion.’ Hollywood’s influence was nearly omnipresent, including what Suda House has described as, “the set-building—constructed for the camera—sensibility, the glamour, the hype, the increasing nudity and sexual encounters depicted on film for the general viewing public—all contributed to this atmosphere of total freedom and experimentation.”

564 Desmarais, 12.
565 Ibid., 13.
566 Suda House quoted in Desmarais, 13. Many of Baldessari’s works evidence the influence of Hollywood “staging,” for example his Embed Series: Oiled Arm (Sinking Boat and Palms) (1974) in which a close-up shot of the artist’s arm covered in oil appears to be a sea in which a miniature boat and a couple of palm trees illustrate a constructed narrative that plays on the viewer’s perception of scale. The title gives away the ruse while the photograph amuses through its reference to Hollywood set productions.
Significantly, this sense of autonomy was also encouraged by the fact that Southern California as a whole lacked serious exhibition spaces and critics, especially by contrast to New York’s preeminence.\textsuperscript{567} Until 1965 when a new Los Angeles County Art Museum was built, there was no independent art museum in the entire city of two and a half million people.\textsuperscript{568} And though \textit{Artforum} magazine was founded on the West Coast in San Francisco in 1962, and moved to LA in 1965, it had relocated to New York by 1967. There was momentarily a glimmer of hope made possible by the sophisticated programming of both the Pasadena Art Museum and the Ferus Gallery; however Ferus closed in 1966, and the Pasadena Art Museum followed suit in 1974.

Perhaps in part because of the lack of dominant institutions, the few major exhibitions that took place were extremely influential. Notably, the most significant exhibitions of this era were also ones that “encouraged experimental attitudes towards photography,”\textsuperscript{569} namely \textit{The New Painting of the Common Object} (1962) and \textit{By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Selavy} (1963). Both shows were held at the Pasadena Art Museum and organized by Walter Hopps. The \textit{New Painting} exhibition was the first museum exhibition of Pop art in the United States and the Duchamp exhibition was the artist’s first retrospective. Each was influential in further developing the freewheeling Southern California outlook, and importantly both exhibitions were crucial to the specific interests of emerging artists working with photography: “the first validated


\textsuperscript{568} Desmarais, 14.

\textsuperscript{569} Ibid., 17.
the Image in an Abstract Expressionist’s world, pointing an ironic and self-referential way for artists more or less stuck with Image as a given; the second discredited the merely “retinal”,570 opening up entirely new possibilities for the very conception of art. It deserves mentioning as well that the Pasadena Art Museum was also the site of Warhol’s first museum exhibition in 1970. And indeed the Ferus Gallery was the site of Warhol’s first one-man show, a dead-pan presentation of thirty-two paintings of *Campbell’s Soup Cans* held in 1962, (the same year as Ed Ruscha’s debut exhibition in the same space).

Among the advantages of this lack of prominent institutional structures for artists was an abiding “sense of freedom from artistic rules and institutional strictures,”571 the very things Baldessari was interested in putting on trial. As Eleanor Antin expressed it, “New York was always formulating the correct ways to work and think while back here we were always eager to be surprised and engaged in new ways.”572

In addition to the Ferus Gallery and the Pasadena Art Museum, the Chouinard Art Institute (which would later become known as the California Institute of the Arts) and the University of California, Los Angeles, were the centres of gravity for nearly everyone involved in progressive art. Significantly, in 1970 (the same year Baldessari burned his paintings), he moved from San Diego to join the faculty at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he

570 Ibid.
571 Ibid., 15.
572 Antin in interview with Desmarais, Ibid.
began to work “almost exclusively in photography and related media, unleashing a frenzy of production that has gone unabated since.”

As teachers, students, or both—many people were beginning to think of the photograph as an art object—not simply a medium. Seeing photography not as the transparent transmission of information nor as pure information itself, but rather as a material entity with its own formal properties ran completely opposite conservative and Modernist informed artistic ideologies regarding the limits of medium-specificity. The formal surface of the photograph—completely out of keeping with traditional sculptural materials—introduces a pictorial space as a counterpoint to, and extension of, sculptural space, positing a powerful break from the illusory concept of photography as a window on an infinitely receding world, deliberately against modernism’s “truth to materials” and the belief in truth as a stable category more broadly. By contrast, critics like Hilton Kramer could not conceive of the possibility of a photograph being understood as an object beyond any object that it might name as an image.

The very notion that photography was in some ways suspect to the art world overall as an aesthetic medium, let alone an aesthetic object, was precisely the attraction for artists such as Ed Ruscha, Wallace Berman, Allan Ruppersberg, and of course John Baldessari. According to


575 On the issue of the photograph as object, see Hilton Kramer’s review of Peter Bunnell’s MoMA exhibition “Photography into Sculpture,” 1970. No catalogue was published for the show but there are articles from the time by Bunnell in the magazines “Art and Artist,” “Art in America,” and “Artscanada.” The exhibition traveled widely to eight additional venues, including the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County (January 24 –March 5, 1972).
Desmarais, Baldessari is one of the most prevalent figures to emerge at this time as especially powerful from this nexus of Los Angeles photography.\textsuperscript{576}

Having been hired at the inception of CalArts, Baldessari had a major impact on the school and thus, on contemporary art in Los Angeles and the ways in which it was perceived nationally. Dubbing the school a “coolbed” of Conceptual art, Baldessari was instrumental in bringing Douglas Huebler to CalArts, who had close affinities with the Los Angeles Conceptual scene, as Dean in 1976. Others who came to teach at his invitation, included Vito Acconci, Robert Barry, Laurie Anderson, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner. Among his students Baldessari can count some of the most visible contemporary artists, many of whom, even among the painters, demonstrate an awareness of the power contemporary culture grants the photograph, including Barbara Bloom, James Casabere, Eric Fischl, Mike Kelley, Matt Mullican, David Salle, and James Welling to name a few.\textsuperscript{577}

Noting that other artists, such as Vito Acconci, Joseph Kosuth and Richard Long had made far-reaching use of photographs in complex ways that went beyond mere documentation, Desmarais nevertheless distinguishes between West Coast and East Coast sensibilities: “In Los Angeles, however, we can discern a particularly tenacious strain of works primarily dedicated to unmasking the photographic lie.”\textsuperscript{578} Additionally, a “goofy humor and self-deprecating humility are marks of this work of the early seventies”—characteristics Baldessari’s work shared with

\textsuperscript{576} Desmarais, 18.
\textsuperscript{577} Ibid., 31-32.
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid., 31.
other artists in his milieu, namely Allen Ruppersberg, Eleanor Antin (who knew Baldessari from San Diego) and William Wegman (who shared a studio with him in 1973).  

Peter Plagens and others have continued to develop narratives around the idea of scholastic Conceptual art in New York versus a prankster laissez-faire style Conceptual art on the West Coast. Considering Baldessari’s pedagogic legacy this mythology makes for a reductive oversimplification of the facts. That California’s and Baldessari’s influence on Conceptual art came as a surprise to some seems in keeping with the unassuming attitude of the place however. As Howard N. Fox, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has explained,

During the 1960s and 1970s, the mythology of California shifted like a tectonic plate, nudging popular conceptions out of place and occasionally thrusting new ones suddenly and violently into national awareness.” Or, as the artist and photo-theorist Allan Sekula has expressed, “Los Angeles is perpetually in the grip of a generalized, often hallucinatory idealism. The art world perpetuates this in various ways. It’s logical that Los Angeles should be the site of the counter-myth that photographs ‘don’t tell the truth.”

Sekula’s extremely influential essay of 1975 would provide a more dialectical approach to these two positions. “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” originally published in Artforum, was among the first widely read political critiques of the medium of photography. His statement that “The meaning of a photograph, like that of any other entity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition,” seemed obvious but was nevertheless radical based on the obedient ways in

---

579 Ibid.
580 See Peter Plagens, Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast (New York, Praeger 1974).
582 Allan Sekula in conversation with Charles Desmarais, Proof, 33. See also Allan Sekula, “On the invention of Photographic Meaning,” Artforum 13, no. 5 (January 1975), 37.
which photographs were being used and circulated at “face value.” Sekula made explicit the ways that photographs are not harbingers of truth but rather loaded signifiers replete with interpretation, explaining that:

Photographs are used to sell cars, commemorate family outings, to impress images of dangerous faces on the memories of post-office patrons, to convince citizens that their taxes did in fact collide gloriously with the moon, to remind us of what we used to look like, to move our passions, to investigate a countryside for traces of an enemy, to advance the careers of photographers, etc. Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone’s investment in the sending of a message.

Baldessari, like Sekula, was an exception to the rules of so-called California anti-intellectualism. Each was engaged with issues of critique from the outset—demonstrating a West Coast subversion of the standards of East Coast “legibility.” Baldessari’s photographs provide one of the many necessary counter-myths advocated by Sekula as a means of calling into doubt the photographic sign as well as the photographic message.

DOUBT AND DIDACTICISM

In Baldessari’s faux-didactic canvasses such as Subject Matter (1967-68), he instructs the aspiring artist to “look at the subject as if you have never seen it before… Saturate yourself with it.” Such works deliberately clash Pop Art influences and materials with the language of tautological closure, providing “a self-conscious critique [that] contradicts the spirit of Pop.”

Tellingly, Joseph Kosuth mistrusted Baldessari. Though Baldessari, like Kosuth, evoked language as a theme unpinning his works from the late 1960s onward, and because of their shared use of text they would often be discussed in tandem, Kosuth nevertheless derided

Baldessari’s practice veritably as false imitations of Conceptual Art, by contrast to the pure conceptualism which he saw himself as participating in. In his much renowned text dedicated to defining the parameters of conceptual art in *Studio International* in 1969, Kosuth wrote: “Although the amusing pop paintings of John Baldessari allude to this sort of work by being ‘conceptual’ cartoons of actual conceptual art, they are not really relevant to this discussion.”

Kosuth interpreted Baldessari’s use of blunt humour in his artworks as “‘conceptual’ cartoons” about conceptual art, merely derogatory signs that for him marked only their lack of seriousness and programmatic analysis. This opposition to Baldessari reveals much more about Kosuth’s limited view of conceptualism in particular and art in general, than it does Baldessari’s position however, especially since nuance was never Kosuth’s strong suit. In response, *EVERYTHING HAS BEEN PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART, NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THE WORK* announces another textcanvas by Baldessari. The statement itself is a humourous reference that reverses Kosuth’s declaration that the purest definition of conceptual art is its investigation into the foundations of the “art” concept. Kosuth could not appreciate Baldessari’s “serious unseriousness,” which links Baldessari to the Duchampian tradition of intellectual play.

Much of Baldessari’s practice pivots on his resistance to the very idea that art can be learned by adherence to pre-established rules and programs, as such his humour is often directed at subverting the logic of pre-set artistic paradigms. For this reason, the fact that Baldessari’s

---

586 Rainer Fuchs, *A Different Order*, 15.
link to pedagogy, namely his role as an art teacher at both Cal Arts and UCLA, features so prominently into his biography and by extension into much interpretation of his own artwork might seem all the more contradictory. The rub according to Rainer Fuchs is that it was precisely his twinned profession as artist and art teacher “as well as his socialization on the periphery of the culture industry in the extreme south-west” of the United States that “brought home to him the banal effects of standardization and of didactically regulating artistic skills.”

Influenced by his context of living in Southern California, inevitably linked to the dream factories of Hollywood, Disney and California dreaming more broadly, Baldessari is a teacher preoccupied with a creativity of mind that cannot be gained through rote rules and formulas. The suggestion in many instances rather is that it cannot be taught at all. This leaves one with a pedagogy that defies rules, in other words, a counter-pedagogy.

Baldessari took the discourse of art as his starting point for his artistic activities in the late 1960s. Suspicious of labels, didacticism, and formalism, Baldessari combined mediums, photography and painting, visual images and language, as a means of productively using his profound sense of doubt as a creative tool. He did not believe in the hermetic theory of artistic development advocated by Clement Greenberg for example, but rather strategically pushed such hermetic theories to the point of absurdity through exercises that expose the limits of autonomy in any art practice.

In *One and Three Chairs* (1965) Joseph Kosuth extended his own understanding of the readymade by breaking it down into a tripartite set of relations—object, linguistic sign, and photographic reproduction. This act was intended to illustrate his assertion in “Art After

---

588 Rainer Fuchs, Ibid., 15.
Philosophy,” that the work of art is a “proposition presented within the context of art as a
comment on art.” Kosuth drew on the models of linguistics, the laws of mathematics, and the
principles of logical positivism to define his project, as an “inquiry into the foundations of the
concept ‘art,’ as it has come to mean.” Baldessari by contrast evoked the models Kosuth relied
on so dogmatically in order to point to the error of their ways, by means both humorous and
sardonic. While these criteria were valid for Kosuth’s own investigations, such a rigorously
analytical approach was hardly applicable to many of the other practices emerging at the time,
particularly to the work Baldessari, who was in fact “explicitly excommunicated from Kosuth’s
late-modernist doxa.” In opposition to Kosuth’s interpretation of Duchamp as doctrine,
Baldessari looked to the older artist for “his subversive legacies and applied them to the false
orthodoxies with which Conceptualism was about to install itself as the new authoritative
movement.”

BETWEEN CHOICE AND CHANCE

A lot of artists around the world got bored at the same time. I was hired at CalArts to teach
painting but I just kind of got bored. I guess [as a teacher] I attracted other people who were
bored. —John Baldessari

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen.
Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all. —John Cage

589 Yve-alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Art since 1900: modernism
antimodernism postmodernis, 1945 to the present, 533.

590 Ibid.

591 Ibid. Works such as I will Not Make Anymore Boring Art could also be considered in this regard.

592 Desmarais quoting Baldessari, 30.
Many of Baldessari’s students over the years have commented on the profound impact his approach to art and teaching had on them. In an interview on 2004, Matt Mullican tried to convey the immense shift in his own thinking that occurred in correlation to Baldessari’s teachings at CalArts in Los Angeles in the 1970s. According to Mullican, Baldessari combined a casual openness to the expression of art with an enlightening didacticism. For example, Mullican admits that he remains nearly dumbfounded as to how the simple act of pointing opened up a whole new way of seeing for him, stating, “I still can’t stop thinking about those works, the pointing issue. The fact that pointing is almost the first semantic act; it is the basic basic act.” This approach of going back to basics with a critical view underscores Baldessari’s artistic philosophy. At every turn and with every medium he explores the limits and breaking points of ideas that are too often taken for granted, or for givens.

Baldessari’s series of photo-based projects from the early 1970s continued to emphasize the importance of pointing to practice. Linking pointing explicitly to the act of choosing, through simple means Baldessari seemed to enact the credo of Marcel Duchamp, who famously stated: “To make art is to choose and always to choose.”

Using nominalism as the name of the game (and the game of the name), *Choosing (A Game for Two Players)* began. The series itself focused on the act of choosing and its connection to random impulse. For example in one version *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Green Beans* (1971) consists of nine color photographs arranged in three horizontal

---


rows of three. As an utter counter-point to Edward Weston’s beautiful photographs of individual vegetables, each blasé photograph by Baldessari documents three plain green beans. In Baldessari’s own words, the instructions were as follows: “A participant was asked to choose any three beans from the group for whatever reasons he/she might have at the moment. The three chosen beans were then placed upon a surface to be photographed. I chose one of the three beans for whatever reasons, I might have had at the moment. A photograph was taken of the selection process. The chosen bean was carried over; the two other beans not chosen were discarded; two new beans added. The next choice was made, and so on. Each of the participants develops strategies unknown to the other player as the selection process continued until all the beans are used.” Each photograph of the set, though seemingly mundane, again includes the omnipresent index finger pointing from the foreground of the frame.

Choosing shares with other works by Baldessari, a performance of the belief that rules (particularly as far as art is concerned) are a matter of perspective. Aligning: Balls (1972) also begins with a set of instructions, directing a banal activity, with a set goal that also seems arbitrary if not completely useless. In Aligning, a red ball was thrown into the air and photographed in various scenes, on various streets, in front of various buildings or telephone poles, in front of the expanse of an anonymous expanse of the sky. In each snapshot the resolution of the image varies as does the location of the ball. Overall they appear excessively amateur and haphazard, one might even say meaningless. Always off centre, the ball floats further up or down the frame, more laterally or not. The completed project is forty-one resultant photographs arranged on the wall but not installed traditionally as “aligned”. Instead of using the

595 Other versions included rhubarb rather than green beans, for example. The seeming randomness of these objects/things furthers the sense of the arbitrary and even the silly in these works.

typical top or bottom edges of the photograph’s frame to dictate the level at which they should be exhibited, the floating ball was used as “a notational device,” which becomes the consistent means of hanging the photographs—the level of the ball in each photograph is aligned to create an order all its own, generated by the ball, which becomes the most random and as well as the most consistent aspect of these photographs. To add to this confusion, “each shot is alternately a photograph of a ball or a photograph of a location or scene.”

“Art for John Baldessari has to do with…the establishment of certain qualitative levels of order while accepting the formation of other levels of disorder,” one critic wrote in 1972, referring specifically to *Aligning Balls* of that same year. Art for Baldessari evidently also has to do with humor, derived in part, from “the nonsense our world sometimes disguises as order.” Exposing the blatant capriciousness of rules functions as a critique of modernist orthodoxy. Baldessari’s examination of “photography’s cultural triumph as a kind of substitute reality” simultaneously unmasks ideals such as originality and preciosity as contrivances. As the viewer attempts to fill in the blanks, or in this case connect the dots, one considers how the desire for narrative literacy often threatens to override reality.

**WHO LAUGHS LAST?**

*I owe you the truth in painting, and I will tell it to you. — Paul Cezanne.*

\[597\] Ibid., 178.

\[598\] Henry Martin, “Milan Letter,” *Art International* 16, no. 6 (Summer 1972), 106.

\[599\] Desmarais, 30.

\[600\] Ibid., 18.
For most of us photography stands for the truth. [...] It fascinates me how I can manipulate the truth so easily by the way I juxtapose opposites or crop the image or take it out of context.
–John Baldessari.⁶⁰¹

Ultimately, Baldessari employs the photograph as a prosaic and yet multi-dimensional material; it is at once his object and his subject. Indulging it its anonymity as well as its surfeit of detail, his interest in the vulnerability of the photograph and its link to truth claims is repeatedly manifest. Despite his use of the stuff of everyday life as both his form and ideation, even Baldessari’s plainest admissions show themselves to be filled with potential duplicity: “This is what it is. It’s not great, it’s not bad, it’s just what it is, sort of ordinary, like Van Gogh painting a pair of old shoes.”⁶⁰² Baldessari’s skeptical use of the photograph performs a wisecracking critique of art, while taking seriously the importance of provoking doubt and debate regarding any claim to the truth in painting, pointing, or pictures.

---

⁶⁰¹ Baldessari, quoted in van Bruggen, 214.
⁶⁰² Baldessari, Ibid., 36.
Conclusion:
Beyond the Shadow of Doubt?

All that has been received, if only yesterday... must be suspected. –Jean-Francois Lyotard.603

Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot contain. --Sol LeWitt

Just as the quest for a comprehensive picture of the world is bound to fail so is the quest for essential photographic meaning. Photography is not and has never been an impartial recording device. Photography under the aegis of conceptual art made this reality all more striking. The conceptual photography of Mel Bochner, Bruce Nauman, Douglas Huebler, and John Baldessari disavowed more than pure documentation and performed more than the role of coy amateur photography. In moving outside of the boundaries of traditional aesthetics, these artists challenged the conventions of the aesthetic object. As I have argued at length, each extended the problematics of Duchamp’s readymade, repeatedly looking for the delays, seeking out the contingencies.

All four of the artists studied here began with propositions that were seemingly logical at the same time that they were seemingly arbitrary. The fact that each project is replete with profound philosophical and artistic questioning becomes all the more apparent as they are brought into dialogue with another. Viewed alongside one another, Mel Bochner’s systematic undoing of measurements rejoins the apparent absurdity of Douglas Huebler’s project to document the existence of everyone alive, in that both push beyond the limits of objective logic. Both depend upon photography to do so, and in exchange, they reveal photography’s unreliable and yet persistent power to undermine systems as such. The unremarkable banality of Bruce

---

Nauman’s photographs, ranging from the artist’s attempts to drink coffee in his studio to his attempt to levitate, speaks to the ordinariness and the implausibility of Baldessari’s subjects, and both question what is art, as much as what is and is not to be looked at. The modernist logic of self-reference is moved towards a form of self-criticism that allows a space for deliberation, and often a space for humour. In the postmodernist sense they make explicit the dominion of mediation and the need for critique. The modernist claim to an original moment is exposed as impossible in face of the infinite possibility of proliferating photographic copies.

I have deliberately attempted to avoid the nomination “photoconceptualism” in regards to the artwork addressed in this dissertation. On the one hand this gesture recognizes the historic specificity of these works from the late 1960s, and acknowledges the fact that it was not until the mid-1970s that a discussion of how these “conceptual” pieces relied on photography was available. Until that point, as I have described, critics, artists, and certainly art historians, viewed photography as extraneous and incidental to the work rather than “the” mark of contingency on which the work pivoted.

As Tony Godfrey noted, “Conceptual art has had the widest possible effect on how photography is used in art, because it does not take the medium as a given, but as something whose mechanisms and use have to be analysed.” Neglect of any one artist’s position on or use of photography, it is doubtless that conceptual artists between 1966-1973 participated in an important transformation of both art and the medium of photography itself. The rise in prominence of photography at this time was formative to the “Pictures” generation of the late

---

1970s and early 1980s, and would continue to be relevant for every contemporary art movement that followed.

It also remains prescient that in the present we have not moved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Instead, the need to question the rhetorical, ideological, and conceptual possibilities of the photograph remain. Arthur Danto’s summation of Wittgenstein’s emphatic doubt is relevant in this regard, “The things we ‘accept’ are what we are certain of only in the sense that we cannot imagine what life would be were they false, almost because they define the limits of imagination. Were we to attempt to set down these ‘accepted’ propositions, they would be simple, obvious, and useless. They would be all but uninformative.”

Photography and conceptual art were perfectly matched in the work of Bochner, Nauman, Huebler, Baldessari and others to demonstrate the unstable role of images in the late twentieth century and the doubt that underscores any relationship between representation and the real.

---

Bibliography


Ades, Dawn and Neil Cox, and David Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).


Antin, Eleanor. “Reading Ruscha,” *Art in America* vol. 61, no. 6 (November-December 1973), 64-71.


*As Painting: Division and Displacement* Exh. cat. (Wexner Center for the Arts, 2001).


Blessing, Jennifer, ed. Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997).


_____. with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, *Art since 1900: modernism antimodernism postmodernism, 1945 to the present*.


*Bruce Nauman* (New York: Leo Castelli, 1968), unpaginated.
Bruce Nauman: Make Me Think, ed. Laurence Sillars Exh. cat. (Tate Liverpool, 2006).


Bruce Nauman: Theatres of Experience. ed.s Susan Cross and Christine Hoffmann (Deutsche Guggenheim, 2004).


_____ . “Alice’s Head: Reflections of Conceptual Art,” Artforum vol. 8, no. 6 (February 1970), 37-43.


“Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp,” *October* 70 (Fall 1994), 127-146.


____. “Pictures,” *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979) 75-88.


_____. *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).


Fried, Michael. “Art and Objecthood,” Artforum vol. 15. no. 10 (June 1967), 12-23.


_____. “Barthes’s *Punctum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005) 569.


Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).


_____ “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” 0-9 no. 5 (January 1969), 3-5.
_____. “Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD),” *Aspen* 5-6 (Fall-Winter 1967), n.p.


_____. and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* vol. 12, no. 2 (February 1968) 31-36.


Martin, Henry. “Milan Letter,” *Art International* 16, no. 6 (Summer 1972), 106.


_____. “I Think Therefore I Art,” *Artforum* 23, no. 10 (Summer 1985), 75.


_____. “Notes on sculpture, part 1,” Artforum 4.6 (February 1966) 42-44.

_____. “Notes on sculpture, part 2,” Artforum 5.2 (October 1966) 20-23.

_____. “Notes on sculpture, part 3: notes and non sequitors,” Artforum 5.10 (June 1967).


Bruce Nauman, interview with Michele De Angeles, 27 and 30 May, 1980. (California Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian institution) 77.


Rajchman, “Foucault’s Art of Seeing,” *October* vol. 44 (Spring, 1988).


_____. *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).


Royal Road Test (1967).

Some Los Angeles Apartments (1965).

Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles (1967).


Various Fired and Milk (1964).


“Herschel, Talbot, and Photography: Spring 1831 and Spring 1839,” History of Photography 4, no. 3 (July 1980).


_____. “The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War,” Artforum (December 1975).


_____.


_____.


“The Reception of the Sixties,” roundtable discussion, October, no. 69 (Summer 1994).

This Is Not To Be Looked At: Highlights from the Permanent Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008).


