



FOUR ARTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

— An Essay in Philosophy —

Dominic McIver Lopes

WILEY Blackwell

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Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London.

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Four Arts of Photography

An Essay in Philosophy

DOMINIC McIVER LOPES

With commentary by

DIARMUID COSTELLO AND CYNTHIA A. FREELAND

WILEY

This edition first published 2016

© 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc

Registered office

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data applied for

9781119053170 (Hardback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: © Amanda Means

For Turner Wigginton

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Notes on Author and Contributors

Dominic McIver Lopes is Distinguished University Scholar and Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Understanding Pictures* and *Sight and Sensibility: Evaluating Pictures*, as well as books on computer art and the nature of art. His first camera was a Kodak Instamatic 124, which he used to document his family's migration from Scotland to Canada.

Diarmuid Costello is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. He co-directed the Arts and Humanities Research Council project on Aesthetics after Photography, and has co-edited issues of *Art History*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and *Critical Inquiry* on photography. He is now working on a book titled *On Photography* for Routledge. He grew up on the smell of D76 and Neutol WA, and supported himself through art school as a photographer.

Cynthia A. Freeland is Moores Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Houston. She is currently (2015–2017) serving as president of the American Society for Aesthetics. Her publications include work on ancient philosophy and feminist theory as well as aesthetics, and her most recent book is *Portraits and Persons*. Her photo stream can be viewed on Flickr, where she is known as “Philosopher Queen.”

Preface

Philosophers cultivate the virtue of cool detachment, but philosophers of art must make a special effort to keep their aesthetic passions in check. Neutrality clears space for multiple perspectives and frank confrontations, but it can be fragile. Slight errors in emphasis, hasty generalizations, too obvious assumptions, and slips of imagination can mislead catastrophically. We must therefore curb our enthusiasms. Yet, I confess I have a soft spot for photography.

My first book, *Understanding Pictures*, took on drawing and photography as our two principal modes of imaging, and I thought an article that I subsequently wrote about the aesthetics of photography would be my final say on the topic.¹ Then came the passion. Over the past 10 years, I looked at a lot of photography as a private citizen rather than as a professional philosopher, in a city with an intense photography scene. Readers of early drafts of my book on computer art urged me to say something about digital art, which got me thinking about digital photography. Soon after, my stepson began to train as a photographer, and our conversations brought the practice of photo-making back into my life—I grew up taking and printing photographs. Back on the professional side, Diarmuid Costello asked me to join him in co-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* on photographic media.² His enthusiasm rubbed off, along with some (though not enough) of his vast knowledge. The last straw was an invitation to speak at a show of contemporary photography at the Kunstmuseum Bonn during the summer of 2011, for this led to the key idea of this book.³

Through all this, I had become convinced that some of the most compelling, and also pleasing, works of visual art in recent decades were photographs. A rarity, photography appeals as much to ordinary art lovers as to art world insiders. At the same time, I was annoyed whenever I heard critics say, as they too often do, that photography only became a serious art form in the 1980s, mainly through the efforts of the Düsseldorf and Vancouver schools. No amount of critical discourse could get me to reconsider 150 years of brilliant photographic art. Even the narrative of its triumphal march through the gallery gates seemed to assume a stunted or partial picture of photography.

This essay uses a little philosophy solicitously to gauge the power of photography as an art. The approach is not philosophy in the standard academic mode, where theoretical analyses are constructed and tested through technically precise (some say tedious) argumentation. Neither is it the kind of philosophy–criticism that draws philosophers, critics, and art lovers to the writing of Richard Wollheim, Arthur Danto, Martha Nussbaum, Alexander Nehamas, or Robert Pippin.⁴ I lack the skill and sensibility for that. My aim is not to argue for a thesis, and I cannot pretend to plumb the depths of specific photographs. I aspire instead to open up and complicate our shared view of photography, counteracting a history of thinking about it from one narrow perspective after another.

As its subtitle proclaims, this book is an “essay.” The word has acquired a squalid reputation through repeated association with classroom assignments requiring students to say pretty much nothing in 500 or 5,000 words. When added to subtitles, “essay” has become meaningless, except to foretell the onset of some dry academic prose. I want to repatriate the word. The essay is a relatively short text that tries out a new idea, without full-on proof, scholarly discussion, and literature review. The essay is experimental, concrete, and personal in its vision (but not always anecdotal). In landscape architecture, gardens are a design opportunity where ideas are put in play, freed from clients’ demands, and follies are built. The essay is the garden of philosophy.

I am tremendously lucky to know many gifted thinkers and scholars. Without their intellectual generosity, this book would never have been written. My thanks to Gemma Argüello, Aleksey—Balotskiy, Diarmuid Costello, Richard Eldridge, Emma Esmaili, Susan Herrington, Luning Li, Samantha Matherne, Madeleine Ransom, James Shelley, and Servaas Van Der Berg. Thanks also to audiences at UNAM, Auburn University, the Kunstmuseum Bonn, Cal State Fullerton, Dartmouth University, the University of Durham, the 2015 New Philosophy of Photography Conference at the Institute of Philosophy in London, the University of Miami, Minho University, Northwestern University, the University of Oklahoma, the 2013 Ovrinnaz Workshop on the Philosophy of Photography, Paris–Sorbonne University, the University of Utah, the University of Valencia, the University of Warwick, and my 2014 undergraduate seminar in the philosophy of photography. A big thanks to five anonymous referees, whose reports set the gold standard for intelligent, constructive peer review.

The bones of the book were presented as the 2012 Mangoletsi Lectures at the University of Leeds, and I am grateful to the donor who sponsored the lectures and for the warm hospitality of Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin, and all the members of the Leeds philosophy department.

Philosophy moves forward through dialogue, but only indirect traces of the dialogue tend to get written down and preserved. Outsiders often miss out on an important and rewarding part of the life of philosophy. Regretting this, Plato wrote dramatized conversations among interested parties, and Plato’s model remains viable.⁵ Another model is the commentary, a kind of conversation in slow motion, and this book includes a pair of commentaries—by Diarmuid Costello and Cynthia Freeland. For me, it is a great honor to get a thorough going-over by my most respected peers. Costello and Freeland do not agree with everything I say. Good thing too, because their insights and acute observations show us the way forward. Nothing makes me cringe like a book that presents itself as being the last word on its topic. Freeland and Costello get the last word here, but our exchange is an invitation for you to join in.

Notes

- ¹ Dominic McIver Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and “The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency,” *Mind* 112.447 (2003), pp. 432–48.
- ² Diarmuid Costello and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., “Special Issue on The Media of Photography,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70.1 (2012), pp. 1–163. Reprinted as *The Media of Photography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- ³ Dominic McIver Lopes, “Jetzt Sind Wir Alle Künstler,” in *Kunst und Philosophie: Fotografie zwischen Inszenierung und Dokumentation*, ed. Julian Nida-Rümelin and Jakob Steinbrenner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), pp. 105–22. Translated and reprinted in *Estética, Cultura Material e Diálogos Intersemióticos*, ed. Ana Gabriela Macedo, Carlos Mendes de Sousa, and Vítor Moura (Ribeirão: Edições Húmus, 2012), pp. 185–98 and in *Enraonar: Quaderns de Filosofia* 50 (2013), pp. 45–57.
- ⁴ Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World*

Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[5](#) For example, Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, 3rd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2014).

Wonderment to Puzzlement

Voicing a disappointment well known to curious minds, Donald Davidson acknowledged how hard it is “to improve on intelligibility while retaining the excitement.”¹ Familiar phenomena seen through a haze can come to have an exotic allure that rarely survives straightening them out. An exception is the philosophy of photography. Those who puzzle over photography are apt to find that the topic grows more—not less—interesting as their puzzles are solved.

Photography's relentless successes over the past two centuries have done little to dampen its magic. Soon after the exhibition of the first Daguerreotype, Edgar Allen Poe nominated it “the most extraordinary triumph of modern science,” and Lady Elizabeth Eastlake later recalled the “wondering gaze” that met the triumph.² Since then, photography's domestication—becoming “a household word and a household want”—has advanced by leaps.³ The invention of dry photographic plates freed the camera from the chemistry set. Soon after that, mass-manufactured handheld cameras were marketed alongside convenient drugstore photo-finishing. The adoption of high-speed 35-mm film from the movie business was followed by the perfection of user-friendly autofocus and automatic exposure control, the invention of instant imaging via Polaroid and then digital display, and (most recently) the migration of the technology out of the single-purpose camera and into the pocket-sized smartphone. By mid-2012, 300 million photographs were being uploaded to social media sites per month. By 2014 it was 300 million per day. Taking photographs is now as natural as turning doorknobs. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called it “the most ordinary thing of all,” while Susan Sontag found it to be “as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing.”⁴ As with sex and dancing, more seems never to be too much. Our response to photographs—of recognition, pleasure, and discovery—remains irresistible and visceral. The power of photographs to command this response, like the power of humor to command a smile, has never faded.

Not every success story makes the philosophy books. Good puzzles grab philosophers. On one hand, the stunning success of photography seems to stem from its capacity to effortlessly and impartially record our visual world. Photographs seem to have a special epistemic virtue, and we tend to trust them more than we trust other images. On the other hand, we value photographs as works of art and as expressions of the artistic vision of the photographer. So it is hard to deny both that the camera is an unbiased witness and that it can be used with the same expressive force as the paintbrush, chisel, or diatonic scale. Yet, it cannot be true that photographs are valuable both as means of artistic expression and also as objective records that neutralize the personal perspective. We face a dilemma and we must take sides, but both sides seem right. Disconcerted, the philosopher rolls up her sleeves.

Notice that the two sides face off as a debate about the standing of photography as an art form. Impressed by photography's epistemic power, you might reason as follows. Photographs are objective visual records because they are the products of machine imaging rather than mind work. However, making art requires mind work, and art's value is achieved through mind work. So, taking a photograph is no way to make a work of art or to make something having the kind of value we find in art. Ergo, photography is not an art.

A cheeky comeback sticks up for photography's expressive potential. If anything is a bedrock datum from which we may reason, it is the fact that photography is an art. Look around any art gallery (or its web site), and you will see plenty of evidence that photographs count as art and express the artistic vision of their makers. Since photography is an art and since we nearly all take photographs, it follows

that we nearly all make art. Ergo, photography is art's democratic apotheosis.

These contrary bits of reasoning are caricatures, of course. They magnify core features of the fancier lines of thought that galvanize genuine debates about photography. Both leverage the puzzle about the nature of photography into a debate for or against photography's prospects as art. For both, photography is an art only if it breaks free of machine imaging to allow for personal expression. So if you accept that photography has special epistemic power because machine imaging leaves no room for the personal touch, then you come out against the artistic standing of photography. If you accept that photography is an art, then you come out against the machine-based epistemology of photographs. The caricature zooms in on three concepts that dominate thinking about photography: the concepts of art, epistemic authority, and personal expression—or art, machine imaging, and agency.

As informative (and fun) as they are, caricatures are still simplifications. Must we really choose between machine objectivity and the expression of a personal vision? Surely not all photographs give us accurate records of events! That some lie is hardly news.⁵ Maybe some excel epistemically while others excel artistically? Or maybe photographers can harness the objectivity of machine imaging precisely in order to reach their artistic goals? Either way, we get the sensible result that some but not all photographs are works of art. What blocks our path to this result is the assumption that photography is an art only if it breaks free of machine imaging to allow for personal expression. But that true? If not, then how can we understand photography as a mind-machine collaboration?

Questions like these call for a closer look at the mechanism of photography, the nature of artistic expression, and the demands of art, especially as conceptions of each of these play out in subtle and sophisticated reasoning that we can take seriously. The agenda for this essay is to come to terms with each of the three core components of the reasoning that spins out of the puzzle.

To lay the cards on the table, this essay does not prove that photography is an art. On the contrary, it starts with the fact that photography is an art. A walk around the galleries or an afternoon's web browsing gives us far more confidence in this fact than any amount of slick reasoning to the contrary. Faced with some philosophy purporting to show that we cannot know that there is a physical reality, the philosopher G. E. Moore held up his hand and remarked, "here is a hand." His point was that no amount of philosophy could outweigh the truth of that. The gesture said, "Halt! Enough already!" Well, nobody needs philosophy to settle the question of whether photography is an art. Photography is an art.

A little philosophy can still illuminate how and when photography is an art. After all, the cheeky reasoning to the rah-rah conclusion that we are nearly all photographic artists goes too far. Photography is an art, but many photographs are not works of art. Nearly everyone takes photographs but the photographs that you and I take are not works of art. Anyway, mine are not. So the question arises, what makes some photographs works of art?

To answer this question, this essay digs deeper into the caricatured positions. After a brief aside about one photograph, we trace the path of skepticism about photographic art through the history of thinking about photography. Romping through the history, we gather the components of the most sophisticated and powerful skeptical reasoning. As it turns out, this reasoning is most interesting not for its (false) conclusion that photography is not an art, but rather for the astonishing fact that, despite its hold on our thinking, it goes wrong at every single step. Many pieces of reasoning have some flaws, including some appealing ones, but reasoning with serious staying power that is flawed through and through . . . that is amazing. And important, because each mistake, at each step, points to a different way to think about photographic art.

Therefore, let us replace the clumsy question “is photography an art?” with a question that calls for a more nuanced answer. When is photography an art? This question has (surprise!) four answers, each revealed by a different fault in the skeptic's reasoning, each correcting our understanding of the core concepts in the puzzle of photography, each opening up a unique perspective that we can take in order to appreciate photographic art.

Plumbago

With a flourish of his hand, G. E. Moore brushed off skepticism about the existence of the external world. In tribute to Moore, why not hold up an image where the artist's hand played a starring role? The frontispiece to this volume reproduces one of James Welling's Flowers series. Nobody who has seen the series or read the words of the critics who have written about it can seriously doubt photography's artistic power.⁶ At the same time, the series does invite us to wonder how photographs function as art.

Start with what we most plainly see. Looking at *Flower 009*, you see a flower, a spray of plumbago. In fact, *Flower 009* is a photogram, made by placing plumbago blossoms directly onto a photosensitive surface, then exposing it to light and developing the print. What we see is an imprint of light that has passed through the delicate petals, creating an image. Photograms such as this are the ultimate photographic traces. No camera with its system of optics interposes a level of interpretation. Yet, the reality of the flower presented in *Flower 009* is not the reality that we are accustomed to seeing. Somehow we see how flowers look and we also see flowers as we have never seen them before.

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet? Perhaps, but names matter. Flowers are classic tokens of beauty, quintessentially colored things, symbols of light itself, marks of love. For Elaine Scarry, they are the things most perfectly suited to be presented to vision.⁷ To romanticize a little more, they are plants' gifts in return for the light they consume. Looking at the Flowers series naturally leads us to reflect upon the cultural significance of flowers as well as on the operations of light and color in photography.

Look at *Flower 009* in the right frame of mind and it is easy to slip from seeing foliage to seeing shape and color for its own sake. The image is formally gorgeous, using light to put the reality of what is depicted in tension with an abstract space. Can there be an abstract art of photography?

Finally, let us come to the hand of the artist. The images in the Flower series were made by arranging blossoms directly on sheets of 8 × 10" monochrome film in the dark. Once exposed and printed, the resulting negative was then contact printed onto color paper using light filtered through a mosaic of hand-cut filters. Here, we have photography without a camera. Instead, an arrangement of flowers by hand and hand-cut filters restore to flowers what was bleached away in making a monochrome photogram. Photography disassembles bits of the world to reassemble them anew.

Anyone writing on Welling's work quotes his idea that any camera is “a time machine, producing pictures that could have been made any time in the prior 135 years.”⁸ Each photograph contains within itself a whole history of technical decisions about optics and chemistry. Technical decisions are never made in a vacuum: they are shaped by aesthetic and scientific concerns. *Flower 009* gives us a glimpse of the four arts of photography that are to be found by taking a close look at the history of photography and the history of thinking about photography.

A Short History of Photography Theory

Theorizing about photography is as old as photography itself. Indeed, older. In 1786, the painter Joshua Reynolds anticipated concerns about photography when he wrote about one of its forbears, the camera obscura. Set “a view of nature represented with all the truth of the camera obscura” next to “the same scene represented by a great artist,” and “how little and mean will the one appear in comparison of the other.”⁹ Departing from Reynolds' pessimistic verdict is a train of thought that reached speed with the invention of photography a few decades later, that has never since slowed, and that impels the sophisticated reasoning to skepticism about photographic art. Here are four main stops along the way.

1. Early Skepticism

Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography, worried that his brainchild might prove “injurious to art, as substituting mere mechanical labour in lieu of talent and experience.”¹⁰ Fifteen years later, the issue loomed large in Lady Eastlake's landmark essay, where she offered that art “appertains to the free will of the intelligent being, as opposed to the obedience of the machine,” and that “to investigate the connexion of photography with art [is] to decide how far the sun may be considered an artist.”¹¹ Talbot himself was bullish on photography's artistic potential, while Eastlake was neutral, but some were definitely bearish. Peter Henry Emerson, writing toward the end of the nineteenth century, held that photographs are “sometimes more beautiful than art, but are never art.”¹² Around the same time, Charles Baudelaire cited “simple common-sense that, when industry erupts into the sphere of art, it becomes the latter's mortal enemy.”¹³

Baudelaire puts the case rather badly. Machine processes are not strictly incompatible with artistic ones. Almost all art-making takes advantage of technology, and has always done so. Consider prepared paints in tubes, the pipe organ, the printing press, and curtain wall skyscraper construction. These are not lethal to the arts of painting, music, literature, and architecture; they have spurred valuable developments in these arts. The point was grasped perfectly well by the first generation to puzzle about the artistic standing of photography. They were not against technological art per se. The concern began with a conception of photography as a specific kind of technology. This conception of photography combines three elements.

First, photography automates image-making. Eastlake's reference to the sun's artistry intentionally echoes Daguerre's description of the camera as “merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature . . . [it] gives her the power to reproduce herself.”¹⁴ A recurrent metaphor likens the photograph to a mirror—in Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous words, a “mirror with a memory” that “reflect[s] image . . . and hold[s] them as a picture.”¹⁵

Second, by automating image-making, photography eliminates skill in drawing. The point is not that automated processes invariably eliminate all human skill—that would be a gross error. Photographic processes often require skills of various kinds, especially technical know-how. Nevertheless, one can make an image with a camera without knowing how to draw an image by hand. This was touted as a novel benefit of the technology in a report to the French parliament recommending Daguerre for a state pension. Photography “calls for no manipulation which anyone cannot perform. It presumes no knowledge of the art of drawing and demands no special dexterity.”¹⁶ By the way, this report of 1839 correctly predicted the widespread use of photography in tourism, in documenting facts and artifacts, and in reproducing art works.

Third, and in consequence of this, are several closely connected features of how photographs represent. Photography secures, in Daguerre's words, "accuracy and perfection of detail."¹⁷ A photograph of a scene can only represent that scene as having features it actually has, and photographs tend to represent more of those features than do drawings or paintings. Accuracy and degree of detail are independent, of course, for there can be inaccurate detail and accuracy with missing detail. A third feature is impartiality, as it is called by the early theorists, though it would be better, albeit more awkward, to say that photographs are systematically selective.¹⁸ They are selective in the sense that there are some classes of visible features that they cannot represent. Monochrome photographs do not represent color, for example, and no photograph represents features outside the field of view or smaller than its resolution permits. Drawing is not selective in a systematic way. A draughtsman may simply choose to omit a red patch on a sitter's face, though she paints in color. She may choose whether or not to draw in the sitter's eyebrows, or lashes.

Early theorists also understood how these three closely connected features come as consequences of the more basic fact that photography automates image-making so as to eliminate drawing ability. Talbot wrote that "it baffles the skill and patience of the amateur to trace all the minute details visible on the paper."¹⁹ Holmes puts it with characteristic eloquence that

in a picture you can find nothing which the artist has not seen before you; but in a perfect photograph there will be as many beauties lurking, unobserved, as there are flowers that blush unseen in meadows ... the very things which an artist would leave out, or render imperfectly, the photograph takes infinite care with.²⁰

An image made automatically is systematically selective. It records as much detail as the system allows, as accurately as it allows. This is the source of photography's epistemic value. As Eastlake put it, photography's "business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give."²¹

What secures photography's epistemic power is precisely what lands it in artistic hot water. For Eastlake, "the sharp perfection of the object ... is exactly as detrimental to art as it is complimentary to science."²² Why? She explains that "when greater precision and detail are superadded ... the eye misses the further truths which should accompany the further finish."²³ The problem with photography is that, being so accurate and impartial, it fails to convey the selective truths we get from art. The familiar tale that photography drove painters out of the business of realism into the business of expression and abstraction is all wrong. For several decades before photography came along, painters had been seeking more than mimesis. As Hegel complained, "enjoyment and admiration become the more frigid and cold, the more the copy is like the natural original."²⁴ Painters agreed and so aimed for a kind of transformation rather than perfect copying. Photographs, they thought, could never match this achievement.²⁵

A spur line branches from this main line of reasoning. Peter Henry Emerson considered that "the medium must always rank the lowest of all arts, lower than any graphic art, for the individuality of the artist is cramped ... it can scarcely show itself."²⁶ Presumably, in serious art, the style of the artist shows through in their work, and in serious graphic art the artist's style comes out in how they interpret a scene pictorially. Photography's accuracy and systematic selectivity means that photographs cannot express the styles of their makers. Therefore, photography is not a serious graphic art; it is a minor art at best.

2. Pictorialism

The early theorists' skepticism about photographic art provoked a defensive reaction in “pictorialist” photography. The characteristic marks of this movement, which dominated photography for a few decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, included the staging of elaborate narrative tableaux modeled on Academic art, an emphasis on the effects of light and atmosphere mimicking those found in painting, and the liberal use of such darkroom manipulations such as combination printing and touching up negatives. An example is Clarence H. White's *Landscape with Figure* of 1906, which would be easy to mistake for a Symbolist reverie ([Figure 1](#)). A woman, not of this world, garbed in white robes, carrying a glass orb, floats through a picturesque landscape, all in soft focus, grainy, deeply shadowed. Henry Peach Robinson, himself a pictorialist photographer, articulated the movement's rationale in considerable detail.



Figure 1 Clarence H. White, *Landscape with Figure*, 1906. Gum bichromate over palladium, 24 × 19 cm.

Robinson granted the assumptions of earlier theorists. He accepted that “a pure, unadulterated machine-made ... photograph ... is the most perfect specimen of realism the world could produce; useful in a thousand ways, it would not be art any more than a minute catalogue of the facts of nature however full of insight, is a poem.”²⁷ Unlike a painting, a photograph such as this involves no skill in “suppression and selection.”²⁸ The workings of the automatic process leaves little room “to enable a photographer to express himself in his material.”²⁹

Having gone so far in step with his theorist predecessors, Robinson refused the skeptical conclusion that photography is not an art. Another conclusion is consistent with earlier theorists' assumptions. The art of photography lies not in its accuracy, detail, and impartiality; instead, it lies in such painterly effects as the technology permits the photographer to undertake. Automatic image-making is not the whole of photography; it is simply a step in the artist's process. What comes before the tripping of the shutter is the staging of an evocative scene, and what comes afterward is rendering a print, molding and retouching it to echo what the scene evokes. White's *Landscape with Figure* illustrates this perfectly. Pictorialist photographs “could have come from no other hands and minds than those which produced them”—they are “as individual as the works of the most mannered painters, and represent not so much the subject which was before the camera as the photographer's individual impression of the subject.”³⁰

3. Straight Photography

Pictorialism was loudly, unremittingly denounced by the “straight photography” movement that succeeded it. Anticipating the straight photographers, Emerson described retouching as “the process by which a good, bad or indifferent photograph is converted into a bad drawing or painting.”³¹ Joining this verdict, Walker Evans portrayed the pictorialist photographer as “an unsuccessful painter with a bag of mysterious tricks”; Paul Strand decried the “introduction of hand work and manipulation [as] merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint”; and Edward Weston condemned the “folly in taking a camera to make a painting” as “incompatible with the logic of the medium.”³² For these photographers, any attempt to redeem photography by imitating painting only succeeds in abandoning photography altogether. The impact of this indictment was so overwhelming that it was not until recently that major works of pictorialism were exhibited in art galleries as anything but historical curiosities.

In the background of this reaction to pictorialism is a pair of principles that form the backbone of modernist art criticism.³³ The first is that every art has a unique medium with representational, expressive, or formal powers of its own. For example, the medium of painting might be making marks on a flat surface. Paired with this is the principle that genuine works of art are those that exploit the special potential of their medium. Or, put more modestly, the principle says that effective works of art are those that exploit their medium's special potential. So, if the medium of painting is making marks on a flat surface, then paintings are effective when they promote our interest in flat, marked surfaces. Strand echoes modernist doctrine when he writes that “photography ... finds its *raison d'être*, like all media, in a complete uniqueness of means.”³⁴ What uniqueness of means belongs to photography? He answers that “an absolute unqualified objectivity” makes up “the very essence of photography,” distinguishing it from other arts.³⁵ As the historian Beaumont Newhall put it, “the ability of the

camera to capture the utmost possible detail of the natural world is its chief characteristic, and should be fully realized.”³⁶ Judged by modernist principles, pictorialism fails photography by turning its back on the special potential of its medium.

The logic of the tussle between pictorialism and straight photography recapitulates that of the early theorists. Photography's special epistemic power clashes with its expressive potential, so if its credentials as an art depend on its expressive potential, then photography is not an art insofar as it does in fact have a special epistemic power. Pictorialism accepted these propositions but promoted the art of photography as a hybrid of the newly invented techniques of photography mixed with techniques taken from painting. Weston saw this: “behind the [pictorialist's] approach lay the fixed idea that a straight photograph was purely the product of a machine and therefore not art. He developed special technics to combat the mechanical nature of his process.”³⁷ Straight photography spurned this solution. Taking the bull by the horns, it attempted to reconcile photography's epistemic power with its expressive potential, so that its standing as art may rest on its specificity as an imaging medium.

How to have it both ways? To begin with, different art media may open up different avenues for personal expression. Texture is important in painting. Tiny perturbations in the marking of a surface by hand and the accumulated effect of a large number of these across the surface can be expressive and can stamp a painting with its maker's identity. An anonymous contributor to the 1908 volume of *Camera Work* observed that, in most architecture, the “‘personal touch’ *does not exist*, and it appeals to the emotions solely through its proportions.”³⁸ This writer then put it that photography resembles architecture because it mediates personal expression through composition alone. Straight photographs with perfect compositions depict perfectly composed slices of reality. Even so, “full credit for any such composition belongs to the photographer who has seen it, and seized it.”³⁹

Weston's essay, “Seeing Photographically,” offers the richest account of the elements of the photographic process for which the photographer deserves credit. Weston begins by accepting the limitations imposed by modernist art criticism: the task is to detail how photographers can “best express whatever it is we have to say ... within the *frame* of [their] particular medium.”⁴⁰ To see photographically, a photographer must “see his subject matter in terms of the capacities of his tools and processes.”⁴¹ Knowing these capacities amounts to knowing how the finished print will look. Consequently,

the finished print must be created before the film is exposed. Until the photographer has learned to visualize his final result in advance, and to predetermine the procedures necessary to carry out that visualization, his finished work (if it be photography at all) will present a series of lucky—or unlucky—mechanical accidents.⁴²

Weston then specifies some of the parameters that a photographer may set through their use of the camera as a tool, including “amazing precision of definition” and “infinitely subtle gradations from black to white” that give “a special tension to the image.”⁴³ By varying these and other parameters, it is possible to achieve many different compositions of one subject, all with the kind of epistemic merit that makes photography special.

Bringing this idea to life is a metaphor that identifies the photographer with the lens or the camera. The photographer is not someone who operates the device. She is the device. For example, having insisted that a photographer “must follow the realistic tendency under all circumstances,” Siegfried Kracauer describes her as an “indiscriminating mirror ... identical with the camera lens.”⁴⁴ Seeing photographically is seeing with the camera as an extension of the eye.⁴⁵

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