

# PHOTOCONCEPTUALISM AND DOCUMENTARY STYLE

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The ubiquitous presence of photography today has affected all areas of pictorial imaging—especially the visual arts. Since its invention in the early nineteenth century, photography has had an ambivalent relationship with the pictorial arts, which have been dominated by painting. The critical difference between a photograph and a painting is that, while a photograph may or may not be a work of art, a painting is almost always understood in that context. In order for a photograph to be accepted as a work of art, the photographer must position it within the complex conceptual and institutional discourses of contemporary art. In their early attempts to be accepted as artists, photographers of the Pictorialism movement mimicked the expressive gestures of painting through graphic manipulation of the photographic print. But photographers who saw the potential for a modern approach to pictorial representation rejected these painterly effects and instead explored the power of photography to document the world's visible phenomena as such and, thus, to reflect reality in the process of interpreting it. When Walker Evans introduced the concept of a 'documentary style', it was to put photography on an original path relative to modern art by emphasising the unique ability of photographic representation to provide an objective representation of reality, which has significantly influenced a wide variety of contemporary artists who use photography.

Any photograph can be literally described as a 'document' insofar as the image is only the record of visible phenomena registered on the camera's receptor. However it is in the

image's expressive character as a selected point of view and intention of the photographer, and as an image positioned in a specific context, that it can be understood as either purely documentary or aesthetically expressive art. Evans first proposed the 'documentary style' in a 1971 discussion with the photography historian Beaumont Newhall, when he wanted his photojournalistic work to be understood as expressing a particular inflection—distinguishable from purely informational documentation of visual facts. When Evans used the term 'honesty' in this discussion to convey a feeling of authenticity that informed the truth of his project and something more than a simple recording of visual fact, he evoked an ethical and aesthetic vision. A characteristic of the documentary style, therefore, is the pictorial image of truthful spontaneity—of images that capture the perception of reality as it is and people as they are. Although the documentary style also emphasises the ideas of instantaneity and spontaneity, as in Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* (concept proposed in 1972), Evans stressed that the serious photographer should represent the world with intensity and conviction. It is this attempt to express an authentic relationship with the dynamics of everyday life that positions the documentary style within the discourse of modern art.

The radical changes in pictorial art that have led to modernism were largely because photography has an ability to efficiently document convincing representations of the world. Exhibitions of modernist pictorial art in institutions such as the Museum of

Modern Art (MoMA) in New York have consistently included documentary photography, and photojournalism in particular. John Szarkowski, curator of photography at the MoMA from 1962 to 1991, exhibited important photographic artists in the documentary tradition, such as Evans and Dorothea Lange and, later, influential photographers like Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus and many others. Szarkowski has initiated discussions about the importance of photography for the documentation of political and economic subjects. As a result, photography's influence on contemporary art has been increasingly significant since the 1960s, when conceptual artists began to use photography to critique not only contemporary life and the social landscape, but also the dominant position of modernist abstract painting. Recently, certain artists have emerged from the conceptual art movement and expanded the technical possibilities of the photograph as a pictorial document to create works of spectacular scale for exhibition in the contemporary museum.

Although Evans has long been respected as a photographic artist by virtue of his influence on later generations of artists, including conceptual artists, he had an ambivalent relationship with the concept of modern art in his own time. Photography historian Clément Chéroux, who curated an Evans exhibition in 2017 for the Centre Pompidou in Paris and in 2018 for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), convincingly argued that a better term for Evans work would be 'vernacular style'. The vernacular implies imagery of the everyday and acknowledges that Evans was less interested in presenting himself as an artist than as a photographer with extraordinary empathy for his subjects and the experience of modern life. Since the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century, documentary photographers who aspired to be recognised as artists have struggled with the conflict inherent in their ambition that photography be accepted as an art form. How to reconcile the everyday with the exalted?

This contradiction originated during the nascent stages of photographic technology when its positivist/realist capabilities supported the dominant ideologies of Western culture and the capitalist economy. As photography prospered and eventually became the dominant medium for mass-media imaging, it increasingly took on a commercialised and industrial function that overshadowed its artistic potential. For book and newspaper publishing, photographs displaced hand-drawn illustrations with the introduction of a half-tone dot process reproduction technology at the turn of the last century. A crisis developed in the pictorial arts in response to these technological developments for mass-media images, which led to the conflicted evolution of early modern painting. Painters were forced to adopt avant-garde styles and formal devices, such as

abstraction, which would reject realist imagery and suppress representation in order to secure the preeminence of painting within the institutions of art.

Photography was temporarily sidelined by the critical discourse of radical abstract and monochrome painting in the 1960s, but it was eventually able to reclaim its place at the forefront of contemporary art by artists who reacted to late modernist abstraction with new strategies of conceptual art and the reappearance of photography in tendencies that I call 'photoconceptualism'. The unique relationship between photography and the 'readymade' is significant to this discussion. As Marcel Duchamp proposed with his 1917 exhibition of a work titled *Fountain*, which was a urinal on a pedestal, any object or image from everyday life that is not understood as such to be a work of art can, nevertheless, be positioned within the discourse of art to function symbolically as an already given 'readymade' image or object, even if only to provoke discussion about the status of art itself. Duchamp's readymade became famous when it was photographed by Alfred Stieglitz and published in the Dada Magazine *The Blind Man*. Thereafter, the strategy of using phenomena of the non-art and quotidian, whether object or image, meant that the photograph, and specifically a photograph that would not have in essence any prior aesthetic pretensions, could function as a readymade—an object or image that is converted from non-aesthetic to aesthetic status. This was accomplished by positioning the readymade image within the discourse of art as a symbol or sign of something else and, therefore, aesthetically transforming it. Duchamp's urinal was transformed into a symbol with its title of *Fountain* and its position as a work of art. It was an ironic play on our expectations of its identity, and it symbolized future possibilities for the production of art, thus transforming the meaning of art itself.

It is specifically the capacity of the photograph to objectively document the world as such that allows it to function as a readymade. And it is the consequent radical transformation of the art context that makes this conversion possible, so that any photograph could then function aesthetically without it being, in essence, aesthetic. Some of the first conceptual artists of the 1960s who used photographs in the context of the readymade included Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman. Dan Graham accompanied his essay titled 'Homes for America', published in a 1966-67 issue of *Arts Magazine*, with photographs of the facades of suburban tract houses, which he took in a generic documentary style that mimicked the standard real estate photos used to advertise and sell property. The formal repetitive structures of the architecture in the images also mimicked the serial structures of minimal artists who were being established in the 1960s, such as Donald Judd. Graham's essay also mimicked journalism rather than architectural criticism, and

he considered his writing a work of art rather than journalism. This work by Graham had a decisive influence on much conceptual art to follow and particularly on the developments of photoconceptualism. The main influence was the clear use of the photograph as a document that underscored the literalist relation to the image that functioned symbolically, or to be more precise, the image that often functioned as a 'readymade'.

Although this conceptual photo-based imagery relies upon the documentary aspect of the photograph, the relationship to the documentary style of Walker Evans, August Sander, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and many others was quite different. The conceptual artists who used photography, who I describe as 'photoconceptualists', preferred to use the generic style-less or art-less aspect of photography, and often appropriated or parodied existing photographic genres in an effort to underplay any overt expressivity in the image itself. It is important to note that this use of the photograph as a readymade was often ironic rather than expressive. Although artists such as Dan Graham had immense respect for the work of Walker Evans, there was rarely any overt intention in these works to express feeling or 'honesty' in the sense that Evans would have intended. Since this conceptual work is cool rather than sincerely expressive, it positioned the photograph-as-document as a work of art in the critical language of the 1960s.

From the 1960s to the present, new genres of avant-garde art have used photography to document works for exhibitions in a museum context. Notably, performance artists like Vito Acconci, Chris Burden or Hamish Fulton, and artists who practiced earthworks art, such as Jan Dibbets or Dennis Oppenheim, had to preserve their performance work through photographic documentation. British artists, such as Victor Burgin and Mary Kelly, use photographic documentation to create works that critique consumer culture or sexism. Bernd and Hilla Becher produced a series of photographs of industrial structures that are a classic example of the tendency towards literalism in the photographic document. The Bechers influenced conceptual photographers of the Düsseldorf School, such as Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer, whose photographic works document the urban environment with the high production values and large scales that create an overwhelming effect for spectatorship in the contemporary museum exhibition.

Another important development in the 1980s New York avant-garde art scene was the appearance of appropriated photographic images that functioned as readymades in works by late-conceptual artists, such as Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine. By using the appropriated photograph as a readymade, these artists challenged one of the foundations of artistic authorship as a value—that of originality. In a 1981 exhibition titled *Sherrie*

*Levine After Walker Evans* (Metro Pictures Gallery, New York), Levine exhibited as her own work photographic copies of well-known photographs by Walker Evans, thus ironically claiming the documentary style and disclaiming it, as well as critiquing authorship by displacing authorship. This exhibition revealed the tendency of avant-garde and conceptual approaches to challenge much of the existing criteria of serious art through the use of documentary photography, even to the point of critiquing the authenticity claims of the documentary style proposed by Evans. Both approaches to the documentary photograph critique the traditional fine print and artful composition, and both approaches were accepted within the institutional discourses of art and photography.

For the photo-conceptualists, however, the eventual strong institutional response to their work led to the need to create works of a larger scale to compete with the spectacle of painting in the museum context. An emphasis on large-scale narrative structures and complex installations began to characterise photo-conceptual work in the 1970s. In the following decades however, some artists coming out of conceptual art created large-scale works that rejected the austerity of much conceptual art. The artists of the Vancouver School, such as Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas, initiated a distinctive approach to such large-scale composed photographs that mimicked critical social documentation in a spectacular way. These artists, however, rejected the term 'photoconceptualism'. Even though their work originated from conceptual art, they moved stylistically and technically far from the austere and structural forms of conceptual photography when they embraced high production values and a renewed emphasis on pictorial representation.

Jeff Wall, who was one of the first to initiate this development with his early large-scale lightbox prints beginning in the late 1970s, referred to this social and subject-oriented tendency as a near-documentary, directorial or cinematographic approach. Wall's backlit lightbox transparency works were fastidiously staged and photographed with a large-format camera yet simulated to appear to be a spontaneous document of a real event or phenomenon. Some works even mimicked the documentary style of the photojournalists. Wall's 'cinematographic' works, however, had a narrative and even an expressionistic dimension that distinguished them from the classic conceptual art that used the documentary or readymade photograph. These works, which used cinematic techniques for the *mise-en-scène* of image production, were often large-scale colour lightbox transparencies that could compete with painting in the museum context. This only became possible after advances in photographic printing technology in the late 1970s. The need to originate events for staged pictorial display also required a precise concept of subject matter and theme born

of an intellectual and ideological perspective well in advance of the photographic moment itself. This development amplified and deepened the social and critical discourse about the importance of photography for contemporary art that opposed the formalist biases of modernist criticism and abstract painting dominant in the postwar period.

Apart from the high production values of the staged images these directorial artists produced, what distinguishes them from photojournalists is their privileged relationship to the subjects and the subject matter being photographed. The candid and personal point of view offered by the documentary-style photojournalists using 35 mm cameras made clear that the position of the photographer to the subject was provisional. But by virtue of the detailed staging of the image in advance of photography, the position of these directorial photographers in relation to the subject was privileged and anything but spontaneous. However much these directorial photographers simulate the spontaneity of the photojournalistic documentary style, they actually maintain a predetermined self-conscious aesthetic intent informed by specific political, aesthetic and ideological ends and reified by specific physical and intellectual positions relative to the subject. As artists, they declare authorship over information, and this also has expressive and spectacular technical implications important to their work.

Some aspects of my own photographic works were created in response to these issues. In my first photographic works in the late 1960s, after a short exhibition career as an abstract painter, I created assemblages of photographs that documented the urban environment, the architecture of the city and the streets with traffic and pedestrians. My early work was directly influenced by the conceptual photography of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. However, as much as it was informed by my 'photoconceptual' programme, and without overtly intending it, these earliest street works were in the documentary style. I referred to these 'photoconceptual' works as a 'literature of images', insofar as I wanted the phenomena in the images to be read for their revelation of the world as it is—as a place of shifting and open-ended-meaning structures. After a turn during the latter half of the 70s to a form of narrative imagery and themes derived from film, video and poetry, I returned to the documentary style in a series of works with photographic enlargements laminated on canvas, including *My Heroes in the Street* from 1986 to the present. In this series, I photographed artist friends in the street spontaneously as though I had just seen them, although of course I positioned them quite consciously as my subjects. Moreover, by laminating my photographs onto a large-scale canvas support, I returned the discourse of my imagery directly to the discourse of modernist painting and the context of the museum. In any case, although

I always had a close affinity with Vancouver School artists who practiced a post-conceptual 'directorial' or 'cinematographic' approach to a 'near-documentary' style, my use of photography was always informal and only staged in a spontaneous manner.

In 1990 I was invited to present an exhibition in the Galéria Temple in Valencia. Soon after my arrival in Valencia to scout locations for the production of new work for the exhibition, Corrine Diserens, who was then a curator at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM), introduced me to the Piscina de las Arenas. I wrote my art history thesis on Piet Mondrian, and I was very interested in early modern architecture and the De Stijl movement that was a major influence on the architecture of the *piscina*, conceived by Luis Gutiérrez Soto in 1933. Excited by this discovery, I made several photographic works of the *piscina* on canvas and exhibited them in the Galéria Temple. Later, Juan Lagardera, a journalist who was conceiving an exhibition of rationalist architecture in Valencia, invited me to contribute works related to this theme for the exhibition at IVAM. In 1997, with the assistance of Luis Mira and Paul Arbez, I photographed the Piscina de las Arenas and several rationalist apartment buildings in Valencia for a large installation at IVAM. Thinking of the genre of architectural photography, I used a large-format camera in order to establish a relationship between the camera itself as an architectural instrument and the architecture of the *piscina*. Furthermore, I composed the images in such a way as to create a formal resonance between the rectangularity of the photograph and the rationalist structure of the architecture. These photographs were printed as colour enlargements and mounted on heavy board, rather than on canvas as I usually did.

Since the *piscina* was also a place where generations of Valencian youth played out their summers in the pool, I wanted to open up a narrative dimension to the imagery that would resonate with the memories of summer fun. To do this, I created a small booklet to accompany the installation. With the assistance of Nuria Enguita, who was coordinating the IVAM exhibition, I designed this booklet to be simultaneously an architectural guidebook, a book of poetry, an exhibition catalogue, and an artist's book. It included a cryptic poetic text that would suggest all of these functions and add a conceptual and playful narrative dimension to the photographic documentation in the exhibition. My intention was to consciously position these photographs as a work of art that would also be a lasting document of an architectural monument that is itself a work of art: the stage for play that could give the sun a place to hide.