PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE MONOCHROME: AN APOLOGIA, AN EXEGESIS, AN INTERROGATION

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Since every work is the outcome of a decision, some form of reflection on it contributes to the process which generates new work. I constantly question the limits of my work, which has its vagrant, inessential and incomplete aspects, and which can never be totally determined by a pure expression of an idea. Such questioning clarifies the necessity of what will follow. It gives purpose and continuity to the flow of decisions that form the idea of the work as a whole; it gives conscious shaping to the act of choice; it recognizes limits both within and beyond the control of judgement. Self-reflection is the essence critical thinking. This essay will trace the factors that have governed my decision to link photography with the subject of urban architecture and monochrome painting.

Between 1967 and 1969 I painted and exhibited several monochromes in an attempt to define what was possible as a painting. Anything was possible in a painting, but not much was possible as a painting. Already at that time the monochrome was well-established as the cipher for the crisis of late Modernist painting. That was its chief attraction. The monochrome has functioned as the essence, the ground, the fundament of painting; as the ideal tabula rasa of an infinite possibility of signifying marks. It has functioned also as the opposite: as the symbolic negativity of meaning, as its critical absence, refusal, closure. It has also appeared as simply the material presence of painting as a space-occupying format, as a designed support that merely provided the referent to a genus of signification, painting as only “what it is”, and nothing else. This final aspect was my starting point.

I wanted these paintings to be autonomous works that existed primarily “in and for themselves”, as an objectification of pure presence, and as such could embody the abstract ideal of art as an object of reflection and judgement, as something in addition and more compelling than whatever else it might possibly signify. Yet as much as I conceived of an art of being rather than representation, it also seemed to me that this was not enough. The possibility of a self-referential autonomy was more of a mirage that a real achievement. If the work was to refer to a totality, it had to be more and other than itself. Then as now, it seemed that the world is much too compelling to bypass for an abstract ideality that only reifies its own presence. Some relation to representation of the world was necessary, and this demanded a technical solution outside of the existing state of painting.

In late 1969 I abandoned these monochromes to construct a number of photography works of the cityscape. The city functioned as an emblem of “reality” or the common exterior world which we know is actually in existence and which is constructed historically. I called it at the time “technology nature” to distinguish it from “primal” or “unmediated” nature. These photographs functioned as indicators to reflect upon reality as a theoretical object. The photographs not only pointed out specific subjects for attention, but also gave an indexical trace or imprint of reality as a general phenomenon, and thus as a subject for reflection; to think the world through the world.

These photographic works not only functioned as referents to a theoretical subject, they were also physical objects in themselves. Through the geometry of form and the mirroring replications of photography, images of the real world could be organized as structures paralleling the autonomous structure of a painting. The systematic process of taking the pictures as well as the composition of the final work followed strict geometric patterns mimicking the linear vectors of abstract painting as well as the geometry of the city itself, its streets and its architecture. In some cases this geometry was represented by the mirroring cleaving of the visual field by the reflections of the street in shop windows, or by the patterns of crosswalks in the street which direct human movement.

Therefore in these early photographic works I sought specifically to construct visual analogues between the organization of the city as an economy of motion, and the geometry of abstract painting, so that the conceptual
infrastructure of my monochrome painting could find a home in the active space of reality, that the “liberating” emptiness of the monochrome could interface with the “oppressive” fullness of the world. I wanted the image to be an ideal referent and a material objectivity at the same time. That this bivalence was the result of photography’s place in the industrial infrastructure of the total economy, and that its significance resided in the economic as well as the cultural, I only understood later.

If these works were in fact also expressive, this was not in itself my intention. Yet I did not banish metaphor or expression from the work. I merely let these aspects rise naturally from the material of experience. They were theoretical in so far as I wanted to make work that avoided aesthetic paradigms in favour of scientific paradigms; so that the city (the “world”) could be known as a conceptual phenomenon and thus criticised; and the truth in the abstract be integrated with what could be known as an object. This of course emphasized the theme of the everyday and the self-evident.

Like a number of other artists at this time, my shift to photographic technique was inspired by those Conceptual artists who were able to move beyond the aesthetic problematic of painting to engage the abstract ideality as well as the political potential of art through language. Since the photograph could refer to itself as well as to the objective status of the real world, it could function like a language and could be structured or shaped as an autonomous work as well as a representation.

There were a few Conceptual artists who introduced the use of the photograph as a referent to an inert reality as well as a linguistic sign. Their subjects were often of vacant spaces analogous to the non-signifying spaces of monochrome painting. In 1969 I saw this quality in the works of Robert Smithson and Dan Graham. But the time I was most directly inspired by early works of Jeff Wall. More recently I see this quality in the work of James Welling, the earlier work of Sherrie Levine, the cityscapes of Thomas Struth and the light-generators of Rodney Graham. This vacuity is the stylistic “ghost” of monochrome painting. What was described at the time as the “dematerialization” of art”, or the “defeatured landscape” was the transfer of the finality of monochrome painting to more dynamic and ultimataely expressive ends. But the abstract quality of these photographs were also balanced by their reference to an objective condition of the reality of the world, that reality, by inference, being also vacuous. That vacuity, being in infinite extension, or “entropic” as Robert Smithson emphasized, could only be given shape through a form of conceptual geometry. This vacuity of course is only a transferred illusion. The world is very much there as a real force, the cityscape being almost a “force of nature”. But the sign of vacuity is less a disavowal of the presence of the real than a gesture of disbelief, and as such it was ultimately a “melancholic” sign.

Even though the inspiration for my early work came directly from Conceptual art, I felt that it should not be merely a formal aesthetic and intellectual structure negating the artwork as object, but should also contain “real information” as a concrete element. By “real information” is meant something tangibly useful and meaningful and which can affect our understanding and practise of everyday life. Of course this demand is not an absolute one, and I recognize that alterations to the function and structure of language itself, which even some of the most abstract of conceptual art introduced, especially that work which contextualized its relation to exhibition and distribution, is also in effect “useful”. But I urged that the “reality principle” should be immediate and directly represented as well as felt in the work.

In these earlier works as well as more recent ones, this reality principle, symbolized in the superstructural architecture of the modern city, reflected an acknowledgement of economic and political forces beyond our control, a heteronomous field in which the autonomous and ultimately alienated work exists as an imaginary redemption. The explicit realism in my work thus acts as the ground that makes possible the implicit and necessary dream of an autonomous ideality that is the work of art. In a series of works that have included portraits of friends in the street, I have even attempted to insert an image of the willfully present ideality of the individual human subject that can still appear as other and autonomous while being submerged within the monumentality of this superstructural reality. The validity of this existentialist dimension in my work is problematic and still unresolved.

The ability of the photograph to give a factual document or trace of the real as an image meant that the “reality principle” automatically became part of the objective language as well as the subject of the work. Through the use of the photograph I saw the opportunity to create a link between the intellectual, literary and idealistic

biases of the purest forms of Conceptual art and the concrete, factual pragmatic recognition of the “objectness” of minimal sculpture. While the photograph provided an abstract linguistic sign for subject matter, an indicator as it were, it also in its direct connectedness to the reality of that subject, functioned as a concrete element in the objective material sense, as an industrial component in the construction of a statement. In my more recent works the photograph is a kind of “slab” of reality riveted to the face of ideality. The images of construction sites in my work thus play on an ironic metaphor for the idea of constructivism in my aesthetics.

These subjects are outer-directed, and thus engaged with the world, and even the distancing and passivity of my work is reflective of a social and historical condition that is symptomatic of more than my condition alone. I believe that it is not merely my own expressive problem, but is in fact my reflection, through what is possible in the language and medium of art, of what is the condition of meaning in the present in both a specific and most general way. My work is the reflection on the significance of the immediacy of superstructural realities. That is, through the economy of art, through its technical language and expressive themes, a reflection is offered on the general economy and its limits, and that this “political” dimension of the photographic is also a reflection on the limits of aesthetic judgement and what is possible as a work of art. In this sense I think of my work as unreservedly Modernist. In effect this work is constructed out of a recognition of the condition of crisis — a crisis of meaning, a crisis that also emerges from the inertia of skepticism in the face of the rhetorical power of photography; of the insufficiency of this inertia as well as the compromised nature of its rhetoric.

In part at least, it was this crisis that led me to a reconsideration of the monochrome and its place in the history of the crisis in painting. Throughout my work of the 70s, the monochrome remained as a latent theme developed only within the photographic subject, often as a Mallarmean metaphor of “silence”. During this period the support surface of the white wall of the gallery or the white page of the book had displaced the support of primed canvas of painting. But since about 1980, when I enfolded my photographic practise back onto the ground of painting, the monochrome has returned as a dialectical field of opposition in relation to the photographic image and subject. This has to do with the relation that the monochrome has with the crisis of Modernism and its position as the critical fulcrum in the dialectic of painting and photography. By intersecting the “field of ideality” of monochrome painting with the photographic “speech of the world”, the historical function and the fetish value of this ideality is alternately refused and reified. Painting becomes secularized.

But in fact my reconsideration of painting emerged as much from a pragmatic basis as a theoretical one. Canvas offered not only a practical technical support that became possible with the innovation of large-scale photographic lamination which allowed protection and control of distracting reflections on the surface of the image, but it also reintroduced a consideration of the historical position of painting that is linked to the canvas support. This highlighted issues latent but unclarified in my work over the 70s. It is also relevant that these conceptual developments in my work have emerged in part from technical problems; and that these ideas have come from the material means of expression, reflecting again the constructivist basis of my aesthetics.

Throughout its history, Modernist technique has bound itself to the repudiation of the pictorial. When painting finally had to abandon diegesis to the narrative feature film at the inception of cubism, the accompanying convulsions of technique and the collapse of pictorial space caused its artistic ideal to be perpetuated in a polemical drive that consequently inhabited those spaces outside the frame of the picture. The function of painting had to respond to this condition by shifting away from mimesis and pictorialism. Painting thus claimed the future by deconstructing the “natural condition” of the picture as an illusionistic simulacrum of the world and by withdrawing the authority of its ideal from the language of the given. Yet in the flow of history, of the determinant condition of the total economy, the function of pictorial representation came to be transferred from the domain of art, with its exclusive ends, to that of mass media, which, through its techniques of cinema, television and photography, still reigns as the authoritative model of reality. The avantgarde could only confront this dominance with a symbolic negation at the margins of the culture of the superstructure.

But dissatisfaction with merely presenting painting as a symbolic refusal led many artists to abandon painting in favour of conceptual practises using photographic, cinematic and video technology. Inevitably, the conflation of these techniques of mass media representation with the
aesthetic idealism of late modernist painting introduced new critical relations to subject matter, and a qualitative shift in the ideology of art that has come under the terms of postmodernism.

The recuperation of the monochrome in my work at this stage is not much a desire to return to the emblem of an unachievable ideality as to reground photography within the problematic of painting and return it to the question of limits. Having secured the legitimacy of photographic practice within the regime of art, is it not necessary to confront it also with the unresolved question of Modernity: what is the basis of its authority? Does not the photographic stand in relation to the endgame of Postmodernism as the monochrome stands in relation to the endgame of modernism? Now in the last decade of this millennium, the question remains the same as that which initiated my work in 1967, and which has confounded the Modernist project since the beginning of this century: what is possible as a painting? And in its larger sense: what is possible to think through art? The response to these questions of course can only be ultimately given in the work itself.