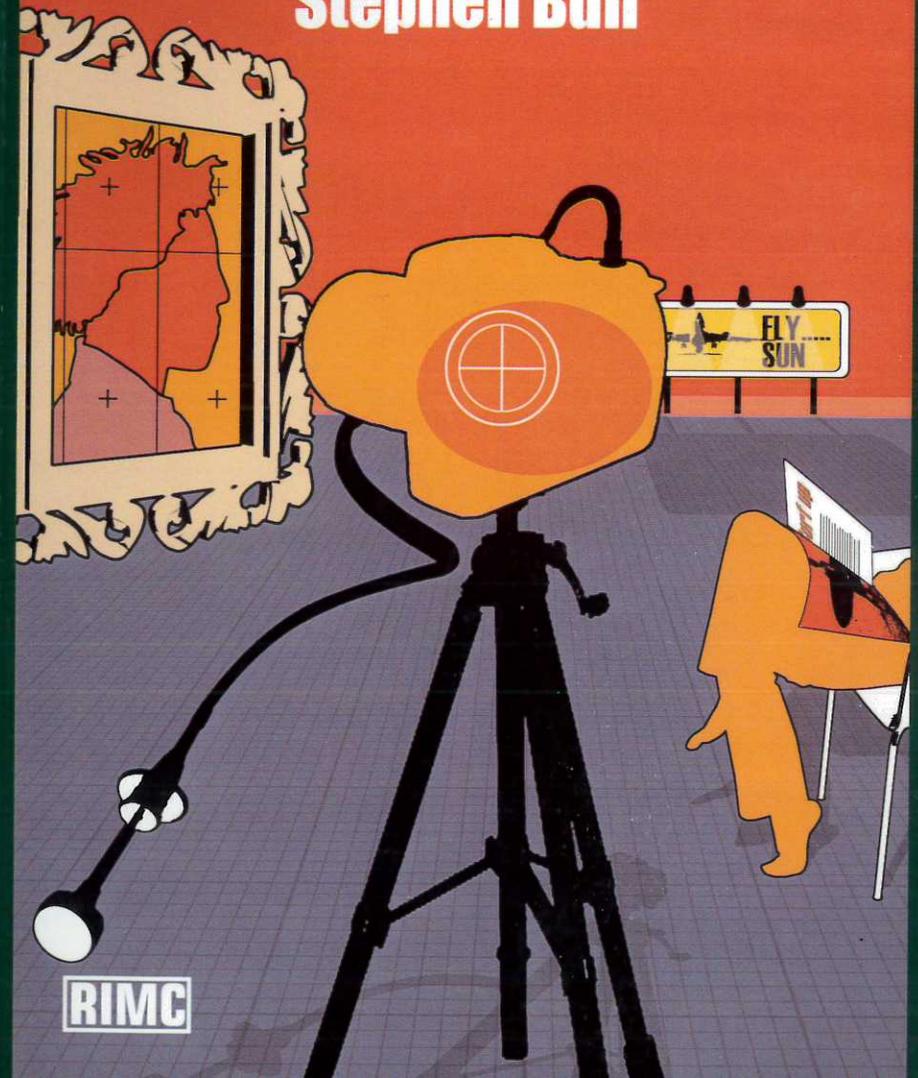


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PHOTOGRAPHY

Stephen Bull



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Photography explores the photograph in the 21st century and its importance as a media form. Stephen Bull considers our media-saturated society and the place of photography in everyday life, introducing the theories used to analyse photographs and exploring the impact of digital technology.

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Topics covered include:

- the identity of photography
- the meanings of photographs
- photography for sale
- snapshots
- the photograph as document
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Photography is an up-to-date, clear and comprehensive introduction to debates about photography now and is particularly useful to media, photography and visual culture students.

Stephen Bull is a writer, lecturer and artist. He has written articles for *Creative Camera*, *Photoworks* and *Source: The Photographic Review* and contributed chapters to books such as *The Media: An Introduction* and *Joachim Schmid: Photoworks 1982-2007*. He has exhibited in London at Tate Britain and The Photographers' Gallery. He was Course Leader for BA (Hons) Photography at the University of Portsmouth and is Course Leader for Photography at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham.

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to the online collaborative and multi-vocal websites that proliferated by the end of the first decade of the 21st century (see Ritchin 2009: 83–85). However, it is important to remember that all of the viewpoints in *Here Is New York* are from a Western perspective. The main title of the show reinforces the idea of the photographs as documents of ‘things as they are’, while the subtitle not only suggests the lack of distinction made between the professional and amateur images, but also the democratic myth (in Barthes’ use of the term, see Chapter 3) that is a fundamental aspect of American society.

The photograph as document remains central to 21st-century culture. While the meanings of such photographs vary according to institutional context, the perceived indexicality of their content remains vital throughout. Debates about the potential differences between objective and subjective approaches continue. Most commentators on documentary photography see it as being in a constant state of flux as its aesthetics change and it moves from the newspaper and magazine page to the book, the gallery wall to the website (for example Rosler in the 1980s (2003), Walker in the 1990s (1995a) and Panzer in the 2000s (2006)). These changes have never yet heralded the death of documentary photography, but instead are symptoms of its continual and necessary rebirth.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS ART

The perennial question ‘Is photography art?’ may seem to have been answered for good by the early 21st century. In Britain, for example, major retrospective exhibitions of photography appeared for the first time at the art galleries Tate Modern (*Cruel and Tender*, 2003, *Street and Studio*, 2008) and Tate Britain (*How We Are*, 2007) and in 2005, after more than 180 years, London’s National Gallery staged its first show by a photographer (see Chevalier and Wiggins 2005; Dexter and Weski 2003; Eskildsen 2008; Williams and Bright 2007). The photobook was fully acknowledged as a form of art practice (Parr and Badger 2004, 2006) and an abundance of overviews bringing together examples of photography as contemporary art were published (for example Bright 2005; Carver 2002; Cotton 2004; Demos 2006).

However, as established in the previous three chapters, the vast majority of photographs, made by almost everyone and appearing almost everywhere, are not considered to be art. It is therefore important to debate the practices and conditions through which certain photographs become perceived as works of art. This chapter begins with a section analysing the attempts by Pictorialists to establish their photographs as art by mimicking the look and subject of another media: painting. The second section examines how modernist practitioners switched to promoting the inherent qualities of photography itself for the same purposes. The

postmodern practices are assessed. Both of these led to galleries being far more open to contemporary art photography and the final section debates key aspects of such work in the late 20th and early 21st century, including the return to a form of Pictorialism and the critical language often used to analyse photography as art.

PICTORIALISM: PHOTOGRAPHY AS PAINTING

The perceived indexicality of photography has been central to its use in advertising, as snapshots, and as evidence (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6 respectively). However, since the public declaration of photography in 1839, many writers and practitioners have sought to establish the medium as art. In 1861 the British critic Jabez Hughes noted that photography was generally used as a document, asking 'may it not aspire to delineate beauty too?' (quoted in Newhall 1964: 59). Hughes' use of the term 'beauty' suggests the types of paintings then prevalent in the official 'Academy' exhibitions: attractive landscapes, idealised nudes, dramatically staged fictional, religious and historical tableaux, and flattering portraits.

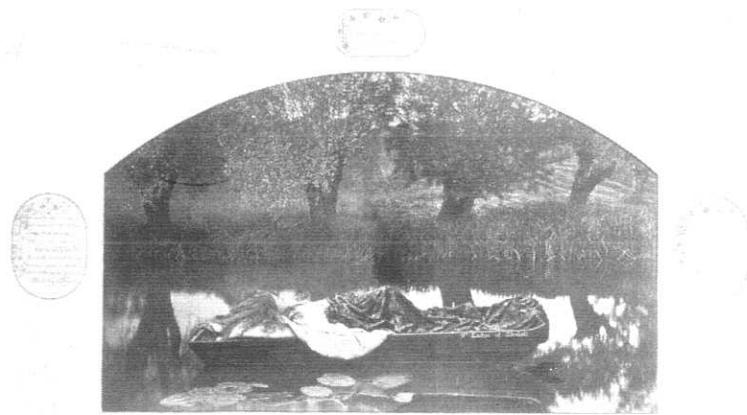
By the mid-19th century photography had begun to enter the art gallery: the first exhibition entirely dedicated to photography took place in December 1852 at the Society of Arts, London (Taylor 2004). In January 1853, within the same exhibition, the founding of the Photographic Society – soon to be the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) – was announced. Its objective was the promotion of 'the Art and Science of Photography' (see Roberts 2004a).

In his book *Art and Photography*, written in the 1960s, Aaron Scharf traces the complicated relationship between painting and photography ('art' generally means painting in Scharf's book) (Scharf 1983). He notes that by 1859 the showing of photographs was finally permitted in Paris's annual Exhibition of Fine Arts. However, in a review of the 1859 exhibition, Charles Baudelaire attacked the way the 'modern public' had mistaken photography to be an art because it accurately recorded 'nature' – and were consequently rushing to have their portraits made (see Chapter 4). Art, Baudelaire argued, should not be about reproducing nature and harsh realities, but must instead be about beauty and the imagination of the artist (Baudelaire 1980; see also Galassi 1981: 27–28). Photography with its mechanical basis should remain the servant of art

has discussed these reasons (Bright 2005: 8), which in summary are due to photography's

- mechanically produced origins
- potential for mass reproduction
- links with commerce
- apparent lack of the need for 'artistic' skill.

In the 1850s and 1860s, those who had the time and finances to experiment with photography were able to counter some of these challenges with the groundbreaking work they made. Examples of these practitioners include Julia-Margaret Cameron (see Marien 2006: 96–97), Lady Clementina Hawarden (see Dodier 1999) and Henry Peach Robinson. Like his fellow RPS member Oscar Rejlander (see Chapter 2), Robinson composed photographs from a number of separate images. In 1869 he published *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, where he demonstrated how photographers could take their inspiration from Academy painting (Edwards 2006: 44; Scharf 1983: 238). For instance Robinson's *The Lady of Shalott* (1861) (see Figure 7.1) is a meticulously constructed photograph based on a mythological scene described in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem of the same title, which concerns a woman cursed to view the world only through its reflection in a mirror (a theme that relates to the mediation of the world via photographs). Not only does the fictional



subject matter also connect with that of Academy painting at the time, but the arch-shaped presentation of prints of *The Lady of Shalott* that Robinson made associated it directly with John Everett Millais' similarly composed and framed pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia*, made ten years earlier and based on a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (and now in the Tate collection).

By the end of the 19th century Baudelaire's 'modern public' was beginning to photograph itself with the new, cheaper and easier to use cameras manufactured and marketed by Kodak (see Chapters 4 and 5). The resulting ubiquity of photography meant that those who wished to continue establishing the medium as a specialised and skilled art needed to separate themselves from the masses, leading to the creation of the multinational Linked Ring in 1892 (Mélon 1987; Solomon-Godeau 1991d: 110).

The style of photography these practitioners made has retrospectively come to be known as 'Pictorialism', partly due to the title of Robinson's book. It is the imitation of painting in an attempt to raise photography up to the same status as art that characterises the Pictorialist movement. This was tried through attention to content (subject matter and technique) and context (where the work was seen). As with Robinson's work, the subject matter of Pictorialism derives from the genres of traditional Academy painting of the time. Tableaux (images depicting elaborate and dramatically staged narratives) were a common theme of Pictorialist photography, each one meticulously constructed, with models' positions held as if they were posing for a painter (Henry 2006: 133–138). The Pictorialists also made use of techniques such as gum-bichromate, a way of printing a photograph so that the image could be manipulated with a brush while wet as though it were paint on a canvas (Scharf 1983: 238). As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued, such processes deny the mechanical nature, lack of 'artistic' skill and repetitive mass reproducibility of photography: factors that Bright identifies as preventing photography being seen as art. They offer the possibility for each print to be unique and show evidence of skilful alteration, potentially providing the photograph with what Benjamin referred to as the 'aura' of a one-off work of art (Solomon-Godeau 1991d: 106–108; see also Chapter 2 and Chapter 4). The Pictorialists hung their pictures in the Academy-style, with photographs filling the walls. This connection with the Academies of Paris, the centre of the Western art world in the late 19th and early 20th century, also

landscape *The Pond – Moonlight* of 1904 (see Chapter 4). Two years earlier, Steichen made a picture of himself that has so much painterly working of its gum-bichromate surface that it could easily be mistaken for a painting. Steichen appears in the photograph with brush and palette in hand, the artists' materials of the time. A brush and palette equalled easel painting and easel painting equalled art. Steichen's signature and the date of the photograph also appear within the image itself – something almost unheard of in the use of photographs as objective documents (see Chapter 6), but very familiar from subjective and expressive paintings. Finally, the title of the picture, *Self Portrait With Brush and Palette, Paris*, not only anchors what we see in the image, but also adds the information that the photograph was taken in Paris (although for all we know it could have been taken anywhere) – again connoting art by association. The clear suggestion made by this hazy print is that Steichen is an artist because he looks like a painter and the photograph is art because it looks like a painting.

MODERNISM: 'STRAIGHT' PHOTOGRAPHY

The American photographer Alfred Stieglitz was initially a member of the Linked Ring and a Pictorialist. In 1892 he made the photograph *Car Horses* showing the animals in a snow-covered scene. The steam rising from their bodies creates a misty Pictorialist effect. However, the horses are not in a rural setting, but are at rest after pulling a coach along a busy New York street. The urban setting hints at the inclusion of more up-to-date subject matter in Stieglitz's work, which continued with *The Hand of Man* in 1902. In *The Hand of Man* steam rises not from the bodies of horses, but from the funnel of a train as it travels towards the camera. The title anchors the reading of the photograph as being about a cultural product rather than nature: the train that has been created by human technology. This deliberately separates it from the traditional Academy subjects of Pictorialism (see Sekula 1982: 97). Although the detail of the image is still hazily Pictorial, it shows a moment caught – rather than the scenes set up and posed for the camera that were associated with Pictorialism (Henry 2006: 138). In *The Hand of Man* we see both the modern world arriving and the beginnings of a modern way of photographing it.

Chapter 2 includes a detailed analysis of the idea of modernism, which can be broadly described as the representation of the experience of the

others, contrasted with those that follow on once what is new and shocking has become tradition (see Greenberg 2003b; Wood 2002).

The image that is often discussed in histories of photography as one of the avant-garde modernist photographs of the early 20th century is Stieglitz's *The Steerage* (1907) (see for example Marien 2006: 182–183; Newhall 1964: 111–112; Orvell 2003: 88). This photograph is sharply focused and has no retouching. It shows the passengers huddled together in the cheap steerage section of a ship heading towards Europe. Stieglitz was travelling on the same ship, but in the expensive section. During the journey he discovered the scene at the steerage. It is useful here to quote at length Stieglitz's description, written 35 years later, of what happened next:

As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck to the right at the bow of the steamer.

To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state. It was rather long, white, and during the trip remained untouched by anyone.

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. . . I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life . . .

I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally, I released the shutter. My heart thumping, I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached, related to the milestone of my *Car Horses* made in 1892, and my *Hand of Man* made in 1902, which had opened up a whole new era of photography, of seeing. In a sense it would go beyond them. For here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.

(quoted in Sekula 1982: 98–99)

In this perhaps unreliable reminiscence we can locate many of the characteristics of modernism. Stieglitz sees the image as a breakthrough

image as particularly significant and original is that he starts seeing the subject matter as abstract forms and tones ('I saw a picture of shapes').

To understand the importance of this, Stieglitz's analysis of his image must also be seen in the context of painting, but a very different kind of painting to that which inspired the Pictorialists (Orvell 2003: 86–91). Not just the year that Stieglitz photographed *The Steerage*, 1907 is also the year that Pablo Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger* where the subject matter (of women in a brothel) is similarly flattened out and broken down into abstract shapes. In the 1920s and 1930s Alfred H Barr, the first curator of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, helped to establish the idea that modern art history was a series of progressive movements (most of them often referred to as 'isms'), each leading onto the next. *Les Femmes d'Alger* is regarded in such histories of art as the first modern painting of the 20th century and the work that inspired Cubism and its successive movements including Futurism and Surrealism (Green 1989: 366–368; Hughes 1991: 21–26). With its turn away from figurative painting (where the subject matter is 'realistic' and instantly recognisable) towards the breaking down of perspective via the use of multiple viewpoints, Cubism is presented in such histories as starting a process of increasing abstraction in painting. This avant-garde art was an inspiration on the new wave of photographers in the early 20th century. Stieglitz started a break from Pictorialism and a progression towards more abstract photographs by using the inherent qualities of the technology of the camera itself: tightly cropping images in-camera, and creating sharply focused pictures with no painterly post-production (Solomon-Godeau 1991d). In opposition to the manipulations of Pictorialism, the images resulting from this technique became known as 'straight' photographs (Newhall 1964: 111).

Stieglitz was the first person to exhibit Picasso's work in America. He opened the New York based 291 gallery in 1905, where he promoted photography as an art by showing it alongside painting, drawing and sculpture. There was still an element of photography achieving the status of art by association inherent in 291, but this time the art associated with the photographs was modern and avant-garde. The same attitude was taken in the lavish journal *Camera Work* started by Stieglitz two years earlier. In each issue a select few photographs were printed in high-quality reproductions on luxurious paper, in an attempt to make them appear as unique and valuable as modern art paintings (see Frizot 1998a: 327–333).

matter of modernity such as car wheels and city streets in a modernist style that emphasised abstract shapes: the black rectangles made by the large windows in New York's Wall Street, the white verticals and horizontals of a picket fence. Sometimes the subject would be virtually unrecognisable (and irrelevant): bowls and fruit, or the shadows of a balcony's railings, forming patterns of shapes and tones.

By the 1920s in Russia and Europe a 'new vision' of the new modern world was being represented through photography. Using recently developed smaller cameras, such as the Leica, photographers could take pictures from anywhere and at any angle as if the camera was attached to them. Russian Constructivist photographer Alexander Rodchenko escaped the confines of what he called 'belly-button' photography (where the camera was held at waist level and looked at through the viewfinder) by photographing his subjects from revolutionary new perspectives (Marien 2006: 239–241). His camera was pointed up and on the diagonal at heroic workers and the new modernist structures that they built, then dynamically and dizzyingly down on street parades or the vast White Sea Canal built at the expense of thousands of lives but depicted as a triumph through photomontage and text for the elaborately designed magazine *USSR in Construction* (see Parr and Badger 2004: 148–151).

The idea of the camera as an extension to the eye was represented in German exhibitions such as *Film and Foto* and the publications *foto-eye* and the dynamically titled *Here Comes the New Photographer!* (all 1929) (see Badger 2007: 57–69; Campany 2003a: 36). In Berlin, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy made highly modernist bird's-eye views such as a photograph taken from the top of a radio tower looking down on a building and path that became virtually abstract through their distance from the camera; while his fellow photographers in the 'New Objectivity' movement, Karl Blossfeldt and Albert Renger-Patzsch, used the inherent technical qualities of the camera to zoom in on details of natural and industrial forms (for more on New Objectivity see Badger 2007: 57–69; see also Benjamin 1980).

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MODERN ART GALLERY: AUTHORSHIP AND EXPRESSION

These new visions of a new world by Russian and European photographers, along with their American counterparts, helped to develop a

progressive movements, the museum's photography librarian and then historian Beaumont Newhall started to establish a progressive history of art photography. This began with a huge survey exhibition covering the years from 1839 to 1937 and its accompanying catalogue, which later became his book *The History of Photography* (published in various revisions ever since, such as Newhall 1964, 1982). Douglas R Nickel has noted that the history of photography in the Western world started being written via the perspective of modern art from the 1930s onwards (see Nickel 2000: 229; for alternative versions of photography's histories see Pinney and Peterson 2003). As Christopher Phillips argues in his analysis of MoMA's photography department (officially formed in 1940), Newhall expanded on Stieglitz's belief that certain photographers could create art photographs by opening up the possibility for any photograph to be considered art via its re-contextualisation on the blank walls of the modern art gallery – or to use Brian O'Doherty's now ubiquitous term coined in the 1970s: by being placed inside the 'white cube' (O'Doherty 1999; Phillips 1989; see also Chapter 8).

Despite a move towards blowing up freestanding images and emphasising the social role of photography under Steichen's directorship of the department during the 1950s (with shows such as *The Family of Man*, see Chapter 6), John Szarkowski's appointment in 1962 saw a return to the practice of displaying images in frames and in rows on walls, consolidating and expanding upon Newhall's earlier approach. But it is not just the immediate context – the physical space of a gallery and presentation of photographs – that leads to them being seen as art. Although images in modernist exhibitions might be quietly isolated on white walls, there is a vociferous discussion that surrounds the images, ranging from wall texts to reviews, gallery talks to conferences, and catalogues to collections that affects how the images are considered (this can be referred to as the 'discourse of art', see Chapter 3).

With his 1964 exhibition *The Photographer's Eye* and the introduction and organisation of the book of the same name published two years later, Szarkowski (2007) extrapolated from modernist photography his pronouncements about the specific nature of the medium that are analysed in Chapter 2. Importantly, Szarkowski saw photography as possessing inherent qualities that could be used by the photographer to express their individual vision as an author: a key concept in modernism. Indeed, the title *The Photographer's Eye* echoes the concept of the 'foto-eye' but shifts

interview Alan Bowness, then the director of the Tate Gallery, London (yet to become Tate Britain), explained that the Tate collected photographs by artists, but not photographs by photographers (Bowness 1999). The role of collecting British photographers' work, Bowness contended, was the responsibility of the Victoria and Albert Museum, an institution that had been buying photographs since the 1850s. Nevertheless, his statement was regarded by many as symptomatic of an attitude that photography itself could not be art on its own terms. Arnatt wrote a short article in response called 'Sausages and Food' where he argued that, just as sausages are one type of food, so too are photographs one type of art and it was absurd to make any distinctions between photographs made by photographers and photographs made by artists (Arnatt 2003). Although it could be countered that, while all sausages are made for food, the overwhelming majority of photographs are not made for art; the very ubiquity of photography as a medium remains a key problem when positioning it as an art form.

Many Conceptual artists also reflected on photography itself (Green 1999). In *Camera Recording Its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds, 2 Mirrors)* (1971), John Hilliard systematically adjusted the settings of a camera as he pointed it at a mirror. The relative visibility of the camera as it fades in and out of the resulting grid of 70 images relies on the 'correctness' of each exposure made. In another work, *Causes of Death* (1974), Hilliard demonstrated how text and image work together by showing the same photograph of an apparently dead man cropped in four different ways to include either a pile of rocks, a riverbank, a bridge, or a fire alongside the body. The different words accompanying each cropped version of the image – 'crushed', 'drowned', 'fell' and 'burned' respectively – suggest a different fatal end. Taking each photograph individually the accompanying word could function as anchorage, but seen together the four words work as relay, their meanings adding different information and contradicting each other without ever defining one definitive 'cause of death' (see Chapter 3 for more about text as anchorage and relay). Works such as this, where text is integral to the photograph and to its meaning, became known as 'photo-texts' (Kotz 2006; Scott 1999: 46–74). Among Victor Burgin's experiments was *Photo Path* (1970), where Burgin placed photographs of a gallery floor over the top of the floor itself. Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), in which he exhibited a photograph of a chair, the actual chair, and a dictionary

reflection on the character of photographs played a part in dismantling modernist photography.

As suggested by Kosuth's idea of the 'photo-investigation', Conceptual Art is also where phrases such as 'investigate', 'explore' and 'question' become a central part of art discourse (Bull 2003; Campany 2003a: 23). With Conceptual Art this attitude was applied not just to reflections on the medium itself, but also to the social world. Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1971), for example, documents her changing body shape in 140 full-length pseudo-scientific photographs made over 36 days as she dieted. The final image in the sequence is intended to match what was culturally defined at the time as the 'ideal' female body-size. Such work, bringing in ideas from feminism, represents an engagement with issues relating to the world beyond art: cultural context instead of aesthetic content. It is this attitude, incorporating issues not just from feminism but also from semiotics and psychoanalysis, that led to the emergence of what Liz Kotz refers to as 'photo-based artist-critics' including Burgin and Martha Rosler (Kotz 2006: 525). Burgin's visual practice (including *Photo-Path*) and his writing in books such as *Thinking Photography* (Burgin 1982e; see Chapter 2), and Rosler's essays and work (for example, her series of photographs and texts *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Systems* (1975); see Chapter 6) must be understood in this context.

By the mid- to late 1970s artists using photography were engaging with mass culture and addressing social issues. As such, Conceptual Art paved the way for those artists whose practice came to be termed 'postmodern'.

POSTMODERNISM: THE ARTIST AS PHOTOGRAPHER AND 'THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR'

It is possible to identify major cultural changes happening from the 1960s onwards where ideas associated with modernity such as progression and fixed individual identity are turned on their head. For example, instead of progressive new ideas, in postmodernity old ideas are constantly revived and the concept of a fluid, fragmented self that is performed replaces that of a single unified identity. Postmodernism, as the representation of postmodernity, constantly recycles recognisable (or figurative) imagery from mass culture rather than the abstract expressions of an artist's mind (see Harrison and Wood 2003: 1013–1017; Harvey 1990; Heartney

work of artists beginning to exhibit during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Following the legacy of Pop Art's return to the figurative and art's reengagement with society through Conceptualism, Krauss introduced the semiotic term 'indexicality' to the analysis of visual art to argue that many of the new artists were making work that had direct links to the real world via the use of photographs and other media (Krauss 1986a; see also Chapter 2). In 1977, the same year as Szarkowski's *Mirrors and Windows*, Crimp curated an exhibition also in New York called *Pictures*, which brought together some of these emerging artists. In an essay of the same title, Crimp argued that the new practitioners were using a range of media with little regard to progressively developing the specific nature of any of them (Crimp 1984), whereas 'medium specificity' was a key element of modernism and promoted in Szarkowski's writings on modernist photography (see Grundberg 1998). Crimp was one of the first writers to see this work as a break with modernism and labelled it 'postmodernist' (1984: 186–187). Solomon-Godeau identified a return in the early 1980s to what she refers to as 'pseudo-expressionist' painting during an era of burgeoning capitalism – and so promoted the postmodernists as an alternative to this, both in their techniques and in what she interpreted as their critique of capitalist ideology (Solomon-Godeau 1991f, 1991g).

Many of these writers were inspired by the Situationist Guy Debord's idea of the 'society of the spectacle' developed a decade earlier. Debord argued that contemporary society was dominated by spectacular images of entertainment and capitalist products (on billboards, magazine pages, and cinema and television screens). These distracted people from the real world, transforming them into numbed consumers (Campany 2003a: 33–34; Debord 2003; Solomon-Godeau 1991h: xxxiv). One reaction to this was to use Debord's technique of 'detournement', where mass-reproduced images that are part of the spectacle (and which might otherwise be hardly looked at) are appropriated in order for their meanings to be playfully and subversively redirected by artists (Bowen 2006: 536–540; Henry 2006: 138; see also Chapter 4): a move that Solomon-Godeau characterises as shifting photographic practice 'from production to reproduction' (Solomon-Godeau 1991d: 103). An engagement with culture and social issues, the use of a range of media, and the appropriation of existing popular imagery from what Campany calls 'the domains in which values, opinions and identities are formed' was detected by postmodernist critics in the work of artists including Cindy Sherman

where she acts out characters from a range of cinematic genres from earlier decades (familiar to audiences from watching old films on television) were seen as a critique of female stereotypes in the media (Owens 1984: 223–234), a feminist celebration of the different roles a woman can have (Williamson 1988b) and even as an act of art criticism itself (Krauss 1990: 27). Kruger's addition of words to 1940s and 1950s image bank photographs in photo-text pieces such as *You Are Not Yourself* (1981) were interpreted as subverting the address to the consumer found in advertising (Owens 1992b: 191–200; see Chapter 4). Prince's series where cowboys were directly cropped from Marlboro cigarette advertisements were regarded as exposing the macho myths of Ronald Reagan-era America (Bright 1989; Solomon-Godeau 1991g: 140). In an even bolder act of appropriation, Levine simply re-photographed pictures by canonised modernist photographers, such as Evans' image of a farmhouse interior taken in Hale County, Alabama in 1936 (a photograph discussed in Chapter 6), leading Solomon-Godeau to argue that 'with a dazzling economy of means Levine's pictures upset the foundation stones (authorship, originality, subjective expression) on which the . . . work of art are presumed to rest' (Solomon-Godeau 1991g: 128). In her 1981 essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' (Krauss 1986d), Krauss not only suggested that the avant-garde idea of art moving forward through the creation of new work was at an end, but also that originality in modernism itself was being simultaneously exposed as a myth.

The practice of these artists also seems to visualise ideas put forward in Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author', a founding essay of postmodern theory written in 1968 (Barthes 1977c). Although Barthes focuses on writing in this essay, his ideas can be applied to work made in any media. However, Barthes uses the word 'text' instead of 'work'. A work, he argues in another essay, is seen as something fixed in meaning and created by a single author, while a 'text' is never fixed in its meaning – its content relating to other texts through 'intertextuality' (Barthes 1977d). For example, a photograph analysed as a text (by examining the elements within it through techniques such as semiotics) can be seen as intertextually connected to other texts such as films, paintings, other photographs, etc.

This goes against the idea of authorship associated with modernism – where a work is isolated as original and unique, with all its influences deriving from the life of its creator. Barthes contends that the authority of

work cannot therefore be discovered and fixed by examining the biographical details of the person that made it. Rather, the meanings of the text remain polysemous and depend on its interpretation by the viewer (see also Chapter 3).

'The death of the Author', Barthes argues, leads to 'the birth of the reader' (Barthes 1977c: 148; see also Wolff 1993: 117–136). Although, as Carol Mavor has argued, Barthes' use of a capital 'A' for the 'dead' Author suggests that the author's own interpretation has not disappeared, but is no longer the primary authority on the work's meaning: it is instead one voice among many others (Mavor 2006). Prince seemed to sum up the adoption of this idea by postmodern artists that appropriated photographs with his remark, 'I think the audience has always been the author of an artist's work. What's different now is that the artist can become the author of someone else's work' (quoted in Heartney 2001: 38; see also Hopkins 2000: 82; Solomon-Godeau 1991d: 117).

At first, most of the postmodern artists using photography were regarded as appropriating imagery in direct opposition to such issues as the practices of modern art history and the culture of capitalism. However, these oppositional ideas were often actually those of the critics themselves, rather than the artists. As Kelly Dennis has put it, 'Postmodernist art critics in some cases displaced their own function as critics onto the medium' (Dennis 2009: 121). Dennis contends that the postmodern critics took a 'modernist' approach to postmodern art photography, seeing the form itself as being essentially critical in its nature, rather than still part of capitalist culture.

Owens, for instance, argued that the work of postmodern artists called attention to the traditional discourses of the gallery and art market (Owens 1992c). But the postmodern critics soon found that the artists whose work they championed were not immune to such discourses. For example, Levine began to relate her work to that of 1980s 'pseudo-expressionist' painters such as Julian Schnabel, and her appropriated photographs were exhibited in galleries alongside the 'original' photographs, re-establishing authorship to their photographers and positioning Levine within the very canon of art history that Solomon-Godeau saw her as demolishing (Hopkins 2000: 82; Solomon-Godeau 1991g: 132–135). Images by Kruger and Sherman have been used in the discourses of advertising and fashion (see Chapters 4 and 8), while in 2006 Prince's *Untitled (Cowboy)* (1989) – one of his photographs enlarged from a

Even oppositional art becomes marketable eventually. Solomon-Godeau acknowledged this – while pointing out that in the 1980s artists using photography seemed more willing than ever to quickly surrender their work to the expanding marketplace (Solomon-Godeau 1991g: 136–140). By the 1990s even the most sensational and subversive work arrived with a price tag.

CONTEMPORARY ART PHOTOGRAPHY: THE PHOTOGRAPHER AS ARTIST

After its employment by Conceptualists in the 1960s and 1970s and by postmodernists in the 1980s, photography became 'the medium of choice' for a wide range of artists from the late 20th and early 21st century (Bright 2005; Company 2003a: 15). The focus of the Western art world shifted to Britain with exhibitions such as *Sensation* at the Royal Academy, London in 1997 (which included photographs by Richard Billingham; see Chapter 6). Work by the so-called 'Young British Artists' was often conceptual in its approach and used snapshot-style photographs to record ephemeral actions. Gillian Wearing's *Signs That Say What You Want Them To Say And Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say* (1992–3) – where members of the public were stopped in the street and given a blank piece of card on which to write a statement that Wearing then photographed them holding – recalls work by artists such as Piper in its engagement with everyday life and apparently casual use of photography (see Lowry 1999).

During the 1990s the genres of portraiture, landscape and documentary returned to the gallery in images by a 'German School' of photography including Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff. These images stressed photography's apparent ability to convey 'the real': depicting the world in a precise and descriptive form. Both Gursky and Ruff (as well as their contemporaries Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth) had been taught at the Dusseldorf Academy of Arts by the Conceptual Art-influenced Bernd and Hilla Becher.

The Bechers own influences derive from the work of August Sander who in the 1920s and 1930s attempted to sum up German society at the time by photographing individuals from a range of backgrounds to represent whole types of people. Generally, Sander's images were taken straight on to their subjects in a style recalling anthropological techniques