

Representation in Photography

The Competition with Painting

From its very inception, photography came to be in a competitive relationship with painting. When in 1839 the photographic technique was made public, the differences in character and origin of the two modes of representation were soon emphasized. Photographic images, some argued, provide a perfect duplication of reality, an achievement painting would never be able to accomplish. Frequently, of course, such arguments were meant as a defense of photography, if not as a claim to its superiority, but others would also invoke this logic to indicate painting's more emphatic possibilities and its capacity to express a subjective point of view. Even if the optimism surrounding photography's supposed truthfulness to nature would quickly lose much of its persuasiveness, it has continued to persist to this day. Moreover, the measure to which photography and painting are capable of representing reality remains a hotly debated issue.

This chapter, which will examine this concern in greater depth, focuses on concepts and arguments frequently put forward in comparative studies of photography and painting that somehow relate to issues of representation. As much as possible our discussion will move from questions of objectivity toward more subjective aspects. The first section introduces the question of whether photography represents reality in a more objective and truthful way than painting, and, if so, how this is played out in particular contexts. Next, our argument develops a comparative analysis of straight and composed photographs, emphasizing the importance of staging and perspective choices made by the artists discussed and the relationship with these characteristics of paintings. This section also addresses the question of narration in photography. In the next section, we concentrate

on the application of indexicality and iconicity as concepts in the debate on how photography and painting represent reality differently, either as causal trace or as stylized likeness. Many critics have deployed the concepts of aura and authenticity, which are the topics of discussion in the following section, to highlight the difference between photography and painting; whereas the former has been believed to lack aura or authenticity altogether, some critics have in fact relied on these terms to stress common features between the two media. In the fifth section we consider the tradition of hybrid overpainted photographs and the shift from black-and-white photography to color photography, notably as regards the role of color in discussions in comparative research. Finally, we zoom in on debates on blurredness and sharpness and their relation to the transparency of photographs. This consideration also underscores the interconnectedness of the various discussions presented in this chapter.

Photography, Objectivity, and Representation

Soon after its invention, photography was employed to record facts – which were often, but not always, facts of historical value. The camera’s acclaimed veracity made it a principal tool not only for registering but also for visualizing a variety of events (Bann 2001). Besides its many scientific applications, photography also became a practice geared to producing portraits of famous and lesser-known individuals – either realistic or bearing a strong resemblance. It was argued that photographs offered immediacy and transparency of depiction in a way that traditional artistic forms of representation such as sculpture, painting, and the graphic arts could not possibly achieve (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 30). To some, most prominently among whom was the nineteenth-century poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, this was a highly negative development. Photography, wrote Baudelaire in a key text, is the offspring of a “revengeful God” who has allowed an industry to see the light of day, providing an imitative result so “identical to Nature” that it appears to be “the absolute of art” (1965 [1859]: 152).

Baudelaire was eager to reject photography altogether, arguing that it could not possibly succeed in creating true works of art because it could never meet the main asset valued so highly by French connoisseurs at the time: creative human genius. Since one automatically produces objective veracity through photography, Baudelaire claimed, taking photographs will always lack a subjective input or imagination, and such input is indispensable if one is to speak of a true work of art. In his view, creative imagination was exclusively associated with the realm of painting and

painters. Others, contrary to Baudelaire, have highly valued the technique's presumed automatic truthfulness and hailed photography's introduction as no less than a welcome revolution.

Photography and its likeness to the model

In 1945 film critic André Bazin asserted that as even in antiquity people have sought to deceive death by making visual, artistic representations of the deceased. The Egyptians used mummies, and later on statues, in order "to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second, spiritual death" (1980 [1945]: 238). Very soon it was established that the photograph, due to its "quality of realism" (Friday 2005: 342), revolutionized this deeply rooted tendency and succeeded in more decisively satisfying our need for identity-substitutes. This argument has been put forward to underscore the supposedly essential differences between paintings and photographs and, subsequently, to identify photography as "a different kind of art" (Szarkowski 1975).

The photographic image, Bazin argues, "shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is a reproduction; it *is* the model" (1980 [1945]: 241 [original emphasis]). Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen have defined the psychological belief that photography works in a purely physiochemical way in terms of a "mechanical" model that "stresses the necessary and mechanical connections which exist between what we see in a photograph and what was in front of the camera" (1975: 149). These authors are highly skeptical of an ontologically determined definition of photography's essence as a basis for arguing in favor of photography, such as Bazin, or against it, such as Baudelaire. Snyder and Allen do not question the assumption of a necessary connection "between a photograph and its 'real life' original" (149), a connection that is obviously much stronger than in the case of a painting. But they question the actual importance of this knowledge for understanding photographs. Is the photograph, because it involves a technique of inscribing reality, forever tied to the obligation to depict "what is there" (148)? Is it obliged to "find" or "capture" situations, whereas the painter, supposedly, can freely create and invent them (148)?

What guarantees about the represented facts do photographs – conceived as purely mechanically produced images – actually offer to us? Or should we put much more emphasis on the photographer's contribution to, manipulation of, and control over the production process of photographic images? Already in 1975, when digital photography had still not yet entered the scene, Snyder and Allen identified commonplaces such

as the view that “the physical objects themselves print their image,” expressed by Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1974), as a “fanciful metaphor.” They argue that the (analog) photographic image is a crafted object rather than a natural thing: “It is created out of natural material (light), and it is crafted in accordance with, or at least not in contravention of, ‘natural laws’.” It is therefore hardly surprising, Snyder and Allen continue, “that something in the camera’s field will be represented in the image,” but in their conclusion they stress that “*how*” something will be represented “is neither natural nor necessary” (1975: 151 [emphasis added]).

Defenders of photography’s supposedly “essentially objective character” (Bazin 1980 [1945]: 241) have argued that photography succeeded in minimizing the “inescapable subjectivity” that the painter – regardless of his skill – could not dispense with (240). Bazin writes that compared with a painter’s intervention in composing his work, the photographer’s contribution to the genesis of his image is strongly limited due to the increased impact of the highly automated technology involved. This is why photographs, more than any other form of picture-making, possess a substantial “quality of credibility,” according to Bazin (241). When reproducing objects, photographs thus add a dimension to comparable hand-crafted images. Although Bazin admits that the photograph’s power might be irrational in this respect, he insists that it does “*re-present*” an object before us in such way that we are forced to accept its existence as real (241 [original emphasis]). This is a most basic assumption about photography, one that was expressed by British photographer Peter Henry Emerson about half a century earlier. In his 1889 pamphlet entitled *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, Emerson writes that “photographs are first and foremost *pictures*,” in the sense that they are representations, and need to be understood and valued as such (as quoted by Snyder and Allen 1975: 144 [original emphasis]).

Canadian Jeff Wall’s *8056 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, 9 a.m., 24 September 1996* (Figure 1.1), a large silver gelatin print, offers a fine example of that finding. The print displays a photographically depicted reality and informs its viewers about the spatiotemporal



Figure 1.1 Jeff Wall, *8056 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, 9 a.m., 24 September 1996*, 1996. Silver gelatin print, 203.5 × 256 cm.

Source: © Jeff Wall, courtesy of the artist.

conditions of its taking. Apart from being slightly blurred, the image accurately captures a view one could have had of that particular part of Beverly Boulevard at that moment in time, when inspecting it through a surveillance camera, for example, which also usually display black-and-white images. Accuracy of representation has long been a painterly ambition. Especially after the discovery of perspective, Western painters have managed “to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them” (Bazin 1980 [1945]: 239). Perspective compositions made it possible to depict a well-chosen moment, as if taken straight from reality. Although perspective painting managed to achieve such reality effect in a perfect way, at least formally, Bazin argues that this mode of painting failed to make a tangible connection with the real-life situation it set out to depict.

Photography, according to Bazin, was able to fill that gap. As an image that seems maximally transparent in relation to the reality it represents, the photographic image appears to be reality’s double, a return to “true realism” (Bazin, as quoted in Friday 2005: 342). This is why photography can depict moments characterized by a “dramatic expression” that psychically confirms a situation had truly happened (Bazin 1980 [1945]: 239). Although painting is also capable of suggesting dramatic movement, it remains fully detached from the moment represented because paintings can never serve as hard evidence of the fact that the depicted situation took place at all. It has been argued that photography, instead of announcing painting’s demise, came to liberate the plastic arts “from their obsession with likeness” (240) or their struggle with “pseudorealism” (Friday 2005: 342).

Photography thus brought the “Classical system of representation,” in the words of Craig Owens, to a culminating point (1992 [1982]: 89). As Owens writes, representation in painting was always defined in terms of “substitution” and “imitation” of reality at the same time (97). Photography would prove to excel in both modes. A photo may not only serve as a highly credible replacement or stand-in for someone or something now absent; it may also compensate for that absence to a certain extent. What is more, the photographic image is a strongly resembling copy of an object or situation as it was once physically present. It re-presents these objects in the sense that it creates the illusion that, in their eternal absence, it can make them feel as if present again, in a maximal tangible way.

This is not to say that photographs, as mere presentations of their objects, can be viewed as somehow coinciding with them. From a contemporary perspective, it is striking that Bazin, even in 1945 when he wrote his essay, could express his belief in a seemingly immediate relation between the photographic image and the object it depicted. Against his ontological

readings, the philosopher Jonathan Friday has argued that Bazin's statement regarding the ontology of the photographic image should not be interpreted "to mean that he is concerned with the nature, or being, or distinctive identity of the photograph" (2005: 339). To Friday, Bazin's approach needs to be understood in phenomenological terms, as an attempt to grasp what photography is through investigating how it presents itself subjectively, to our perceiving and psychologically determined consciousness.

Historical brief: photography and ontology

Ever since photography's discovery, however, the idea has circulated that it is possible to objectively define the essence of photography as a signifier that stands in direct relation to the reality it represents. Sir John Frederick William Herschel probably introduced the word "photography" to the world in a paper entitled *Note on the Art of Photography, or The Application of the Chemical Rays of Light to the Purpose of Pictorial Representation*, which he presented to the British Royal Society on March 14, 1839. He also coined the terms "negative" and "positive" in this context. These made reference to the inventions by his compatriot, fellow-scientist friend, and true defender of positivist philosophy, William Henry Fox Talbot. In *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the Process by Which Natural Objects May be Made to Delineate Themselves Without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil* (1839), Talbot expressed his great belief in photography's proof-function and its inductive qualities. As such photography would help us to arrive at an understanding of the "true law of nature" (Talbot, as quoted in Armstrong 1998: 108).

Photography, according to Talbot, merited this highest esteem due to its quality of being the very imprint of nature. As he writes in the introductory remarks to his photographically illustrated book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), photography allows for obtaining visual representations that are the result of "the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper" (as quoted in Armstrong 1998: 112). In Talbot's view, photography's scientific quality to materialize light and to be a material trace of the reality it depicts is its major difference from other modes of visual illustration. Photographs, he argues, "have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone," whereas "plates of the ordinary kind ... owe their existence to the united skill of the Artist and the Engraver" (112, 113). The latter necessitates skillful human intervention, but photography by contrast is the beautiful result of "nature's painting" (114).

At this earliest moment in the history of photography, then, Talbot had already articulated the most elementary ontological definition of

photography: It can be understood as “a process of recording, a technique of *inscribing*, in an emulsion of silver salts, a stable image generated by a ray of light” (Damisch 2003 [1978]: 87 [original emphasis]). “A photograph,” the French semiotician Hubert Damisch asserted in 1978, “is this paradoxical image, without thickness or substance (and, in a way, entirely unreal), that we read without disclaiming the notion that it retains something of the reality from which it was somehow released through its physiochemical make-up” (88). Evidently, Damisch viewed Talbot’s early assumption as one that needs to be argued with.

Yet, the assumption of photography’s intrinsic interconnection with reality was highly influential throughout the twentieth century. Still as early as in 1966, the curator John Szarkowski claimed rather enigmatically: “Like an organism, photography was born whole” (1966: 11). To him, photography, from the very outset, was endowed with an essential nature, that is, with essential characteristics that we would further discover and understand as time went by. In the catalog essay of the 1981 exhibition he curated at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) under the title *Before Photography*, curator Peter Galassi offers an ambitious effort to “give substance to Szarkowski’s conjecture” that the development of photography can be understood as being almost similar to that of an organism, and can be grasped through a taxonomic approach (Phillips 1989 [1982]: 40). Galassi traces photography’s origins in relation to the history of Western painting while making a statement that has subsequently been heavily contested by his critics. He argues that photography, much more than being the offspring from a fruitful juncture of scientific, cultural, and economic determinations, is the final, perfected result of centuries-long pictorial efforts to depict the world in terms of the afore mentioned classical system of representation.

In retrospect, it is perhaps striking that the idea of photography as somehow presenting the object of which it is a physical trace again (in a flat *and* realistic form) has been foregrounded in discussions since the very beginning of photographic history. This basic understanding of what representation actually is, Damisch underlines, is precisely the reason why photography was invented. But photography also came into the world, as Craig Owens has argued (and as we address in detail below), to uncover eventually what the classical system of artistic representation had been concealing all along, namely that it is but a human construction determined by convention up to the point of conviction.

Hubert Damisch also brings to mind the fact that the so-called discoverers of photography did not so much have the desire “to create a new type of image or to determine novel modes of representation” (2003

[1978]: 88). Instead of searching for new ways of depicting individuals, groups, settings, or ideas, they were after something far more literal: “they wanted, rather, to fix the images which were ‘spontaneously’ formed on the ground of the camera obscura” (88). What is omitted from this discussion, Damisch argues, is that the images obtained by the first photographers were not as naturally given as it seemed at first sight. The design of the early nineteenth-century camera obscura was influenced by the requirements of art as it developed throughout the modern Western tradition, at least since the discovery of Renaissance single-point perspective.

Reconsidering Jeff Wall’s *8056 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, 9 a.m., 24 September 1996* in this light, one finds that the artist has indicated in a visually tangible way how the rectangular or square structure of the early nineteenth-century camera obscura’s ground glass conformed to a conventional notion of space, which was determined long before the invention of photography. “All images produced by lenses are circular,” the artist writes, “but cameras normally combine a lens with a film format that excludes the peripheral area of the image, thereby making it seem that images are rectangular” (Vischer and Naef 2005: 369). This was a primordial aesthetic choice, which lived through within dominant further artistic developments of the technique. In this way, Snyder and Allen have argued, “the requirements of ‘traditional’ art formed the basis for the many, today still ongoing comparisons between photography and painting.” Willingly or not, photography thus came to be seen as “a benchmark of ‘pictorial fact’ against which to measure more traditional pictorial media” (1975: 148).

Case study: Hiroshi Sugimoto

The Piano Lesson by the Japanese American artist Hiroshi Sugimoto (Figure 1.2) is a color photograph that only at the first glance appears as if taken straight from life. This is so because both the interior and the



Figure 1.2 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *The Music Lesson*, 1999. Pigment Print, 135 × 106 cm, negative C2001.

Source: © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy of the artist.

clothing suggest that the photograph was taken in the seventeenth century, long before the invention of photography. But its striking resemblance to Johannes Vermeer's famous painting *The Music Lesson* (c. 1662–1665) will soon make one pause and wonder whether this is a photograph of Vermeer's original painting. This impression, in turn, will quickly be discarded as one notes a reflection of a camera tripod in the mirror above the virginal. Finally one realizes that one is looking at a picture of the largely complete wax reconstruction of Vermeer's painting at Madame Tussauds in Amsterdam. Comparison of the Vermeer painting with Sugimoto's image will reveal the difference between the rectangular and square tile floor in the seventeenth-century original and the circularly deformed floor in Sugimoto's photo, due to the fact that the image was taken with a wide-angle lens.

Sugimoto's image addresses the deeply rooted psychological human need for making images that preserve human beings from eternal oblivion. It is common knowledge that, in order to satisfy that need, wax figures were photography's most important three-dimensional forerunners (Sterckx 2006). The wax figure possesses the particular characteristic of an almost superhuman realism, having an impact on the viewer that the figure is almost felt to be alive (again). Sugimoto's photographic image is one step further removed from the originally depicted subject in the wax figures. The picture thus explicitly reveals several of the photographic image's peculiar characteristics of depiction, some of which – such as mirroring effects and sequential representation – we discuss in more detail in Chapter 5. Several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painters, including Canaletto and Vermeer, experimented with the camera obscura (Steadman 2001). If Vermeer is perhaps seen as a precocious proto-photographer, Sugimoto's contemporary photograph may turn out to be an interesting multi-mediating picture, a theoretical concept we return to below.

The wax version of Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* is a popularizing, theatrical attempt to duplicate a great painting. This wax version, however, will at best come to be understood as a three-dimensional *tableau vivant* of the painting – never as an image in its own right. In contrast, Sugimoto's photograph, which is a two-dimensional image that not only duplicates but also accentuates the flatness of the original painting, seems as an ironic attempt to commemorate photography's many historical efforts to surpass painting. The remarkable presence of the tripod in the mirror testifies to what could be at stake in this image: Painting and photography historically serving the same aims – preserving the ever-changing world, in as realistic a way as possible. As close rivals they ended up in fierce competition – one, to be sure, that is still ongoing.



Figure 1.3 Jeff Wall, *The Stumbling Block*, 1991. Transparency in lightbox, 229 × 337.5 cm.

Source: © Jeff Wall, courtesy of the artist.

Straight and Composed Photography: The Impact of the Digital

Straight photography: a historical definition

It is not difficult to take Jeff Wall's *The Stumbling Block* of 1991 (Figure 1.3) as a typical example of a so-called "straight photograph." The term "straight photography" emerged in the 1880s to indicate a non-manipulated photographic print, that is, an image in which the emphasis is on its direct documentary character. This approach reflected a critical response to the composite prints of photographers such as the Britisher Henry Peach Robinson, one of the first to establish the principles of pictorialist photography in his *Pictorial Effect in Photography* (1869) (Figure 1.4). Robinson's pictures not only combine two or more photographs, but are also staged. This means that the scene before the



Figure 1.4 Henry Peach Robinson, *He Never Told his Love*, 1884.

Source: Courtesy of National Media Museum/SSPL.

camera was “created” rather than encountered as such in real life. In general, straight photography was understood to depict a reality situation as it was (even if minor interventions on the part of the photographer, such as asking a subject to repeat a certain pose, were tolerated). At first, straight photography was a viable choice within pictorialism, a photographic movement that largely subscribed to the idea that art photography needed to emulate the approach taken in painting and to etch the point in time by using black-and-white or sepia-toned images. “Straight” defined those more detailed images as contrasting with the soft-focus painterly photographs which eventually became the hallmark of pictorialism, after being promoted by the American photographer and curator Edward Steichen in the early 1900s and before the First World War.

An irreversible breach with the past was made when pictorialism turned its attention to special filters and lens coatings, as well as heavy manipulation in the darkroom, and exotic printing processes such as rough-surface printing papers that helped to further break up a picture’s sharpness. Some artists even went as far as “etching” the surface of their prints using fine needles, with the intention to increase the picture’s level of personal artistic expression. In his urban street scenes and portraits of the 1910s, American photographer Paul Strand moved away from the soft-focus symbolism of pictorialist photography to images of greater definition. As of then, straight photography meant images that bore witness to “absolute unqualified objectivity,” Strand wrote in the last issue of Alfred Stieglitz’s New York-based landmark photo magazine *Camera Work* (June 1917).

To an increasing extent, straight came to imply a specific aesthetic. It was typified by higher contrast, sharper focus, aversion to cropping, and emphasis on the underlying abstract geometric structure of subjects. Combination prints were eschewed as much as staging pictures. This emphasis on the non-manipulated silver print dominated modernist photographic aesthetics well into the 1970s. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau pointed out upon mentioning John Szarkowski’s preference for the snapshot aesthetics of Gary Winogrand against the “retouched, painted, and manipulated art photographs of, say, Benno Friedman” (1982: 173), the aesthetics of straight photography introduced aspects of formalist photography to America. Straight documentary photography as art adhered to the logic of “truth to materials” and wished to find its own identity as high art in dialogical opposition to painting. At the same time, the aesthetic of the straight picture flourished within the more narrowly defined and socially oriented documentary tradition that saw light in the 1930s. Documentary photographers cherished the supposed truthfulness to reality of the socially inspired, straight image (an issue we analyze in more detail in Chapter 4).

Straight photography remained in fashion until the late twentieth century. In order for a photograph to obtain artistic acclaim, it had to stay true to a “straight approach to life” (Kracauer 1980 [1960]: 254). Referring to the example of Lisette Model, Siegfried Kracauer asserts that photographers should go after “candid shots,” for only they are “true to the medium” (257). Photography, he argues, has an “outspoken affinity for unstaged reality” (263). As such it obeys the demands of its own medium. In the same vein, Kracauer argues that photography needs to emphasize the “fortuitous” and the “adventitious” as much as it is obliged not to favor an “obvious compositional pattern.” As the medium-specific photographic approach obliges the photographer to emphasize the fortuitous, he or she should aspire to depict “fragments rather than wholes.” Fragmentary motifs cannot be “staged”; rather than determining them in advance, the photographer should encounter them in nature (264).

Case study: Jeff Wall

The Stumbling Block is a typical example of Jeff Wall’s interest in making contemporary works of art that “evoke the appearance of documentary or ‘straight’ photography” (Fried 2008: 63). Actually, it is not a straight, that is, a direct documentary photograph. Wall has explicitly acknowledged that *The Stumbling Block* belongs to that part of his body of work defined as cinematographic. This refers to “those photographs in which the subject of the picture has been prepared in some way, ranging from minimal modifications to the construction of entire sets, creation of costumes and objects, etc.” (Vischer and Naef 2005: 272). As such he contrasts cinematographic photographs to documentary ones.

Wall’s cinematographic pictures are always staged to a certain extent, from rather minimally to heavily. If it is not always clear what exactly has been staged for his cinematographic photographs, Wall claims to have used “non-professional performers in roles very close to their own lives” (Fried 2008: 63). His documentary photographs conform to the normative definition of documentary or straight photography, in the sense that they were made with no intervention on the part of the artist, except for his choice of “the location and time of the picture” (Vischer and Naef 2005: 272). Over the years, Wall made several images within the documentary category, such as the already discussed *8056 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, 9 a.m., 24 September 1996* (Figure 1.1). Arguably, he has become best known for the cinematographic part of his *oeuvre*, certainly the most debated-upon in the literature.

Jeff Wall has defined this approach as “near documentary” (Enright 2000: 50), meaning that he wants his pictures “to feel as if they easily could be

documentary photographs,” which at least should “claim to be a plausible account of ... what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed” (Wall 2002). But, as Wall explains in an interview with Jan Tumlir (2001), at the same time it should be clear from the pictures in subtle ways, although not necessarily immediately, that, when accomplished, they are no longer candid. Wall’s pictures merely seem to be an “emblem of dailiness” (Fried 2007: 517); they merely look straight, even though one consciously knows that, at least to certain extent, they are not.

In *The Stumbling Block*, the depicted characters appear so accustomed to the photographer’s distanced presence that the scene emerges as if they had forgotten he was there to take their picture. The personages or other elements included in Wall’s cinematographic pictures are always somehow “staged” into the settings in which the viewer encounters them – sometimes to the extent of being, at least in some aspects, digitally inserted into the picture. However, this is not perceived as such by the viewer, who cannot readily tell from looking at the picture how the staging process took place. The viewer only knows something was not straight because the artist gives away the information that the image is “cinematographic,” that is, staged (Vischer and Naef 2005: 332). Wall further informs his viewers that *The Stumbling Block* is “digital montage,” that is, a computer-assimilated composition of several cinematographic photographs of the same subject.

This way of employing the photographic image has urged various writers, including Jean-François Chevrier, to conclude that Jeff Wall’s work, much more than continuing the early twentieth-century tradition of straight photography, is bringing back to life “a pictorial tradition dominated by the concept of ‘painted theatre’,” in which the photographic picture is redefined “as a synthesis of pictorial composition and cinematographic ‘mise en scène’” (2005: 17). He has elaborated how Wall’s works can be considered a photographic reconstruction of the historical picture or *tableau*, defined as “the exemplary form of autonomous pictorial art” (17). Jeff Wall has endorsed such an interpretation of his work (Chevrier 2006: 13). Michael Fried has argued that many of Wall’s pictures, effectively, are outstanding examples of revival of a specific painterly tradition in a contemporary mode that Fried defines as absorptive, and which he considers to be the most superior form of visual art. The best of Wall’s works produce for their viewers the “magic of absorption” in an extremely accomplished way, with “great pictorial and intellectual sophistication” (2007: 517, 2008: 75). This “appeal to absorption” is achieved through the inclusion of characters that appear completely immersed in their own laborious activities. Also, they are, at least to a substantial extent, “unaware ... ‘of the construct of the picture’” itself, which accounts for the fact that they do not seem to notice “the necessary presence of the viewer” (2007: 516).

As regards *The Stumbling Block* one might presume that the personages had rehearsed their specific positions in the composition's staged theater so many times that they were indeed oblivious of the photographer's presence. This is also the case in the Robinson picture (Figure 1.4), where at no time do the characters appear to be noticing the photographer's presence. Yet, even as far back as 1960, Siegfried Kracauer, who moved to the United States during the Second World War, was of the opinion that flagrantly staged late nineteenth-century pictorialist efforts – like those of Julia Margaret Cameron or Henry Peach Robinson, geared towards creating “pictorial beauty,” one that could compete with traditional painterly idioms – are a denial by the artists-photographers of the properties of their own medium (Kracauer 1980 [1960]: 249). They are nothing but mere imitators of traditional art, not of “fresh reality” (248), which he viewed to be photography's true mission. “If any medium has its legitimate place at the pole opposite that of painting, it is photography,” Kracauer concludes (256). Such finding does immediately demonstrate that photography, in the course of the twentieth century, has come a long way. The current, photographic revitalization of “the tableau-tradition-in-painting” is related to ways of photo-making which have been prevalent since the late 1980s. How is one to come to terms with such profound changes within the theoretical understanding of photography's relationship to painting?

A picture such as by Henry Peach Robinson is composed in accordance with the so-called “golden rule,” which calls for adherence to a compositional scheme of “one-third/two-third horizontal proportions” (Wells 2009 [1996]: 304). In *He Never Told His Love*, the interaction between the image's principal characters, the only male person in the picture and the young woman who appears to be talking to him, takes place exactly at the height of the image's imaginary horizontal dividing line. Viewers can choose to position themselves with regard to the characters depicted in the image as if standing right in front of them, at the same height, just a few meters away, or as if almost taking part in the depicted discussion. Obviously, the photographer positioned the camera at the appropriate place in order to achieve that very kind of pictorial effect. Wall's *The Stumbling Block* strikingly plays with the very same compositional scheme. Several criss-crossing horizontal “lines,” apparently trolley car electric wires, divide the upper and lower sections of the picture, and the central events and actions all take place in the lower section. Yet, from a compositional point of view, it is remarkable that Wall thus appears to hold on to the golden rule, by positioning his picture in the tradition of Robinson's combination prints. This is striking because Wall, one of today's most celebrated artists who work with photography, thus seems to bring to mind these early photographers.



Figure 1.5 Alexander Rodchenko, *Assembling for a Demonstration (Gathering for the Demonstration in the Courtyard of the VChUTEMAS – Higher Institute of Technics and Art)*, 1928. Gelatin silver print, 49.5 × 35.3 cm. Source: Mr and Mrs John Spencer Fund, Museum of Modern Art, New York. © SABAM Belgium 2010; Image © 2010 Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

Cherishing ambitions as artists, they were an absolute minority in their own day and age, when photography was practically considered as a “convenient means of record-making” (Jeffrey 1996 [1981]: 48).

In his essay “The Photograph Versus the Painting” (1926), critic Ossip Brik, taking a similar stance as Kracauer before him, went as far as to argue that eventually photography would supplant painting. When writing this, however, he did not exactly anticipate any tableau-like methods to do so. Instead, Brik put all his hopes in photography’s ability to define its own medium-specific identity, which he believed could only be done by “ex-painters” (1989 [1926]: 217). The example by excellence Brik selects is photographic work by Russian artist Alexander Rodchenko (Figure 1.5), whose intention it is, he writes, “to reject the principles of painterly, ‘pictorial’ construction for the photograph, and to discover other, specifically photographic laws for taking and composing the shot” (217).

Since the painterly process takes time, generally requiring a fixed position sustained for at least some period, painters are not easily inclined to leave their easel behind and make paintings from a non-traditional perspective. This is exactly where photography has a potential advantage. Photographs can be taken swiftly and rapidly, as well as from various positions. Rodchenko thus found for photography a way to distinguish itself from painting and posit its own specificity. Most importantly, Rodchenko, in an essay entitled “The Paths of Modern Photography,” argued in favor of viewpoints “from above down” and “from below up,” the dazzling angles for which his photographic work has become famous (1989 [1928a]: 258). Treated this way, photography, Brik writes, no doubt will

summon artists to “replace the painter’s primitive methods of ‘artistically reflecting life’” with images that, as he believed, could have much more decisive communicative impact on their viewers (1989 [1926]: 218).

Brik strongly believed it would be possible for photography to break away from the traditional painterly clichés employed to represent visual facts, be it within painting or in pictorialist photography. “Strictly speaking,” Rodchenko argued along the same lines in a brief text entitled “A Caution,” “we are not fighting against painting (it’s dying anyway) but against photography ‘à la painting,’ ‘inspired by painting’” (1989 [1928b]: 264). In order to avoid confusion with painterly compositional schemes, it was crucial, Rodchenko argued in “The Paths of Modern Photography,” to “employ completely unexpected vantage points and in completely unexpected positions” (1989 [1928a]: 261). To succeed in this ambition, there is one viewpoint that absolutely needs to be avoided, namely “the belly button” (262). This refers to the conventional painterly, compositional point of view that reflects the vertical, upright, and forward-looking creative process of making the piece that is supposed to be looked at subsequently by a viewer in a similar, vertical way. In Rodchenko’s view, then, Robinson’s pictorialist approach, which conformed to the above-described “golden rule,” was strongly to be eschewed.

The general art critical and theoretical climate of the pre-Second World War moment was thus certainly marked by an emphasis on strong contrasts between painting and photography, based partly on a differentiation between angles and perspectives to depict scenes. In an essay entitled “From the Painting to the Photograph,” Ossip Brik also put forward a vehement plea for photography to search for its own specific expressive forms and methods within the logic of the straight picture. Contrary to painters, the photographer, according to Brik, “does not have to set the [depicted] scene up in order to take it” (1989 [1928]: 230).

Thus Brik, perhaps unwillingly, paved the way for John Szarkowski, who in 1966 championed the modernist idea of formalist art photography’s medium specificity in technical terms. “It should be possible,” Szarkowski writes, “to consider the history of the medium in terms of photographers’ progressive awareness of characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium” (1966: 7). He distinguishes five phenomena he considers unique to photography: The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point – and this list is not meant to be exhaustive. Photographers, Szarkowski argues, can only record reality as they encounter it. The photograph reflects a fragment of reality, and does not explain it. Rather than being a story, it only offers scattered and suggestive clues of what was once there. The photograph is unable to assemble these

clues into a coherent narrative, he continues. It somehow tells of reality itself, so to speak, while simultaneously re-presenting it to us.

In this respect, Szarkowski's view differs from that of the critic Clement Greenberg. Although he approaches Szarkowski when claiming in 1967 that "photography is not necessarily inferior to painting in its capacity for art," Greenberg argues that photography achieves its highest qualities by "story-telling" (1993 [1967]: 271). A few years earlier, in 1964, he already emphasized that photography, before being anything else, was "a literary art" (1993 [1964]: 183). The triumphs of photography, Greenberg continues, are "historical, anecdotal, reportorial, observational before they are purely pictorial." In order to be successful as a work of art, a photograph has "to tell a story." Everything else, including the pictorial values of the photograph, derives from the decisions a photographer makes with regard to his choice and accosting of the story that forms the image's subject.

Victor Burgin has commented that, in reading Greenberg, it tends to be omitted that his "primary concern [was] with the specificity of a given practice" (2007: 367). In the case of painting, Burgin writes, Greenberg found this specificity in the medium (painting on a flat surface). However, it does not follow that one might expect him to find the specificity of any practice whatsoever in its material definition of the medium. According to Greenberg, this is not the case for photography: its specificity lies in the fact that it is a narrative practice, that photography is a "technology plus narrative" (368). But, as Burgin claims, Greenberg is not able to define how "an impression of narrative can be given by a single image" (1982 [1980]: 211). This is perhaps accomplished, in fact, by Wall's *The Stumbling Block*. Its enigmatic narrative and epic dimension appear to match Greenberg's conception of photography. In writing, Wall has argued that he conceives of photography in terms of "a novelisation of pictorial forms," or what he also describes as "the literature *of* the picture" (1989: 58 [original emphasis]). His photographs, he asserts, continue a long-standing, traditional line of "synthetic story-telling" in pictorial art (58).

Today, Wall's *The Stumbling Block* indicates that, contrary to the precocious situation of early photography, the contemporary photographer is no longer "powerless to compose his picture," and is able to achieve much more than just "take it" (Galassi 1981: 41). Wall has conceded that his pictures are "re-enactments," as he calls them (1996: n.p.). They are multilayered combinations of an extensive range of shots, taken over a certain period of time "with a single camera position and with the camera set almost the same for every shot" (Tumilir 2001: 114). If some of these shots were straight and others staged, they are all mounted into a single synthetic image.

Robinson's combination pieces of straight shots (e.g., of the landscape, sky) and of carefully staged images (e.g., the personages) testified to a rather clumsy way of composing the image. His "combination printing" was inspired by the work of his tutor Oscar Rejlander (see Figure 3.4), who always composed his images out of several negatives that each were printed separately on the same paper. Robinson explains that at the time it was impossible, for example, to obtain in one exposure both sharp foreground detail and impressive meteorological effects (Ades 1976: 89). Wall's pictures achieve full, perfected compositional synthesis. As of 1991, he started to employ computer technology, *The Stumbling Block* being his first digital montage piece (Vischer and Naef 2005: 332). In this work, "several discrete photographic moments, shot both 'in the field' and in the studio, were digitally conjoined" (Tumlir 2001: 112). His most recent cinematographic pictures are often even more digitally worked on with the help of sophisticated software which is currently at an artist's disposal.

A digital future

The widespread adoption of digital technique in art photography has caused several media theorists, most prominently William J. Mitchell (1992), to conclude that contemporary digital montage, which constructs images, is more akin to painting or collage techniques than to analog photography. It has often been argued that digital interventions undermine photography's supposed inherently truthful status, and have thus come to herald the death of analog photography's most specific hallmark (Ritchin 1991). As there are no original negatives to verify the truth of the image, the challenging idea of a photographic copy that has no original has circulated widely over the past decades (Burgin 1996 [1995]: 29). Others, such as American photographer and critic Martha Rosler, have claimed that manipulation has been integral to photography from its very beginnings. In an essay entitled "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations" (1989), she underlines that the success of digital developments within photography are the logical consequence of a cultural imperative to create perfectly tricked pictures, rather than vice versa (2005 [1988/1989]: 270).

This is why manipulation alone cannot serve as a credible criterion for distinguishing between analog and digital photography, nor does it provide a sufficient base for arguing that the former by necessity presents the viewer with a more truthful picture than the latter, as William J. Mitchell would have it (1992: 225). Philosopher Scott Walden has argued that analog images more easily facilitate the generation of thoughts that are true, thus increasing the viewer's confidence in the truth value of the

images themselves. Digital images, he says, can also leave the veracity of our thoughts unscathed. But it will be much more difficult for the viewer to have confidence in such thoughts because it is much more complex to verify the degree of objective, mechanical creation of digital images than that of analog images (2008: 4–5, 108–110).

If Walden clearly expresses his worry with regard to the shift from analog to digital pictures, media and visual culture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell seems less concerned. It takes much more, he argues, than the absence or presence of digital montage to assess the presumed more truthful nature of one photographic image over another. Here, the irrational element of belief in an image by its viewer is at stake, and belief is highly dependent on the picture's wider horizon of appearance, "its *being in the world*," as W.J.T. Mitchell has argued in a critique of William J. Mitchell (2006: 17 [original emphasis]). This issue will be further developed in this chapter, as well as in other chapters of this study.

Even within the most narrowly defined straight photography, which has often come to be understood as a norm against which to test manipulative deviations (as in Mitchell 1992: 7), it is common knowledge that it takes a lot of mediation by the photographer at various stages of the making process of the image. "After all," Geoffrey Batchen writes, "what else is photography but the knowing manipulation of light levels, exposure times, chemical concentrations, tonal ranges and so on" (1999 [1994]: 18). Other relevant issues include the selection of the type of camera, choosing a camera position, choice of the lens and of the film, control of light, the method of development, and printing decisions – a list that is hardly exhaustive. As Batchen concludes:

In the mere act of transcribing world into picture, three dimensions into two, photographers necessarily manufacture the image they make. Artifice of one kind or another is therefore an inescapable part of photographic life. In that sense, photographs are no more or less "true" to the appearance of things in the world than are digital images. (18)

With regard to the issue of manipulation, Lev Manovich has equally claimed that "[d]igital technology does not subvert 'normal' [i.e., straight] photography because 'normal' photography never existed" (1996 [1995]: 62). W.J.T. Mitchell confirmed this claim when stating that "[t]he concept of the 'genuine' image as a natural, unmanipulated entity is an ideological phantasm" (2006: 16). The relationship between digital and analog representation is "dialectical," rather than involving "a rigid, binary opposition" (20). Still, as Wall acknowledged in a written statement regarding *The Stumbling Block*, it is thanks to digital technology that he has been able "to escape from aspects of photography" that he has "come to see as

limitations” (Vischer and Naef 2005: 332). The new technology has allowed him “to experiment with a new range of subjects or types of picture,” which earlier had been beyond his reach (333). As a result, he could make composite photographs that have in many ways demonstrated the younger medium’s triumph over the older one. However, perhaps the price paid for this has been a loss of belief in photography’s objectivity or indexicality, as we will elaborate in the next section.

Photographs as Iconic Index of the Reality Represented

Many publications concerning the theory of photography use the terms “index” and “icon” (or “indexical” and “iconic”) to define the relationship between the photograph and reality. Often, these terms are used to explain the difference between photography and painting in general. This section addresses the arguments of both scholars who call photography indexical and those who assert that photography is or can become (even more) iconic. Through the example of the oil paintings of the German painter Gerhard Richter, we discuss how painters have reacted to photography’s claims of indexicality. In doing so, we further touch on how icon and index relate as concepts to issues of representation, straight and staged/composed, as dealt with above, whereby Jeff Wall’s *The Stumbling Block* again serves as a key work.

The index and the icon: a historical definition

In a roundtable discussion in Cork, the question of whether a photograph is an index or an icon was a main point of debate (Elkins 2007a). Although this dialog between nine specialists in the theory of photography did not lead to decisive conclusions, it became especially clear how hard it is to define the notions of icon and index. Should one study the original definitions as formulated by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth century? Or should one rather use the redefinitions from more recent publications by semioticians basing their theories on Peirce? In our opinion, one of the main reasons for the rather disappointing outcome of the roundtable in Cork is that photography was discussed in general instead of on the basis of a concrete corpus of photographs. Generally, those who considered the photograph as index not only had different photographs in mind but also dealt with other aspects and perspectives than those who stressed the iconic characteristics of photographs.

It has been argued that the early idea of the photograph as “a mechanical analogue of reality” (Snyder 2007: 369) gave rise to a further, additional definition of photography: A photo is also a physical trace or index of that reality. Authors agree that the index has a causal relation with its referent, such as smoke being an index of fire, to use an oft-mentioned example. This is why the index is also called a trace. Another famous, but more complicated, example of an index is the footprint left in the sand. The footprint presents formal similarities to the foot which produced it. But formal resemblances are part of definitions of the iconic, meaning the photograph’s relationship of likeness, conveying ideas of the thing it represents by imitating it. We may conclude, then, that theorists define index and icon as two different forms of representation, with – sometimes – an overlap in formal relationship. With regard to photographs, Alan Trachtenberg (1992: 187) proposes distinguishing between the term “trace,” which he relates to the footprint and the shadow, and the merely causal relationship of the index. In his view the more complex concept of trace, which indicates not just a causal relationship but also a formal or iconic resemblance, would be the only appropriate one to define photography.

Many theorists, however, have basically used index and trace as synonyms, privileging the term index and emphasizing the causal relationship to the detriment of the formal or iconic aspects. The reason for this conflation seems to be that causality can be linked to photography’s assumed relationship of veracity to the reality it represents. Photography’s indexicality thus constituted the basis for proposing ontological distinctions between painting and photography. Indexicality, understood in sheer terms of a cause–effect relationship, would be the hallmark of photography. Iconicity, which in this logic

does not possess such causal capacity, is left for painting, as being its own specific characteristic of a stylized resemblance, an identification to which we return below.

In many of his oil paintings, Gerhard Richter has powerfully criticized this dichotomization and reflected on what painting’s presumed total absence of indexicality can teach us about photography’s supposed full possession of it. Works like *Erschossener (1)* (Figure 1.6) have been hand-painted from photographs that appeared in German



Figure 1.6 Gerhard Richter, *Erschossener 1 (Man Shot Down 1)*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 100 × 140 cm. Source: © Gerhard Richter, courtesy of the artist.

newspapers. They come out as black-and-white, blurred photographs. Richter thus seems to prove that it is possible to imitate a photograph by hand, and thus to create an “imperfect index” (Green and Seddon 2000: 44), as David Green has argued. *Erschossener (I)*, as a painting from a photograph, seriously questions the supposedly perfect indexical relationship between the original photograph of a shot down Andreas Baader, found in his cell at Stammheim prison, and the reality as it happened. By provocatively identifying the painting as “Shot down (I)” [*Erschossener (I)*], Richter hints at debates in German society that ran through late 1970s after the so-called suicides that suggested the dead body lying on the floor – revealing that a bullet was shot through the head from behind – might not be a suicide victim. Whether it really was murder or suicide is something the original photographic image does not say. Together with the dubious caption, the painting, introducing a reflective distance towards the original photograph, seems to assess that what really happened cannot be understood from the picture’s indexical character alone.

Richter’s photo-like paintings add an element of non-automatic indexicality to painting’s iconicity. This is where the difference between photographic and painterly indexicality as conceived by Richter appears to reside: in its “automatic” character or the absence thereof, rather than in its problematically truthful character. In analog photography, the indexical automatically installs the iconic. This iconic aspect is similar for both photographs and paintings. In general, a detailed photograph at first sight may appear more truthful than a lesser detailed one or than a painting. For every iconic image, it takes the viewer’s conception of such a possibility of resemblance to effectively see that relationship of similarity between reality and representation. As the philosopher Nelson Goodman has asserted in *Languages of Art* (1968), the (degree of) resemblance between a realistic depiction and the reality it refers to, be it a figurative painting or a photograph, is always ultimately symbolic or based on a convention, shared by many persons.

An analog photo is always or almost always an automatically created, “realistic” image, because it is a true-likeness reproduction of reality. Yet, this is only so thanks to the fact that the photo is able to physically or indexically record that reality – indeed, in a highly depictive way. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, the photograph “is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object” (1985 [1977]: 203). This means that the photograph is indexically iconic, or iconic through and throughout its indexicality (Schaeffer 1987: 59–140). With Krauss and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, who introduced the concept of “indexical icon” (*l’icône indicielle*), many authors – including Jonathan

Friday and, to a very small extent, even Peirce himself, as Joel Snyder (2007: 382) has argued – have come to agree that the photograph can be defined in such terms. Friday, departing from his reading of Bazin, who defines photography in terms of a resembling image and trace at the same time, inverts the order of terms. He proposes to distinguish between two modes of representation: the “iconic” (painting) and the “iconically indexical” (photography) (2005: 343). In addition to being an “ordinary representational resemblance,” the photo is “a tracing of patterns of light reflected from its object” (343).

In his *The Spoken Image: Photography & Language*, semiotician Clive Scott links the matter of “style” in photography to iconic features, concluding that the debate about the possibility of speaking about photographic style remains unresolved (1999: 34–36). He quotes the American literary and culture critic Susan Sontag, who, like many others, argues in *On Photography* (1977) that style cannot exist in photographs because it is automatically installed due to the image’s indexical nature. Others, however, argue that style does exist in photography, but that it is more dispersed, more a combination of unrelated factors – subject matter, camera, darkroom habits, point of view, etc. – than something unitary, and that it can have multiple embodiments in the work of a single photographer. Scott suggests that the photograph as image mainly has pretensions to style because of the painterly techniques it uses. This appears to be all the more true in digitally mounted photographs, and it is confirmed by Jeff Wall, who has emphasized the importance he accords in his pictures to classical harmony (Van Gelder 2009).

Scott also systematically analyzes the arguments for calling photography indexical or iconic. He argues that different opinions can exist side by side, depending on which characteristic of photography and which photograph one has in mind. According to Scott, the arguments to call analog photography indexical mainly are that it is about the now: it cannot present the past from memory and therefore it cannot be anachronistic. The camera makes the instant available to us again, in a non-discriminating way. It can unveil new details, but also veil details through shadows and create certain gaps (What do I see here?). Moreover, a photograph contains non-motivated details, coincidences, inserted in the image by the sheer release of the shutter. A photograph is considered to be a witness, stressing the singularity of a moment. These characteristics are very much related to the features of straight photography as defined in the second section of this chapter (and are of crucial importance to post-documentary photographers as Chapter 4 demonstrates). We now further examine them through a study of Jeff Wall’s *The Stumbling Block*, which will also demonstrate the complexity of this photograph’s indexical nature.

Case study bis: Jeff Wall

The many preparatory photographs for Wall's *The Stumbling Block*, taken of the posing models and the scene surely were indexical, since they presented the now and instant of the model and situation. It is true that the shutter ultimately took part in deciding on the creation of each individual shot. Most probably, there were unexpected new details in those photographs. Still, one cannot be sure if the artist decided to leave them in the final composition or not. The exact indexical nature of Wall's digitally manipulated photograph is one big question mark. In any case does the now of the various elements in the photograph differ from the now of the ultimate picture, as it is the result of the combination of different photographs by means of computer software. The definitive picture is not a witness of an event in the past, but rather a new, autonomous image. What are the consequences of this production process for *The Stumbling Block's* iconicity?

In his writing, Jeff Wall has minimized the importance of the indexical nature of photography to the advantage of its iconic characteristics, while aiming to demonstrate photography's relation with the history of painting. As it has been argued, photography and figurative painting share a common characteristic in the sense that they both are a mode of representation in which the picture can be perceived as resembling or imitating the object it depicts. They can, therefore, both be defined as iconic. In an analog photograph or an iconic index, the iconic relationship of likeness is created through physical contiguity. The photograph is a meticulously precise physical imprint of light reflections transferred onto a sensitive surface in such way that they create a relationship of resemblance between reality and representation. The case of painting demonstrates that an icon need not be a record; it "needs not be present to what it represents, it can be an imaginative, and imaginary, reconstruction" (Scott 1999: 27). Even if a figurative, photorealist painting may seem to perfectly mirror the reality it depicts in the same way a photograph does, there is always an element of intrusion or transformation added to the element of likeness. A painting is handmade, its resemblance is constructed. From that perspective *The Stumbling Block*, as a constructed or digital composition of several analog photographs that include staged elements, may indeed be called iconic. But what kind of icon, then, is it?

Scott's discussion of iconic aspects mainly focuses on shifts from indexical to iconic. Over time, straight photographs that were first strongly related to the referent as index, he argues, become interesting photographs to look at in different ways when we do not know and do not bother anymore about the who or where. Something similar happens in Wall's digitally mounted

images, yet much faster in time. Actually, most of this process takes place even before they are released to their viewers. Since Wall created the penultimate circumstance represented in *The Stumbling Block* on his computer, no spectator could have seen that exact situation in real life. Even if one may recognize one of the models or the city streets where the action took place, one knows that the scene that perhaps looks partly familiar never happened as shown in the picture. With time, like in an analog image, this possibility of partial recognition grows less apparent, which, incidentally, will make such a digitally mounted photograph even more iconic.

The Stumbling Block seems to be an indexical snapshot at first sight but then appears to be a construction of various indexical snapshots, with some perhaps even omitted. It certainly is not a single trace of a specific event in the past. This conclusion calls forth the definition of photography as a trace by the philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He became well known with his concept of “simulacrum”: an empty sign that does not refer to a referent in the real world, but only to other signs. In his essay *The Perfect Crime* (1996 [1995]), Baudrillard calls the photograph a specific form of an empty sign. The title of his essay refers to a trace which leads to nothing, so there is no referent, no referential connections. In case of a perfect crime, a question also discussed in Chapter 3, one cannot find the information which leads to the murderer, causes, weapon, etc. Similarly, to Baudrillard, any photograph is like a trace of a perfect crime. The original environment is cut off: Both the space around the photograph (there is a blind field around the photo) and the noises which could indicate the where and what-about are no longer there. There is no indication of the exact moment in time, so you do not know what happened before and what happened afterwards. Instead of defining a photograph as in semiotics as an index of something, Baudrillard uses the notion of trace in order to indicate how causal and formal resemblance are relative issues, which might ultimately refer to nothing.

If this appears to be already the case in analog photographs, it is even more apparent in digital compositions. A digitally mounted photograph is not a simple iconic index in the manner of an analog photograph. Building on Friday's terminology, it can be argued that, unlike a painting, a digital photo is not an icon without indexicality. We want to propose that it is rather an icon with multiple indexes. It is not just “iconically indexical” but instead iconically multiply indexical. This opens up a wide range of questions. Can an icon that bears multiple indexes at the same time still be considered as a meaningful trace of something that was once there? If the viewer is not informed as to which indexes have been left in and which ones have been left out, should one not rather conclude that indexicality

has become irrelevant? Should one not rather say that *The Stumbling Block*, like a figurative painting, is an icon without indexes, as none or almost none of the indexes it carries are of crucial importance to the image's interpretation? This conclusion, even if it might be slightly far-fetched, certainly raises the issue of the importance of single indexicality for an analog photographic image that deliberately decides to hold on to it, and to explicitly communicate this characteristic to its viewers. In the digital era, it now needs to be presumed that it makes a difference whether a photograph is a synthetic composition of multiple indexes or just one trace. It should be investigated how the image will have a different impact on its viewers, once they know whether the image's indexicality has been manipulated or not.

Before one can answer that question it is important to recall that indexicality has been identified with the kind of speechless nature photography would automatically inherently possess. In *The Photographic Message* (1961), the literary theorist Roland Barthes identifies the (analog) photograph – and the press photograph in particular – as “a message without a code” (1986 [1961]: 5). This is the “*denoted* message, which is the *analogon* [of reality] itself” (6 [original emphasis]). Besides that, the photograph contains a “*connoted* message, which is the way in which the society represents, to a certain extent, what it thinks of the *analogon*” (6 [original emphasis]). The addition of a code to the message fixes the meaning of the message in one or another determined sense. As mere denotation or simple indexicality of the reality it depicts, the photograph is understood to be reality's “uninvested analogue,” which has a “primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination” (Sekula 1984 [1975]: 5). In *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning* (1975), the American photographer and critic Allan Sekula considers this idea of “pure denotation” as “folklore” (5). “In the real world,” Sekula argues, it is impossible to separate a photograph's denotative function (if it has one) from a culturally determined meaning, which has been invested (see also Chapter 4).

It can be of crucial importance for our understanding of the worldview communicated by the photographic image whether we either emphasize or minimize the fact that the reality or referent (subject) is always “already imprinted in, burned into, the signifier” (that is, the photograph) (Scott 1999: 26). That a photograph has a unique causal relationship to reality – its indexicality – can be a determining, or even decisive factor, for deciding on what the photo critically conveys about that very reality. Still, this should not imply that analog photographs that are just slightly digitally altered or highly digital pictures that are constructed out of multiple indexes cannot entertain a critical dialectic relationship with regard to the

“reality” they reflect on. The greatest challenge for photography today is to discover how exactly it wants to position itself in relation to the reality it “mirrors” or merely reflects on. Whether it will engage in a critical discourse or present itself as more artistically freestanding does not depend on its indexical nature only, it seems, but on a wider set of compositional and technical contextual elements, some of which are discussed in the next section.

Aura, Authenticity, and Reproducibility in Photography

Aura: a historical term

Historically, figurative painting has most often been higher valued than photography on the scale of art due to its presumed purely iconic nature, which photography supposedly lacks, “condemned” as it was to indexicality. In his essays “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936) and “Little History of Photography” (1931), the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin described the difference between the two media through the term “aura,” which most paintings were thought to have and most photographs were supposed to lack. Although Benjamin’s essays date from the 1930s, many recent publications concerning photography theory refer to these texts, to stress their prophetic nature, or to use his terms in an adapted way, or to refute his arguments, challenging if not dismissing his arguments as typical products of modernism. During the 1980s, in the context of the so-called “postmodern debate,” Benjamin was repeatedly cited in order to declare the postmodern death of modern art’s aura, to critique modernist notions of artistic uniqueness and authenticity, and to assert photography’s role in problematizing not only art but also representation (Dennis 2009: 112).

This section addresses Benjamin’s definition of aura, his argument on why some photographs do have an aura, what the difference is with his definition of aura in painting, and what, according to Benjamin, the positive and negative characteristics and merits of photography are. Their consequences for the function of this medium in society will be elaborated in Chapter 4.

Since the question of aura touches on issues of authenticity and reproducibility, two oft-used terms in theory of photography, we also discuss these here. Authenticity in photography appears to be something else than in painting. If photography as a medium of reproduction differs from painting, what, then, counts as the original in photography? Most of these issues will be discussed in relation to this section’s key work by the German



Figure 1.7 Thomas Ruff, *Portrait 1986 (Stoya)*, 1986. 210 × 165 cm.
Source: © Thomas Ruff, courtesy of the artist.

Thomas Ruff (Figure 1.7). One reason for selecting a portrait photograph is that Benjamin mainly uses examples of portrait photography.

The starting point for the theme of this section is Benjamin's reflection on aura in painting and photography. In both "Little History of Photography" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin centers his definition of aura on the experience of it by the spectator. In these essays he offers the following definition of aura:

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (2008 [1936]: 23, 2008 [1931]: 285)

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin (2008 [1936]: 21, 24) adds that aura in an artwork is what gets lost through its reproduction. The most important aspects of aura appear to be some kind of relation to the original site of the work, the work's materiality that changes through time, its uniqueness, and its cult value,

next to the abovementioned tension between nearness and distance. Benjamin observes that after the rise of serial reproductions, reproduction increasingly prevailed over the original work of art and its aura (24). Not only does he point out the decay of aura, but also the cultivation of the auratic in linking it to concepts of creativity and genius, eternal value, and mystery, which were susceptible to appropriation by fascism (20). According to Benjamin, the corruption of aura started after the cult value of artworks became market value and propaganda value. Interestingly, Benjamin suggests that photography could take advantage of the lack of aura to stimulate social changes (see Chapter 4). That he both celebrates and mourns the liquidation of the aura contributes in particular to making his essays multi-interpretable and multi-applicable (Costello 2005: 165).

Although Benjamin suggests that photographs cannot have the aura he preferred in traditional artworks, he makes an exception in his 1931 essay for early photographs. His argument is that, for instance, the production of a daguerreotype was a time-consuming craft, which was aimed for permanence. In his 1936 essay he adds that the interest in portrait photography in the formative years of the medium can be explained by the cult of remembrance, where “the cult value of the image finds its last refuge” (2008 [1936]: 27).

Photography lost this aura in the commercial portrait studios, where one merely sought to imitate painting’s aura. Only some photographers, such as the Frenchman Eugène Atget and the German August Sander, would have managed to withstand the seduction of commercial photography and snapshots. Benjamin (2008 [1931]: 285) praises Atget as the first photographer to break the pretence that afflicted photography once it sought to imitate painting (Costello 2005: 170). He appreciates Sander for making the human face reappear with a new meaning, since he took his photographs from direct observation, adopting a scientific standpoint (Benjamin 2008 [1931]: 287).

Case study: Thomas Ruff

Thomas Ruff’s *Portrait (Stoya)*, 1986 (Figure 1.7), attracts attention due to its size of 210 × 165 cm. Ruff appears to be rehearsing Andy Warhol’s deadpan Polaroid aesthetic (see “Painting-like Photographs Versus Photo-like Paintings as Multimediating Pictures”) while presenting to the spectators of his pictures frontally posed, bust-cut head-and-shoulder color photographs. These could have been taken inside a photo booth, had not Ruff decided to blow up his pictures – and with it the faces of his characters – to monumental sizes. The Cibachrome print as well as the

technique to stick the photo paper vacuum to Plexiglas offered new possibilities to photographers in the 1980s.

Ruff's series of portraits can be linked to August Sander's work, based as it is on direct observation and an almost scientific perspective (interestingly, Sander mentions only his model's profession and Ruff only the model's first name). Benjamin's observation that another nature speaks to the camera than to the eye (2008 [1936]: 37) seems to have a parallel in Ruff's pin-point sharp recording of details of the skin, which were invisible to the eye. However, Benjamin rather hinted at what he called "the optical unconscious," which surrealist photography succeeded to express.

The aura's criterion of appearance of distance, no matter how close the object may be, is from a particular perspective applicable to the face blown-up by Ruff. Patricia Drück (2004: 217) claims in *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff* [The Image of Man in Photography. The Portraits of Thomas Ruff] – a study based on her Ph.D. thesis – that nearness and distance as formulated by Benjamin can be related to Ruff's work, although it lacks the magical quality Benjamin connected to these terms. Drück emphasizes that the closer a spectator comes to one of Ruff's huge portraits, the better seen are the details of the face but the less real is the model seen as a person, which increases rather than diminishes the distance. This characteristic has stimulated discussion about the role of the photo portrait in society: Ruff's photograph looks like a photo for an identity card, that is identification photography, which presents measurable features rather than expressing personal identity, but the photo is sized like for an advertising board or political propaganda, other genres which also lack intimacy. This association calls to mind Benjamin's complaint that photography had become the servant of capitalist commerce and political propaganda. Identification photography is related to politics as well. But Ruff's photographs, rather than being advertisements or political material, in fact reflect on those applications. Moreover, the enlargement of his model to the size celebrities are usually presented in, reminds one of Benjamin's observation that everyone had become equally susceptible to reproducibility, everyone, famous or unknown, can be reproduced to the same scale and in the same format (Batchen 2009 [2005]: 90).

In response to these characteristics, Ruff's pictures are called photo portraits about photo portraits, or "meta-photo portraits" by Drück (2004: 170). Contrary to the expectation with regard to a portrait to express personal identity, Ruff's portraits emphasize that this is not possible. Drück quotes Ruff with regard to this issue: "I have no interest to show my interpretation of a person. I depart from the idea that photography can

only show the surface of things, the same goes for portraits” (104). This statement underscores Benjamin’s view that by its very nature photographs are unable to do anything but show superficial appearances. Whereas Benjamin regrets this characteristic of photography and searched for compensation, Ruff exaggerates this feature (cf. Chapter 4 on Benjamin’s solution to combine images and texts).

Ruff’s emphasis on the surface makes Drück (2004: 168, 230) prefer to call his photographs “face picturing,” related to the term “faciality,” instead of portraits, or “de-faced portraits,” stressing that the face was taken away from the portrait and presented in the photograph. Consequently, Ruff’s “faciality” is the reverse of the early portrait photographs praised by Benjamin for their cult value of remembrance, where aura, according to him, manifested itself for the last time in portrait photography.

Drück’s research demonstrates that the monumental size introduced in art photography in the 1980s – partly on account of the renewed interest in the relation between photography and painting – was tied to the wish to provide photography with an aura similar to that of painting. For Benjamin monumentality rather was a “corruption” of aura in political propaganda. Peter Galassi, who called Ruff’s series a “touchstone of an essential ethos of the 1980s” (2001: 17), stresses the paradoxical results of its monumentality, demonstrating that his pictures record the greatest details of a person’s face while at the same time they reveal nothing really relevant about this person. In this way they record everything and reveal nothing – a conclusion Drück agreed with and elaborated upon. Galassi refers to it as the “mindless opacity” of Ruff’s pictures (17).

In order to further come to terms with Ruff’s approach to photography, we turn for help to another concept associated with Benjamin’s aura: authenticity. According to Benjamin, in the doctrine of “pure” art (*l’art pour l’art*) authenticity took the place of the “authentic” work of art, which has its basis in ritual (2008 [1936]: 24). Benjamin hints at a relation between aura and authenticity in painting, but does not do so with regard to photography. What does authenticity mean in the case of photography? Clive Scott (1999: 28) analyzes the difference in location of the notion of authenticity in photography and painting in an illuminating way: In the sequence (a) subject/referent ↔ (b) camera ↔ (c) photographer, the guarantee of authenticity lies between (a) and (b). In the sequence (a) subject ↔ (b) painting ↔ (c) painter, the guarantee of authenticity lies between (b) and (c). In photography, “faking” means changing the relationship between (a) and (b); whereas in painting that same change means maintaining an authenticity (pastiche, parody, imitation, adaptation).

In painting, “faking” means reproducing the relationship between (b) and (c), copying exactly. In photography, however, reproducing means maintaining an authenticity (further prints from the same negative).

In this context, Geoffrey Batchen (2001: 83–87) relates authenticity to the issue of a photograph’s production. At what points in its production should we locate its creative and temporal boundaries? Is it when the photographer presses the camera shutter, submitting a chosen scene to the stasis of framed exposure? Is it when the photographer singles out this exposure for printing, thereby investing a latent image with the personal significance of selection, labor, and, most crucial of all, visibility? Or is it when that image is first exposed to the public gaze? Batchen’s case study is Stieglitz’s photograph *Paula*, which was probably taken in 1889, not printed until 1916, and exhibited for the first time only in 1921. Batchen concludes that histories of photography choose the date of 1889 as date of origin of the photograph. This conclusion confirms Scott’s statement about the authenticity of photography. The guarantee of authenticity in photography can be found between referent/subject and camera.

Authenticity, as well as aura, is often discussed in contrast with reproducibility. The term reproducibility also is an oft-mentioned characteristic of photography, but is a complex term to apply to the nature of photography. Benjamin used the term in the title of his 1936 essay, but particularly referred to the ability of photography to reproduce paintings and other artworks. Problems arise when applying the term reproducibility to define photography in contrast to the uniqueness of painting. Benjamin also realized this when stating that “from a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense” (2008 [1936]: 25). Can reproducibility be related to photography if there is no original to reproduce, or should we call the negative photography’s original?

If one would define the reproducibility of photography as the ability to produce any number of prints disregarding the question what the original is, reproducibility can be reduced through limiting the number. This tendency found its origins in Stieglitz and the members of the Photo-Secession group, which aimed to fulfill collectors’ demands. As we elaborate in Chapter 4, the group also received institutional support after, in 1940, the New York Museum of Modern Art appointed Beaumont Newhall as the first museum curator of photography ever. From then on, photography increasingly became analyzed in terms of connoisseurship and expertise, to be judged on its aesthetic merits while employing the criteria usually reserved for fine art. For the time being, however, Newhall’s efforts to render black-and-white photography the aura it supposedly would have

come to efface and to ascribe to the medium Benjaminian auratic qualities such as “genius, creativity, eternal value and mystery” were met with hostility and ultimately failed as well (Phillips 1989 [1982]: 21).

Today, the tide has changed. The limited number of copies and the monumental size increasingly infuse photographs such as Ruff’s with the auratic qualities that Benjamin listed as characteristics of aura after the cult value of artworks turned into market value and political value. Drück, however, emphasizes that Ruff’s photographs mainly interrogate what a photo portrait is in our society, and that his strategy, impersonal blown-up photographs, can be defined in the same terms as Benjamin’s basic definition of aura as the tension between nearness and distance. The monumental size and pin-point sharpness of Ruff’s photograph *Portrait (Stoya)*, which make spectators feel as if they are looking at the photograph through a magnifying glass, leads us to the issue of sharpness versus blurredness in photography, which we discuss in the last section of this chapter. But before we do that, we need to touch on current issues of color in photography, strikingly present in Ruff’s photograph, as in many other pictures today.

Painting-like Photographs Versus Photo-like Paintings as Multimediating Pictures: The Question of Color

In the June 1855 issue of *Le National*, the eccentric Belgian painter Antoine Wiertz wrote a brief yet highly visionary note in which he announced important changes for painting, caused by photography’s machine eye:

Here is some good news for the future of painting. ... Since a few years, a machine is born that is the glory of our age and that each day amazes the mind and startles the eye. Before another century is over, this machine will be the brush, the palette, the colors, the craft, the experience, the patience, the dexterity, the sureness of touch, the atmosphere, the luster, the exemplar, the perfection, the very essence of painting. Within a hundred years there will be no more masons in painting: there will only be architects, that is, painters in the largest possible sense of the word. (1869 [1855]: 309–310; translation by the authors, partially taken from Benjamin (2008 [1931]: 294)

Wiertz argues that, with time, painting will no longer be considered well defined by tradition. He goes as far as conceiving of unsettling the conventionally accepted view that painting is a medium-specific activity, determined by the materials by which it is composed (paint, brush, canvas). He is

convinced that by the 1950s photography will have become a tool to make “visual art in the most generic meaning of the term” (Van Gelder 2000: 24). More particularly, photography will fit a more malleable formula understood as “*painting at large*” (Van Gelder 2007: 300 [original emphasis]).

Overpainted photographs then and now

For the time being, Wiertz articulated the unthinkable. Obviously, when he wrote the above-quoted lines, photography did not yet possess the capacity to realize the undertaking he had in mind at some level of accuracy. Apart from the compositional handicaps discussed above, photography had a major disadvantage with respect to painting: it was uncolored. Many a photographer throughout the nineteenth century sought his way out of the problem by experimenting with lenses, with interventions on the negative or in the developing process. Sepia tones strongly approached the effect of traditional oil sketches. Obviously, however, a mere oil sketch was never considered to be an accomplished piece and photographers desired to compete with finished tableaux. Some went as far as overpainting their pictures to achieve a more colorful image.

In the nineteenth century, overpainting photographs was a common practice in commercial studios (Henisch and Henisch 1996). In his study *Each Wild Idea*, Geoffrey Batchen (2001: 61, 62) discusses how in the United States overpainted tintypes were produced in large numbers from the 1860s through the 1890s. These practices offered new employment opportunities to frame makers, photographers, and “folk art” painters, whose portrait business was ruined by the cheaper and quicker tintype technology. Batchen stresses that such portraits are fascinating for what we do not see – the photograph, for example. In many of them, the underlying photographic image has been almost entirely covered by paint or, in the case of some of the backgrounds, erased through the application of acid. He characterizes the resulting image, which was often elaborately framed and matted, as a strange, hybrid piece of work – part photograph, part painting, part etching, part sculpture. However, overpainting is a rather odd practice as well. First, a photographic portrait is taken to ensure the veracity of the appearance of the person being portrayed. But then this “evidence” is hidden beneath a layer of often inexpertly applied paint. The mechanical exactitude of the camera is present – one is aware of its foundational role – but the eye perceives only the traces left by the hand of the painter. Nevertheless, Batchen argues, however clumsy the artist, the overpainted portrait continues to be supported by the supposedly true value of its original photographic nature.

With regard to overpainted photography in general, Batchen informs us that in the nineteenth century all sorts of photographs were modified with paint. The paint helped, for instance, to bring particular photographic images, such as daguerreotypes, under the control of the eye. The polished silver surface of the daguerreotype offers a gestalt experience in which one sees, alternately, one's own reflection and the portrait being examined. The paint layer removes the mirror effect and thus the discomfort of having to confront oneself staring back. Yet, if overpainting or brushing up the image was basically acceptable, if not acclaimed, in the more commercial genre of nineteenth-century portrait photography, it was a taboo in the more intricate genre compositions, especially the then fashionable depiction of modern-life subjects. The origin of this taboo appears to have been that such painterly manipulation could easily develop to photography's advantage, something which the then established high art community heavily opposed. Painters argued that in their colorful canvases they managed to offer much more freely imaginative expressions of their subjects. For several decades, this logic served them to ascertain the more prominent position of their medium – painting with brushes on a flat support – in the established hierarchy of the arts.

The infamous case of the Belgian painter Jan Van Beers demonstrates that trespassing these conventions was hardly a freestanding game. His now lost painting *Le Yacht "la Sirène"* (1881) caused the greatest scandal at the Brussels Salon of 1881. It was accused of being nothing more than an overpainted photograph (Baetens 2006a, 2006b). The painting was even vandalized while being exhibited at the Salon: An unidentified visitor scratched off the face of the young woman to see if a photograph was hidden underneath it – none was found. The scope of the ensuing scandal cannot be accounted for by the fact that Van Beers possibly sought inspiration in photographs to compose his paintings. In as early as 1839, a painter no less important than the Frenchman Paul Delaroche had expressed his enthusiasm over the invention of the daguerreotype, stating that the "painter will discover in this process an easy means of collecting studies which he could otherwise only have obtained over a long period of time" (Scharf 1974 [1968]: 37). Other famous painters, most notably, Frenchman Eugène Delacroix, had paved the way for Van Beers through their extensive drawing and painting after photographs (123). Moreover, the controversy sparked by Van Beers's painting did not seem to be related to the fact that he overpainted a specific photograph, because this claim was never corroborated by hard evidence.

The source of all the anxiety was apparently his hyperrealist style of painting. This would equally suggest that Van Beers was way ahead of his

time. When Gerhard Richter in the 1960s came out with blatantly photorealistic paintings, they instantly met with praise – a response that is now also seen to his highly acclaimed overpainted photographs (Figure 1.8). As of 1989, Richter has selected some commercially printed, small-size, photolab-made pictures. He has selected these from his private archive of “productionrejects” (Heinzelmann 2008: 85), that is, a group of ordinary images judged not to be good enough for use for the purposes for which they were originally intended, such as making a painting after them



Figure 1.8 Gerhard Richter, *8.2.1992, 1992*. Black-and-white varnish on color photograph, 10.9 cm × 14.8 cm.

Source: © Gerhard Richter, courtesy of the artist.

or including them in one of his family albums. Richter mostly realizes these overpaintings through application of leftover paint on color photographs by means of a so-called doctor blade, thus inserting an element of chance into the final outcome. As an automated representation of reality, the photograph becomes partially covered by the semi-automatically applied, non-representational layers of paint.

This perhaps explains why the viewer, who soon notices that parts of the final image are made up of an underlying photograph, has a difficult time in understanding the photographic motif. In *8.2.1992*, for example, it is possible to discern the legs of two people walking in front of a cathedral. Because both are wearing pants, it isn't clear whether they are men or women. Likewise, there is no clue as to the significance of the event taking place in the work. Due to the fact that the image has been overpainted, the spectator is deliberately excluded from what is happening in it, which, as a result, becomes of relatively minor importance. Such an approach to photography sharply contrasts with the gossipy sensationalism that very often surrounds images of people. Markus Heinzelmann has argued that the non-representational layer of paint that covers the image offers a new boost to “the narrative potential of the photograph” (2008: 85). As a hybrid, that is, neither painting nor photograph, this image opens up different paths of reading in which the rather randomly applied layers of paint allow for different ways of relating to the picture's subject, which has lost most of its anecdotic communicability.

By selecting his own commercially reproduced, color film amateur pictures – if Richter as photographer can be called an “amateur” at all –

and introducing them to the realm of high art through the act of visibly overpainting them, Richter obviously makes a statement with regard to the history of both photography and painting as artistic media. Before long, it became a taboo for artists to use commercial outprints as a basis for their pictures, let alone overpainting them and subsequently presenting them as high art in a respectable museum. Until well into the 1960s, photography that wanted to be institutionally taken seriously as high art was perforce stuck with its black-and-white condition. In this respect, John Szarkowski has even argued that it was the black and white aspect that forced originality (and modernist medium-specificity) on photography (1966: 7, 8).

In 1907, when the French Lumière brothers introduced the autochrome process on the market, it was technically possible to make color images of acceptable quality. Notwithstanding some valuable experiments such as by their compatriot Jacques-Henri Lartigue, color photographs would play a relatively minor role in the history of photography as art during the first half of the twentieth century. Working in color was expensive. Color images did circulate in upper-class amateur circles, and, as of the 1930s, they entered applied photography, often for commercial aims (fashion, advertising, industry), which will be discussed in Chapter 4. However, due to the above-discussed nineteenth-century commercial and psychological developments, and the fact that color photography in its embryonic stages was considered inferior to painterly possibilities with color, the consensus was that color photographs had to be excluded from the major canons of high visual art. This view led up to the exigencies of modernist medium-specificity.

In 1926, Ossip Brik articulated in writing how photography came to turn its major limitation – the technique being not good enough at producing colored images – to its advantage. He simply changed tack by arguing that it was precisely because photographs were not colored they could offer a more accurate impression of nature than painting. Paintings can only “*imitate*” nature’s colors, but never actually “*transmit*” them (1989 [1926]: 214). The painter, Brik asserts, is unable to provide the richness of color one observes in actual nature, and depicts it falsely, distorting nature’s colors. Painters defend themselves by claiming it is not their task to depict objects as they really are; they merely should rebuild them on a canvas, in a painterly mode. But even then, Brik writes, painters stick to a primitive method of “artistically reflecting life” (218), which has become outmoded by photography’s arrival. At least, and contrary to painting, the photograph does not surrender to a cheating game with nature. Stronger, the photograph can record “life itself” (216). This very quality alone offers ample compensation for its lack of color and proves to him the superior status of black-and-white photography.

Multimediating pictures today

Color photographs made a tentative but noticeable entry into the 1960s art scene in American pop artist Andy Warhol's experiments with Polaroid images. The Polaroid technique, launched in 1963, was affordable and quickly gained popularity in amateur circles. Because it offered an almost instantaneous color outprint, it was also popular for producing entertaining snapshots at family get-togethers, and Warhol first used it for taking pictures of his friends. Soon he began to transfer the images onto canvas by means of the silkscreen technique. Around the same time, he also used photographs depicting disasters that had appeared in the press for the same purpose. He sequentially serigraphed the photographs on canvas, after which he frequently hand-painted them. The color he added was not meant as a way of engaging in a dialog with painting, which also explains why this work is basically unrelated to Richter's overpainted photographs, as Uwe M. Schneede has argued (Heinzelmann 2008: 199). "The reason I'm painting this way," Warhol insisted, "is that I want to be a machine" (Swenson 1963: 26). Today, as some have argued, the computer can take care of what Warhol was obliged to do with much more basic tools. Of course the human hand is still needed to steer the camera's eye, and to execute our decisions regarding digital alterations on the computer. Yet, this does not prevent people from believing that digitally produced photographs can somehow be considered as machine-painted. This is a development that Warhol was longing for and that Wiertz had already foreseen.

In the 1970s, some art photographers started to work with color photography, which had now become inexpensive and easy enough for independent artists to work with (Galassi 2001: 21). It was during this time too that artists faced the challenge renouncing more than a century of monochrome black-and-white tradition in photography, up to the point in 1985 when it was exclaimed that "From today black and white is dead" (Butler 1999 [1985]). Jeff Wall, who is fond of recalling that his work can be understood as a programmatic effort to (re)invent the Baudelairean ideal of making the so-called painting of modern life (Chevrier 2001), has made a substantial body of cinematographic photographs in colors, which has come to exemplify this new development. *The Stumbling Block*, for example, is a complexly constructed – hyperreal, to use the term by Jean Baudrillard – photographic depiction in color of contemporary life.

Wall maximally exploits the optimized possibilities of the color image – in his case Cibachrome (nowadays called Ilfochrome) – which not only allows for color effects but also for large-format prints (1.80 m × 3 m is not

uncommon), which are formally reminiscent of the Western pictorial tradition. *The Stumbling Block* thus demonstrates how much Wiertz's intuition was right. This carefully composed photograph is presented to the public as a unique picture. It testifies to a brightness of color that one is rather accustomed to encounter in the most sophisticated, composed paintings.

Being paintings in the largest possible sense of the word, Wall's works seem also to be having a much more significant effect on their spectators. Philosopher Diarmuid Costello has identified Jeff Wall as a "painter' who paints photographically" (2007: 76). This is not to say that Wall should only be seen as a painter proper, as Michael Fried has argued. Jeff Wall, Costello writes, can also be considered as much "a painter, cinematographer, or perhaps 'pictographer' as ... a photographer 'proper'" (80).

Wall has argued that painting could establish itself as an autonomous modernist art by concentrating solely on the medium's formal and material aspects. The experiments of the 1960s and 1970s within conceptual art have demonstrated, by contrast, that photography could not free itself from its innate capacity for depiction. The other arts, most prominently painting, have tried to invent themselves "'beyond' depiction" (1995: 247). Photography instead, he writes, is intrinsically marked by its obligation to mimetically depict a certain reality. "Photography cannot find alternatives to depiction," as "[i]t is in the physical nature of the medium to depict things" (247).

Wall's concept of "depiction" is what other authors have called photography's already discussed iconicity. Photography has not been able to participate, Wall continues, in the exploration of abstraction, although photography may have suggested this development in the first place. Photo-conceptualism was "the last moment of the prehistory of photography as art" and "the most sustained and sophisticated attempt to free the medium from ... its ties to the Western Picture" (1995: 266). It failed to do so, Wall concludes. In response, David Green has commented that as of then, around 1974, "any definition of the medium of photography would have to accommodate its function-as-representation" (2009: 107).

For Wall, this has meant the creation of what he describes as a "revolutionized ... concept of the Picture" (1995: 266), a notion that applies most notably to his own approach, as he has pointed out on many occasions. Both Jean-François Chevrier and Michael Fried use the term Picture as a synonym for those works that, according to them, reinvent the nineteenth-century tableau-tradition in painting by means of photography. Chevrier writes: "Many artists, having assimilated the Conceptualists' explorations to varying degrees, have revised the painterly model and use photography, quite consciously and systematically, to produce works that stand alone and exist as 'photographic paintings'" (2003 [1989]: 114). Photography here first and

foremost serves to rejuvenate a long-gone figurative painterly tradition in the hybrid discipline of picture making or painting at large.

In Wall's pictures, which we understand to be hybrid, composite images, photography, and painting merge into pictures that we would like to define as multimediating. In multimediating pictures, the assembling of characteristics of various media into the same image sets into motion a process of visual communication that is highly layered. Such less neutrally defined pictures, which retain their privileged link with a painterly idiom, suggest that the shift from one medium to another is not a complete one. Multimediating pictures, as in Wall's case, generate reflection that precisely flows from their combining effort, rather than in the negative meaning of stealing or merely passively reproducing or rehearsing various media. It should be added that the prefix "multi" does not mean that the analyzed works just extend the abilities of one medium to represent the visible world. Rather, the doubling or multiplication of media highlights that, by definition, mediation renders direct views of the "real world" impossible (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2009).

Perhaps this is also what Richter is hinting at, when he emphasizes that, in his overpainted photographs, "two realities" are at interplay with each other, the reality of the photograph and that of the painting (Heinzelmann 2008: 81). Certainly, this is an interaction he has explored even more vividly in his photo-like oil paintings. Richter has famously asserted that in these works he has used painting as a means to make photographs. By making oil paintings such as the 1988 *Erschossener (I)* (see Figure 1.6), Richter is convinced he is "producing" photographs, although he is hand-painting every single part of it (Richter 1995 [1993]: 73). Diarmuid Costello (2008: 302) has interpreted Richter's assertion as a deliberate intention to mimic the mechanical apparatus of the photo camera, reducing the artist's intervention to quasi-automatic transcription. However, it can be argued that, by imitating the sterility of the photo camera as much as possible, Richter somehow reinvents a bodily experience of a photograph by means of brushes and paint.

It is certainly not a coincidence that, in order to achieve his aims, Richter has often turned his attention to making photo-like paintings – or, as one should say, hand-making photographs on canvas – in gray scales. The philosopher Vilém Flusser (1984 [1983]: 29, 30) still promoted in the early 1980s the use of black-and-white photography stating that black-and-white situations cannot be found in the world "out there" because they are limits, "ideal situations." Black is the absence of light, white is the total presence of light. Black and white are "concepts," for instance, of optical theories. Since black-and-white situations are theoretical, they cannot be encountered as such in the visible world. Gray is

the color of theory. Black-and-white photographs display this fact: they are gray. They are images of theories. In a certain sense, Richter has taken on this challenge by painting black-and-white photographs.

Photography itself, on the contrary, more often takes recourse to color today. It is no longer painting's "inferior in the reproduction of color," as André Bazin wrote back in 1945 (1980 [1945]: 240). Many color photographers today believe that they have managed to create a means of bringing painting to perfection, something that photographic black-and-whiteness could not possibly have been able to do. They believe this not only with regard to figurative work, but also in relation to abstract work. German artist Wolfgang Tillmans's photo series, presenting abstract monochrome color patterns (1997 and 2001) are an interesting case in point. They demonstrate, according to art theorist Lane Relyea (2006: 97), how they are pictures first before they are pictures of some *thing*. They look like abstract colorfield paintings of the 1960s. The resemblance grew even stronger when Tillmans produced these images as inkjet prints in large formats (sometimes over 3.5×2.5 m). Here color runs in thin strands across the length of the paper's textured, un glossed surface (97).

Whereas, for many decades throughout the twentieth century, photography's added value to painting was the quasi-automated making process of the image, today this view no longer holds. Anyone observing blown-up, framed contemporary color photographs that are presented to their spectators as visual works of art is strongly aware of the subjective impact the picture's maker had on the genesis of the final product. Now that the subjective input into the making process of images in photography and painting, particularly in digitally mounted tableau-like images, has become comparable, many conclude that photographs have at least become equally suitable tools for constructing paintings. Today, in many ways a photograph can be a technically more perfected painting. As such photography has obtained its long-aspired iconic status.

Sharp and Blurred Photographs: Transparency and Hypermediacy

Photographs are often characterized as a "lens," so to speak, as something through which we can "see" in order to obtain information about the world. Photography's medium-specific property, Siegfried Kracauer famously argues, resides in the "mathematical exactness" and "unimaginable precision" of detail rendered by the camera (1980 [1960]: 246). Kracauer thus associates the transparency of a photograph with its

sharpness. Clement Greenberg adds another element, when suggesting that “the difference between the extra-artistic, real-life meaning of things and their artistic meaning is even narrower in photography than it is in prose.” He equally attributes this to the transparency of the photographic medium (Greenberg 1993 [1964]: 183).

Viewers are used to somehow negate the surface of photographs. Unlike a painting, a photograph does not seem to present its viewers with a tactile barrier or “skin.” People look at photographs as if peeping through a window at the outside world. When referring to paintings people tend to say, for instance, “This is a painting of the Pantheon in Rome painted by . . .” but when referring to a photograph of that monument they say “This is the Pantheon in Rome” instead of “This is a photographic impression of the Pantheon.” The photographs taken of family members or during holidays are shown to others to offer a sense of what it was like or how relatives really look like, even if most amateurs will know that photography is not exactly an objective method of registration. Identification cards still have photographs to prove the identity of the person, even though authorities are increasingly relying on fingerprints or iris scans as well.

In an unpublished paper presented at the symposium *Aesthetics after Photography* on November 21–22, 2008, in London, the philosopher Robert Hopkins argued that “photography was designed for accurate seeing.” Cameras are designed to help users make the right choices in order to succeed in accurate seeing, in creating transparent and truthful representations of reality. Today, people still hold this view, even if they know that photography does not exactly meet the expectation implied. In contemporary art photography, many examples of images can be found that interrogate the transparency of photography through, for instance, extreme blurredness or extreme sharpness.

Bolter and Grusin’s idea of remediation

Before discussing some of these examples, we want to introduce the opposite terms “transparent immediacy” and “hypermediacy,” as defined by new media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999). Specifically, they discuss transparent immediacy in relation to transparent media, which they define as media that give spectators or users the impression that they directly experience reality instead of (just) a representation of it. Contrary to transparent media, hypermedial media draw attention to themselves as medium: the spectator looks at the medium rather than through the medium. Hypermediacy makes us not only aware of the medium or media, but it also reminds us, in subtle or more obvious ways, of our desire for immediacy (1999: 34).

Until the invention of photography, painting functioned as a transparent medium. Subsequently, the invention of motion pictures made photography less transparent, after which television – and, even more so, virtual reality – would have a similar effect on motion pictures.

Bolter and Grusin have coined the term “remediation” to refer to this process of producing a more transparent version of an earlier medium. As such remediation pertains to the representation of one medium in another (1999: 45). It is the formal logic by which new media refashion older media forms (273). Still, the new medium always remains dependent on the older one, and can never efface it entirely (47). A fine example is the digital software that Jeff Wall needs to remediate his analog photographs in order to produce a composite image such as *The Stumbling Block*. Their artifactual character is emphasized by the fact that they testify to an equal sharpness of focus across the whole expanse of the picture plane. Such an evenness of focus across objects and personages at varying distances from the viewer is impossible to achieve in a single photographic shot.

Wall needs to combine several straight photographs of the same setting while using the computer in order to obtain this all-over sharpness (Fried 2004: 54). Wall thus plays with the logic of immediacy and hypermediacy in the sense that his images seem marked by an immediacy that suggests a unified visual space while in fact they are marked by an underlying logic of hypermediacy that indicates the images are not just a window to the world but “windowed” themselves, with windows that open onto other representations or other media (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 34). Interestingly, Bolter and Grusin also emphasize that remediation operates in both directions: older media can also seek to appropriate and refashion new(er) media (48). We may think of how Gerhard Richter “remediates” photography through painting. This accounts for Bolter and Grusin’s argument that remediation does not destroy the aura of a work of art; instead it always refashions that aura in another media form (75).

Despite the difference, hypermedia and transparent media are, according to Bolter and Grusin (53), opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to present the real. In the logic of hypermediacy, the artist strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to take delight in that acknowledgment (42).

Transparency and sharpness

The transparency of photography did not diminish drastically after the invention of moving images and new media. It soon became clear that

people wanted to continue to believe in it. The philosopher Kendall L. Walton (1984: 267) observes that some authors suggest that there are degrees of transparency, while others suggest that a picture can be transparent in certain respects and opaque in other respects. We discuss this complexity on the basis of photographs by Edward Weston, Angèle Etoundi Essamba, and Idris Khan.

Sharp focus photographs seem to be experienced as more transparent than blurred photographs. For instance, identity photographs have to be as sharp as possible to function as a copy of reality. Moreover, a transparent window provides a sharp view on the world, whereas a blurred or opaque window makes the spectator aware of the presence of the window as “interface.” The photographs by the American Edward Weston, which have often been praised for their sharpness of detail, demonstrate that the transparent surface of the photograph is one of the main reasons to call photography a more transparent medium than painting. However, one does not always recognize the objects photographed by Weston immediately. This is why many of his photographs, with reference to Walton, can be called transparent in certain respects and more opaque in others. The close-up, unusual perspective, or composition makes the spectator aware that the selected photographic frame obstructs a straightforward, “open” view of the object, which could be called a hypermedial aspect of photography.

Weston’s emphasis on the transparency of a photo’s surface by zooming in on textures, such as of human skin and porcelain, presents transparency with hypermediacy as aim: the attention of the spectator has to be drawn to the medium of photography in its capability to reproduce textures in a way no other medium is able to. Weston stresses this power of photography in his essay entitled “Seeing Photographically”: “First there is the amazing precision of definition, especially in the recording of fine detail,” which “cannot be duplicated by any work of the human hand” (2003 [1943]: 106). This aspect enables the photographer “to reveal the essence of what lies before his lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object” (107).

With regard to Weston’s photos of human skin, it is interesting to realize that since the fifteenth century, treatises or instruction books for painters and sculptors have paid much attention to representing the human skin. How does one re-create the human skin through paint, stone, or marble? Giorgio Vasari, for instance, advised sculptors in the early sixteenth century to use marble instead of wood for statues, because the texture of marble is more related to the human skin than that of wood. Weston and many others have shown that photography defeats other media in the representation of the human skin. In a painting, so much “a

work of the human hand” as Weston calls it, the spectator does not only look at the subject depicted; most paintings will also attract attention to the painted surface, to the handmade surface created by brushstrokes. As a result, a painting will at best provide a semblance of the texture of porcelain or the human skin.

John Szarkowski obviously agrees with Weston, as appears from his textual contributions to *The Photographer's Eye*. In the section “The Thing Itself,” he declares: “more convincingly than any other kind of picture, a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality” (1966: 12). It is interesting to notice the self-assured, self-confident tone of the texts by Szarkowski and Weston concerning the medium specificity of photography. Although today we do not deny that some photographs can be defined by the characteristics mentioned by Szarkowski and Weston, these features are not medium-specific for photography in general, which is why some scholars have claimed these texts to be no longer relevant.

Some contemporary theorists and photographers, however, still address and explore these issues and interrelated concerns – and often critically so. Patricia Drück, for example, refers to this ability of photography calling Ruff's portrait photographs “dermatological realism” (2004: 218) (Figure 1.7). In a similar yet also very different way, Angèle Etoundi Essamba's photographs present close-ups of human skin. Born in Cameroun, she is one of the new black movement photographers who appears to sympathize with the Black is Beautiful movement of the former generation. Through zooming in and selecting monumental sizes for her photographs, she unequivocally celebrates the black skin, which for centuries was interpreted by Westerners to be inferior to the white skin. Although Etoundi Essamba's and Weston's photographs look quite similar at first sight in presenting detailed human skin, Weston aimed to show the superiority of his medium, whereas Etoundi Essamba seems to use this characteristic of photography for more ideological reasons.

The British photographer Idris Khan (see Figure 3.6) is fascinated by the transparency of photography from another perspective and experiments with it in different ways. Looking at his early photographs, which have a surface that is made opaque to some extent, the observer becomes aware of the presence of the photo's surface as a separate dimension between the viewer and the photo's underlying subject. We may call this an interesting example of hypermediacy in photography. Some of Khan's later photographs contain so many superposed transparent layers of photographs that, in contrast to a painting made of many layers of paint,

one hardly recognizes anything in the photograph anymore (Westgeest 2011). As a result of photography's transparency now accumulated into opaqueness, one cannot discern the outer layer of Khan's image, something that one is almost always able to identify in a painting. Thus, in these images by Khan, the many transparent images create a blurred photograph, which leads us to a consideration of the issue of blurredness in photography in relation to transparency and hypermediacy.



Figure 1.9 Uta Barth, *Field #9*, 1995. Color photograph on panel, 58.4 × 73 cm, edition of 8.

Source: © Uta Barth, courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Blurred photographs

Looking at a blurred photograph is quite similar to experiencing a haze before one's eyes, looking through a steamy window, or walking through mist. These experiences from daily life are caused by something in between our eyes and what we are looking at, which may explain why looking at a blurred photograph is often experienced as looking through a blurred surface, even if this is not the case in blurred photographs. Blurredness in photography results from different causes, such as movement and double exposure (to be discussed in the next chapter, with regard to photography and time). A blurred subject, such as a foggy landscape, will of course result in a blurred photograph, but in this section we discuss photographs that are blurred as a result of being out of focus. This effect is quite similar to the process of accommodation of the eye. For centuries, painters have adjusted their paintings to that effect through applying sharp outlines in parts of the foreground of their paintings and blurring the backgrounds. Here, at the end of this chapter on issues of representation, indexicality/iconicity, and the comparison between photography and painting, we want to investigate the consequences of blurredness with regard to these aspects, while looking at the work of Uta Barth and Thomas Ruff.

It is obvious that the blurred photograph, such as Uta Barth's *Field #9* (Figure 1.9), is perceived as less transparent than a focused photograph, as a result of lack of details which hampers the recognition of the photographed subject. Consequently the indexical quality of the photograph is also weakened. An extremely blurred photograph loses its causal relation with its referent almost completely, and becomes a kind of formalist

abstract painting, more specifically a composition of only colors and tones. One could argue that a blurred photograph presents the main formal features of its subject, which increases its iconic character in the meaning of formal relationship.

With regard to the term representation, the consequences of blurredness seem to be more complicated. Blurredness, according to the art historian and philosopher Wolfgang Ullrich in *Die Geschichte der Unschärfe* [The History of Blurredness] (2002a: 98), may cause a distortion of the representation of the motif, but it can also increase the credibility of the photograph, and even emphasize its “truth.” Snapshots, which are often not sharp overall, are associated with directness, whereas extremely sharp photographs taken with high-tech cameras by professional photographers may be distrusted, since these photographers have more tools for unnoticeable manipulation than amateur photographers. According to Jonathan Friday, in his reading of Bazin, sharpness or blurredness barely influences a photograph’s credibility because our belief in photographs as truthful representations of reality is held even when a picture is blurred: we act “as if” the image shares something with its occasion (2005: 345). It is the making process of the picture that actually determines whether our psychological belief in its truth-value will ultimately hold or not. Photographic representation and how it is perceived by the viewer, as Craig Owens has argued, is never firmly grounded in its object; it is always related to circumstances (1978: 76–77).

Furthermore, the grade of blurredness determines whether or not the photograph is still a recognizable representation of the referent. Caroline von Courten (2008) has concluded with regard to this issue that blurred photographs increase the active perception or even participation of the spectator in the visual communication between spectator and photograph and ask for more perceptual time to fill in the details and identify the subject. Moreover, the blurredness evokes another kind of perception: it stimulates associations and moods rather than a rational reaction as in the case of focused photographs. Courten (2008: 10) suggests that this kind of perception evoked by blurred photography could probably be compared with the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s term “phenomenological reduction,” which means that familiar phenomena have to be interrogated from a critical distance and reflection (2004 [1948]). Blurredness stimulates the critical distance to familiar phenomena. Only when the blurred photograph becomes too abstract to stimulate the imagination of the observer, the process of active perception is broken off. From the perspective of the spectator the referent has practically disappeared at that stage, although a trace will remain except in the most

extreme case of blurredness, which is a completely blank photograph (because the light parts dominate the dark ones).

The increasing popularity of blurred photographs in contemporary art photography may have different reasons, one of them being the preference for interaction with the public and “the undeterminable” in contemporary art (Gamm 2007). Blurredness may also relate to the renewed interest for issues of representation after the crisis of representation in a form which James Elkins, in his essay “Einige Gedanken über die Unbestimmtheit der Repräsentation” [On the Unrepresentable in Pictures] calls a “renaissance of representation as ruin” (2007b: 119). Parallel, blurred photography could be considered to be “representation as ruin.”

Another possible reason for the increasing popularity of blurredness in contemporary art photography, according to Courten, is linked to the new generation of (digital) cameras, which are programmed to produce focused photographs, and high-tech commercial photography. The blurred photos then compensate for the abundance of detailed images in daily life by providing a place for visual rest.

In the context of blurredness it is possible to perceive an interesting historical shift in the relationship between photography and painting. Whereas in the nineteenth century painting still served as a visual reference point and therefore as a “model” for painterly blurredness to photographers, this situation changed in the mid-twentieth century when photography became the visual point of reference and “leading” visual medium in society. As the exhibition *The Painting of Modern Life 1960s to Now* (2007) demonstrated, an increasing number of contemporary painters use blurred snapshot photographs as model for their paintings in order to present the dynamics of our contemporary world (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2009). A case in point is Gerhard Richter and his *Erschossener* (1).

Thomas Ruff’s blurred digital photographs, such as *Jpeg se03* (2006) (Figure 1.10), present a new relation to impressionist painting or, even more so, to neo-impressionist pointillist paintings, which show an abstract pattern of paint stains or dots on a close look. The subject of the painting can only be recognized from a distance. In extreme blow-ups, the pixels of the low-resolution pictures, which are often downloaded by Ruff from the internet, have a similar effect as those stains and dots.

As discussed above, Ruff’s portrait photographs stress a “dermatological realism.” One would expect that the sharp focus of these photographs evokes a very different experience than his *Jpeg* series. Surprisingly, as a result of the monumental size, both series need to be looked at from a distance for the viewer to see the subject. As Drück concludes

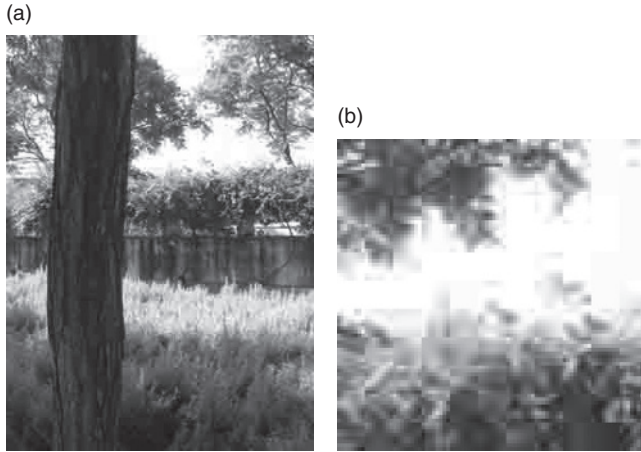


Figure 1.10 (a) Thomas Ruff, *Jpeg se03*, 2006. 242.6 × 184.8 cm. (b) Detail of Figure 1.10a.

Source: (a,b) © Thomas Ruff, courtesy of the artist.

(see “Aura, Authenticity, and Reproducibility in Photography”), the closer a spectator comes to one of Ruff’s huge portraits, the lesser does the model remain a depiction of a person. From close one observes only the pores and irregularities of the skin or, more impersonal, the mosaic-like pattern of the pixels.

Finally, we touch on the relation between blurredness in photography and the workings of the human eye. The debate in the nineteenth century among photographers and theorists on whether a photograph should be as sharply focused as possible or be partly blurred was strongly related to the discussion about the relationship between photography and painting. The late pictorialist photographers, such as Peter Henry Emerson, preferred a painterly blurredness in photographs. As argued in the first section of this chapter, these photographers were accused of being pseudo-painters. The blurred photographs looked like impressionist paintings, which were perceived as unfinished paintings that had to be completed by the spectator in the very act of observation and interpretation (Courten 2008: 4).

Wolfgang Ullrich, in his essay “Unschärfe, Antimodernismus und Avantgarde” [Blurredness, Antimodernism, and Avant-Garde] (2002b: 396), describes blurredness as an extended form of the human eye’s intrinsic blurred vision. The human eye is able to focus only on one point,

which leaves the rest of our view blurred. Selected focused photographs present the same distinction. But we are not always aware of this way of looking in daily life, since the eye is moving incessantly. This observation concerning our constantly moving eyes and the contrast with the fixed, static nature of photographs invites an exploration of the tension between movements in real life and the photographic recording of aspects of time, which is the subject of the next chapter.

In the wake of the mid-nineteenth-century speculations about the consequences of photography's truthfulness for the prospective relationship between painting and photography, as this chapter's historical overviews have revealed, artists and critics formulated theories of photography regarding its representational qualities that mainly aimed at ultimately defining the medium's ontology as distinct from painting. At the same time, the two media increasingly went their own way. Recently, however, more theorists of photography have adopted the opposite perspective, which parallels the rapprochement in applications of these media. They wonder in fact why photography could not share or even exchange characteristics with painting and what is left of their peculiarity. The recent debates on terms used to describe issues of representation, as discussed in pairs in this chapter, confirm this observation. Finally, it is relevant to note that photography appears capable of reflecting on painting without having any of that medium's physical characteristics, whereas painting manages to reflect on the nature of photography without incorporating any traces of photographic materials.