

Artists and Photographs (1970)

Originally published in *Artists and Photographs* (New York: Multiples Inc., 1970); reprinted in *Studio International* 179 (April 1970): 162–164. *Artists and Photographs* contains an exhibition catalogue with text by Lawrence Alloway and nineteen works by different artists.

At least since Delacroix, when the camera provided a modern technique for getting direct images of the world (*Journal*, May 21, 1853), photographs have been in the hands of artists. They were, as Delacroix saw, images of the world unmediated by the conventions of painting; these were followed, later in the 19th century, by the wide distribution of works of art by photographic reproductions. This was defined by Walter Benjamin in Marxist terms in the 20s and celebrated later by Andre Malraux in terms of the camera's autonomous pictorial values. In the 20s, collages and photomontage, new works of art produced by photography, were abundant.

The present exhibition/catalogue clarifies with a new intensity the uses of photography, in a spectrum that ranges from documentation to newly-minted works. Some photographs are the evidence of absent works of art, other photographs constitute themselves works of art, and still others serve as documents of documents. This last area was the subject of an exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Bern, last year, *Plans and projects as art*, a survey of diagrams, proposals, propositions, programs, and signs of signs. Bernar Venet's book which is a profile of his "exploited" documents since 1966 demonstrates this possibility. The different usages are immense: for example, Douglas Huebler documents place not duration, whereas Dennis Oppenheim's piece is sequential, a chart of time-changes. One thing everybody has in common should be noted: there is an anti-expertise, anti-glamorous quality about all the photographs here. Their factual appearance is maintained through even the most problematic relationships.

One of the uses of photography is to provide the coordinates of absent works of art.

Earthworks, for example, such as Robert Smithson's, can sometimes be experienced on the spot, but not for long and not by many people. Documentation distributes and makes consultable the work of art that is inaccessible, in a desert, say, or ephemeral, made of flowers. The photographic record is evidential, but it is not a reproduction in the sense that a compact painting or a solid object can be reproduced as a legible unit. The documentary photograph is grounds for believing that something happened.

Photographs used as coordinates, or as echoes, soundings that enable us to deduce distant or past events and objects, are not the same as works of art in their operation. Max Bense has divided art and photography like this: "the esthetic process in painting is directed towards creation: the esthetic process of photography has to do with transmission." "Painting reveals itself more strongly as a 'source' art, and photography more strongly as a 'channel' art."¹ Dennis Oppenheim classifies photographic documentation as a "secondary statement . . . after the fact,"² the fact being, of course, the work out in the field. He feels restricted because "the photograph gives constant reference to the rectangle. This forces any idea into the confines of pictorial illusionism." However, the distinction between source art and channel art enables us to disregard the four edges as a design factor; the area of the photograph is simply the size of the sample of information transmitted, a glimpse. Common to both the absent original and to the photographic record is phototopic or day vision, with light as the medium of perception on the site and in the record. The works are, after all, photographable.

There is the possibility that documents, as accumulating at present, may acquire the preciousness that we associate with, say, limited edition graphics. The development of Earthwork or Street Events is resistant to the possession of art as usually understood and photography resists becoming personal property by its potentially endless reproduction. The fact that photographs are multiple originals, not unique originals, as well as one's sense of them as evidence rather than as source objects, should protect their authenticity ultimately. In the present instance, in *Artists & Photographs*, the contents of the catalogue are variants of the items in the exhibition, not repro-

ductions. Both the exhibited "object" and the catalogue "entry" are permutations made possible by the repeatability of the photographic process.

Michael Heizer has discussed the role of photography in relation to his own work. Of a work in Nevada he writes: "it is being photographed throughout its disintegration."³ The run of photographs records the return of probability to his initial interruption of the landscape. He points out that photographs are like drawings, as the basic graphic form of his big works in the landscape is recovered in aerial photography which shows the earth's surface as an inscribed plane. Related to the concise graphism of photographs is the camera's effectiveness as an image-maker. Heizer's own bleak landscapes, like excavation sites, Smithson's photographing of mirrors in a pattern in landscapes to make a compound play of reference levels, and Richard Long's walks in the country with regular stops for documentation with a camera (of the view, not of the walker) presuppose a photographic step in the work process. As Oppenheim has said: "communication outside the system of the work will take the form of photographic documentation. . . ."⁴

Other artists in this exhibition/catalogue use the camera as a tool with which to initiate ideas rather than to amplify or record them. Edward Ruscha is represented by *Baby Cakes*, one of the factual series of photographs which began as early as 1962 with his book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. This book like his later ones, is neither sociological (the sample of subjects is arbitrary) nor formalistic (the imagery is casual), but it is a concordance of decisions, unmistakably esthetic, for all their deadpan candour, in the absence of other purposes. Similarly Bruce Nauman's photographs of the air (sky?) over Los Angeles solidifies the channel functions of photography into a source art. In such works the photographs are themselves an object, an original structure projected by the artist. The information that Nauman's photographs carry cannot be decoded as news of weather or pollution or as a lack of unidentified flying objects. (The information that Nauman's *LAAIR* does not carry, though it looks as if it might, is different from Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris*, 1919. That sample of the atmosphere is contained in a sealed glass ampule, of which one would

have to say, this is *not* a piece of laboratory equipment, etc. The artists in both cases work against the reduction of the photograph or the object to a channel function.)

Michael Kirby takes "clarity as the only conscious standard" in both shooting and developing his photographs, but the result is not record but source. In *Pont Neuf* he uses six photographs, taken from one point, to provide views of the surrounding space: the work can, as it were, be inferred backwards to the converging point. Jan Dibbets' work is inconceivable without monocular vision (that is, a camera); his "perspective corrections," whether constructions built in a field or areas ploughed on a beach, demand one absolute viewpoint to be effective. Only from that one point can his inversion of distance give the appearance of flat squares and posts of identical size. "Misunderstandings," an anthology of quotations found by Mel Bochner (his contribution to the catalogue), includes this: "Photography cannot record abstract ideas," but his piece in the exhibition ironically and defiantly is concerned with measurement (i.e. a form of abstraction).

The artistic ideas and operations that need photographic documentation are especially those that are modified in time. Time, in fact, is central to photography. In the case of Christo there is data on the wrapping of a tower, some of it prospective (dia-

grammatic or simulated) and some of it memorial; the work process is arrested at different points in time. Sol LeWitt's *Muybridge III* takes a classic image of motion (successive views of a walking nude) and encloses it to be viewed directionally. Dan Graham's work alludes to Muybridge's measured walking images, but here it is the walkers who take relational photographs of one another. The slides are then projected quickly on two screens, compressing the original time sequence. Robert Morris' piece is a record of a "continuous project (altered daily)." Only by photography can the temporal route of a work of art be recorded in terms homologous to the original events. It should be stressed that it is not a question of memorializing a favorite state, catching the work's best profile, but of following the process.

These artists occupy various points in a zone that includes Conceptual art, Earthworks, Happenings. Conceptual art, to the extent that it is to be thought about, or repeated, or enacted by others, insists on documentation systems *originated by the artist himself*. This is no less true of performance arts, such as Happenings or Events, which survive verbally as scenarios or schedules and visually as photographs. The record of one of Allan Kaprow's Happenings is a form of completion. It is necessary to differentiate these uses of photographs by artists from other

approaches. The present title *Artists & Photographs* has a verbal echo of, for instance, *The Painter and the Photograph* (University of New Mexico, 1964) which is a study of photography as a transmitter of information for the use of figurative painters.⁵ *The Photographic Image* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966) was divided between artists who imprinted photographs in paintings or who copied photographs, less as an aid to illusion than as a play with the channel characteristics of the medium. (In the work of Richard Artschwager, Malcolm Morley, and Joseph Raffael the subject is frequently the photograph itself rather than what the photograph depicts.) *Paintings from the Photo* (Riverside Museum, 1969-70) combined both realist and post-Pop usages.

A Note on Process Abbreviation

Abstract painting has many ways of achieving the 20th century dream of an instant, unrevised, all-at-once art form. There has been a steady sequence of process-abbreviation, compressing and reducing in number the stages that go to make up a work of art. Staining and high-speed calligraphy, for instance, have a directness to which figurative art has little access. One of the few ways is in the use of photographic images printed on silkscreens; not only is there an immediate delivery of a grainy, convincing image to the canvas, as the screen is pressed down and painted on the back, but the screen can be used again. Both technique and image are immediate. If "a print is the widow of the stone," to quote Robert Rauschenberg,⁶ then a photograph is the twin of an event. Andy Warhol's method is the repetition of the single image within each work, varying it by nonchalant registering and impatient inking; Rauschenberg's way is to cluster different screens in each work, repeating them only in other works.

Notes

1. *Camera*, 4, 1958.
 2. Letter to Multiples, 1969.
 3. *Artforum*, December, 1969.
 4. *Land Art*, Fernsehgalerie, Berlin, 1969.
 5. The catalogue includes a history of artists using photos by Van Deren Coke.
 6. *Studio International*, December, 1969.
- Rauschenberg is referring to lithography, but in terms of assimilating photographic impressions the medium resembles silkscreen printing.

Artists and Photographs, 1970; Walker Art Center

