

ANDREAS RENTSCH

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MEDIUM SPECIFICITY IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

ABSTRACT

As my work has extended into other mediums such as painting, drawing and performance art, I will explore how this art practice fits in the art historical context of expanding the boundaries of the photographic medium. I am also interested in contemporary discourse of medium specificity, as it relates to my art and the work of other artists. I will use Michael Fried's provocative claim of the emergence of Jeff Wall as a painter and Gerhard Richter (1) as a photographer as the basis for a critical argument regarding photography.

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Introduction

Although my work of late possesses a close aesthetic relationship to performance, drawing and painting, it always originates in my mind and in its application within the photographic medium. While my work is anchored in a moral sensibility, process has become more and more important in my art practice. My aim has consistently remained within the parameters of the photographic medium in order to discover new ways to articulate my ideas visually. Experimentation and chance have become important tools in my research. A big part of this process has been abandoning a considerable amount of control and allowing the material to take over in some unexpected and unpredictable ways. This has mostly been accomplished by forgoing one or several steps in the conventional approach to photography. In the case of my *Entangled with Justice* series for example, I circumvent the manufacturer's specification of separating the negative from the positive of the Polaroid Type 55 film right after its exposure and processing, and instead of fixing and washing it immediately, allow it to develop and decay over a period of weeks or months before I tone it for permanence. By allowing the chemical phenomena to randomly and arbitrarily impact the once available information in the image, the resulting shapes and forms became metaphors for our own unpredictable and exciting existence.

In the series *X-Ray* (2012-2013), I eliminate the apparatus altogether. Additionally, the light sensitive medium (x-ray film) is continuously exposed to light at all times:

weeks at a time, and sometimes months. A unique feature of X-ray film is that it has a double-sided emulsion that allows me to utilize both sides for producing images. The mark-making is created through my application of traditional black and white photographic chemicals by hand onto the film's surfaces. Once again, the methodology is very much part of the meaning, as the ensuing manifestation of the image is concealed until the film is ultimately fixed, washed and dried. Its temporality is an integral part of the process, as the evidence of my actions is often revealed after several days or weeks, or is completely deconstructed by the chemistry. The X-ray film



Figure 1: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the series *Entangled with Justice*, 2007, 4.5x3.5", Unique Polaroid negative

becomes a revelatory tool, exposing hidden appearances, almost like a forensic expert unearthing concealed truths under the layers.



Figure 2: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #3* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x126"

Medium Specificity in the Contemporary Discourse

My unconventional approach to photography raises the question of medium specificity. When I first introduced my *Entangled with Justice* series at *FotoFest*, a biennial photo conference in Houston, Texas in 2008, it was the first time that I returned from one of these events without a sale, future exhibition or publication of my work. My initial disappointment shifted to curiosity as to the reason for this rejection. To my astonishment, this work was deemed non photographic, or not photographic enough, or outside the norm that was acceptable to the reviewing attendees. Although I consider my art practice to be an expanded form of photography by including other art forms such as performance and drawing, all the work originates with and is captured by the photographic process.

What defines photography in today's art discourse? Is it still closely identified by the use of the apparatus and its reproducibility? Is it as Annie Leibovitz said, "about moments, a specific split second rather than continuous motion?"(2) Rather than answer these questions and discuss the limitations of the photographic medium as defined in the past, shouldn't we be looking at the new ways and possibilities of the artistic experience that photography offers us in contemporary art? Haven't the barriers and disconnect between dissimilar art practices evaporated, and exposure to other fields of study become necessary to explore new avenues of expression? The dialogue is no longer about each individual medium, but how we can expand them: *expanded cinema*,

expanded photography. In Andrew Uroskie's essay "Rhetorics of Expansion", he outlines how artists refused "a rhetoric of medium-specificity that sought to dictate in advance what was essential and inessential, proper or improper, these artists sought instead to reconceptualize both the moving image and contemporary art through a mutual imbrication."⁽³⁾ While Uroskie refers to video and film in his essay, this applies to photography as well. With the ascent of the digital age, photography, like no other medium (maybe with the exception of film/video), has been in constant flux and transformation, with diverging groups predicting the demise of the analog photographic medium, while there is a renaissance in some other parts of the photo community to reacquaint themselves with traditional 19th century photo processes. More recently, the incorporation and acceptance of other mediums has been a vital aspect of photography, adding an entirely new dimension to the discourse. Is the overlap of media platforms (as in my own work with the camera-less capture of light and the painterly and performative elements in my art practice) an expansion of the photographic medium or is it deconstructing the medium specificity?

In the thought provoking article "After Medium Specificity Chez Fried: Jeff Wall as a Painter; Gerhard Richter as a Photographer"⁽⁴⁾, Diarmuid Costello questions Fried's understanding and definition of medium specificity. Costello mentions that Fried "maintains that we are unable to say *a priori* what may count as an instance of a given medium – other than that it bear a "perspicuous relation" to the past practice of the medium in question – it being a function of the ongoing development of the medium to bring this out... If a photographer can make paintings using the technical means of

photography, or a painter can make photographs by painting, is it still possible to distinguish between artistic media in principle?”(5) According to Fried’s reading, “the photographer Jeff Wall emerges as a ‘painter’ who paints photographically, and the painter Gerhard Richter emerges as a ‘photographer’ who makes photographs with the means of painting.”(6) I share Costello’s skepticism, especially the fact “that approaching photography in this way arguably fails to regard photography as photography, preferring to present photography as a kind of painting by other means.”(7) There is no doubt that Jeff Wall has investigated a great deal visually and intellectually in the history of painting, its pictorial ambition and scale, but an inherent medium specificity can’t be negated with even the loftiest of intellectual arguments. As my work treads similar questions of medium specificity, I would allow my art practice to be called photography by other means. I do agree with the following statement by Jeff Wall about the close connections of mediums:

“Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms. The only additional or new element is movement in the cinema”(8)

Another quote from Richter seems to have bolstered Fried’s argument of considering the German painter as a photographer:

“I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means; I’m not producing paintings of a photograph but producing

photographs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.”(9)



Figure 3: Jeff Wall, *Sudden Gust of Wind*, 1993, transparency on light box, 7'6"x 12'4"

I disagree with Richter's assumption that light is not one of the most crucial components in the medium of photography, when in fact it is the essential element necessary to make a photograph happen in the first place. Susan Sontag said as much in the following statement:

“While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) - a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.”(10)

In my reading of Fried, the main point of his argument is the explanation and conviction of an artist that his/her work should be considered as an exemplar of a certain medium, regardless of some medium specificity. Although I disagree with Fried's theory that "artistic media are not defined physically, causally and ontologically"(11), but basically allows the individual artist to define a specific medium by his/her own standards, I'm nevertheless intrigued by the fact that a discussion by an esteemed art critic and historian such as Fried would attempt to provide such a provocative definition, especially since he was so adamant in trumpeting medium specificity in his *Art and Objecthood* essay (1967). It is a good indication that artists and critics alike have been clamoring for an expansion of the parameters of medium specificity.



Figure 4: Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, oil on canvas, 35x20"

Expanded Photography

This is an exciting time in photography, in which many contemporary artists have found new ways of creating a visual vocabulary in dealing with the photographic medium, expanding on its discourse and interacting with other types of art. Artists such as Philip Lorca DiCorcia and Gregory Crewdson employ theatrical lighting to give their work a distinct cinematic feel. Crewdson's preparation for a photo shoot is reminiscent of a film set with a crew of dozens, meticulously arranging the location for days or weeks, with the ensuing photograph looking like a movie still. Wolfgang Tillmans' mundane snapshot-like photographs taken of his surroundings, often lacking coherent



Figure 5: Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, from the series *Hollywood 1990/1992/Hustlers*, *Marilyn, 28 years old, Las Vegas, Nevada, \$30, 30x40"*

narratives between them, become something otherworldly once exhibited, an installation of taped and clipped imagery. “They are really color fields—color playing on a purely visual level. That’s why it’s interesting to do these installations where the actual narrative content is taken away and each picture only represents color.”(12) His casual approach in exhibiting on alternative, non-archival surfaces such as laser and photocopy papers, confronts the question of acceptability, challenging the medium of photography, its conventions, materials and processes – and, he has broken with the institutionalized formal display, almost as if to cater to a more social media-oriented audience, rather than the sophisticated viewership that frequents his museum and gallery exhibitions.

Other artists such as Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall have embraced scale as a definitive nod to painting in their pictorial imagery. Wall wants his massive transparencies to be understood primarily in relation to nineteenth-century painting and its history. Ironically, his method of displaying his giant transparencies in light boxes is heavily borrowed from contemporary advertising.

What all of these artists have in common is their ability to expand the photographic medium beyond the mere causal relationship to its subject that defined traditional photography by reframing the discourse. Process, “formal qualities of style – the central issues in painting”(13) become essential queries in their art practice. When Susan Sontag said in her seminal book *On Photography*: “The painter constructs, the photographer discloses. That is, the identification of the subject of a photograph always

dominates our perception of it – as it does not, necessarily, in a painting,”(14) it epitomized exactly the opposite approach of these artists in dealing with medium specificity and the subsequent re-coding of it. Although their work and the questions they raise have sometimes more in common with other mediums, their aesthetic and the material used is nevertheless photographic in nature, and the use of the photographic apparatus is an essential component. I found it strange when George Baker in his essay, “Photography’s Expanded Field”, played down the importance of the medium by declaring: “Even among those artists (*) then who continue in some form the practice of photography, today the medium seems a lamentable expedient, an insufficient bridge to other, more compelling forms.”(15) Rather than to denigrate the importance of the medium of photography in their work, I would rather highlight a statement in the same article by Baker, when he refers to Rosalind Krauss’ observations in her ground-breaking article *Sculpture in the expanded Field*:

“Thus, to paraphrase Krauss one last time, ‘[Photography] is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn’t. [Photography] is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities.’(16) ... Not that modernist medium-specificity would simply dissipate into the pluralist state of anything goes, but rather that such mediums would quite precisely *expand*, marking out a strategic movement whereby both art and world, or art and the larger cultural field, would stand in new, formerly unimaginable relations to one another.”(17)

(*) : In his essay, Baker refers to Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Rineke Dijkstra, Andreas Gursky.



Figure 6: Gregory Crewdson, from the series *Twilight, Untitled*, 2001, 48x60"



Figure 7: Gregory Crewdson on location, from his series *Twilight*, 2001



Figure 8: Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2012-2013



Figure 9: Andreas Gursky, installation view, Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA, 2010



Figure 10: Jeff Wall, installation view, National Gallery of Victoria Australia, Melbourne, 2012-2013

Etymology of Photography as Inspiration

Since I first experienced the practice of photography at age twelve, the affection and passion for the medium has not dissipated. The fascination of being able to capture light felt like pure magic to me. As I grew older and started to better understand the process, the desire to explore still uncharted territory became an obsession. The etymology of photography has always been my inspiration for experimentation. The word originates from the Greek language: the definition of photo is light, and graph means write, draw, describe and record. My artwork of the last two decades has taken that word quite literally; from illuminating entire landscapes with a flashlight, from clouds transforming into lines emulating charcoal drawings, from the sun making unpredictable imprints during hour-long exposures, from recording my walks in nature by leaving the shutter open for several minutes, to drawing the outlines of my body with a flashlight. All these series involved recording the light with an apparatus.

My latest body of work, *X-Ray*, raises some additional, interesting questions about medium specificity. The basic ingredients of this series are purely photographic: X-ray film that consists of an emulsion of silver halide particles similar to that of traditional black and white film; conventional photo paper developer and fixer that are used in the analog process, and light. The parallels basically end there. Pinned to the wall, the film is exposed at all times in my studio, without the use of any apparatus or lens to gather the light, creating an instant latent image. In a temporal process that takes hours and weeks, the mark-making happens by using my hands to apply the chemicals directly

onto the surface, creating shapes and forms depending on my gestures. The end results closely resemble expressionistic paintings. Very few people would consider it a photograph without my explaining. Even then, most would regard it closer to painting and drawing. But isn't my studio the container that brings in the light necessary to burnish the silver halides, and my hand the mechanics of the apparatus that guides the light to its ultimate resting place? It still raises some fundamental questions whether or not the act "of painting" the chemicals onto the emulsion and the lack of an apparatus "disqualifies" my work as photographic. But then again, is the medium of photography defined by the apparatus?



Figure 11: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Rock Series*, 1995, toned gelatin silver print, 50x35"



Figure 12: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Cloud Series*, 1997, toned gelatin silver print, 11x14"



Figure 13: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Sun Series*, 2000, toned gelatin silver print, 30x30"



Figure 14: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #4* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x70"

There have been numerous artists who have pushed the boundaries of photography. Man Ray explored the camera-less approach with his photograms - or as he called them, Rayographs, after his last name - by arranging translucent and opaque objects on photosensitive materials. His technique included immersing the object in the developer during exposure, and using stationary and moving light sources. There is no dispute

that being a painter greatly influenced some of Man Ray's approaches and his interest in the process. During the Dadaist and Surrealist movement (Man Ray was part of both), artists were especially excited to investigate a still young medium that was so conducive to experimentation. More recently, Wolfgang Tillman's other work, his abstract images, are more closely related to the painterly tradition - created in the darkroom with chemicals and no apparatus - and he has re-defined the medium further by adding giant scale that was not common in the nineties. Another artist, Adam Fuss, experiments with some of the earliest photographic techniques such as the photogram, giant daguerreotypes and the pinhole camera, using these ancient processes to construct a contemporary aesthetic.



Figure 15: Man Ray, Rayograph, gelatin silver print, 1922



Figure 16: Wolfgang Tillmans, *It's only love give it away*, medium and exact size not known, 2008



Figure 17: Adam Fuss, *Home and the World*, 2010, daguerreotype, 27³/₄ x 42"

Summary

In 1977, Susan Sontag wrote her seminal book *On Photography*. Her observations are still enlightening, fresh and valid: Prescient as well, maybe not in the way she imagined when she wrote the following quote to counterpoint Edward Weston's insistence of assessing a good photograph by its technical prowess, which she considered a "bankrupt" objective:

"The new position aims to liberate photography, as art, from the oppressive standards of technical perfection; to liberate photography from beauty, too. It opens up the possibility of a global taste, in which no subject (or absence of subject), no technique (or absence of technique) disqualifies a photograph."⁽¹⁸⁾

This quote summarizes and answers some questions I have been raising. I do want to return, one last time, to the etymology of photography: Drawing with light, light recording, documenting and writing with light. In that regard, I consider my more recent work to be the purest form of photography. This fascination in the ability of capturing light and making it visible within the photographic process has been an obsession of mine for the past 30 plus years.

Vilém Flusser called for a new philosophy of photography in which "to probe their [photographer's] practice in the pursuit of freedom... Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera."⁽¹⁹⁾ He singles out the experimental photographers that could lead to this new philosophy of photography in order to rid themselves of the shackles that have been

used to contain the medium from expanding.

“They (*) are conscious that *image, apparatus, program and information* are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program.”(20)

Flusser’s elaborations concisely reflect my interest in the discourse of photography. My *X-Ray* series creates “unpredictable information” outside the traditional means of capturing light. But does it ultimately matter if it is categorized as photography, or painting, or drawing or even performance? Should it be just called *expanded photography* or is it some sort of new medium that hasn’t been named yet? The one thing I can say with conviction is that I am committed to exploring new avenues of expression, with light as my guiding force and constant companion.

Andreas Rentsch, May 2013

(*) Vilém Flusser refers to the experimental photographers.

Endnotes

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2. Carrie Lambert, "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'", *October*, Vol. 89 (Summer 1999), p.94.
3. Andrew V. Uroskie, "Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Situating Expanded Cinema in Postwar Art, Rhetorics of Expansion", p. 26.
4. Costello, *op. cit.*, p. 75-89.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*
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8. Jeff Wall, "Frames of Reference", *Artforum*, September 2003, p. 190.
9. Gerhard Richter, Interview with Rolf Shön, "The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993, London: Thames & Hudson", 1994, p.73.
10. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Doubleday, 1977, p. 154.
11. Costello, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
12. Wolfgang Tillmans, Interview with Bob Nickas for online *Interview Magazine*, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/wolfgang-tillmans>, September 12, 2011
13. Susan Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

15. George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", *October 114*, Fall 2005, p.123.
16. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the expanded Field", 1979, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985, p. 284.
17. Baker, *op.cit.*, p.136.
18. Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
19. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, 1983, p.80.
20. *Ibid.*, p.81.

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