1-1-2006

October culture : photographic theory and the beginnings of postmodernism

Jamie M. Allen
Ryerson University

October Culture:
Photographic Theory and the Beginnings of Postmodernism

by

Jamie M. Allen

BAA and BFA, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 2000

A thesis project

presented to **Ryerson University**, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
and
George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film,
Rochester, New York, United States of America

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2006

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

I authorize Ryerson University and George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signed_____

Jamie M. Allen

I further authorize Ryerson University and George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signed_____

Jamie M. Allen

***October* Culture: Photographic Theory and the Beginning of Postmodernism**

Jamie M. Allen

Master of Arts, 2006

Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario in coordination with George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York

Abstract:

This thesis explores the birth of the journal *October*, in its context of late 1970s academia and the decline of modernist criticism in the United States. It analyses three articles first published in *October*: Rosalind Krauss's two part "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" (Spring/Fall 1976), Thierry de Duve's "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox" (Summer 1978), and Douglas Crimp's "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" (Winter 1980). The thesis attempts to understand the key role played by *October* in changing our understanding of photography as an artistic practice and cultural object by discussing the position of *October* in the creation of photographic theory and the function of photographic theory in the critique of modernism that has come to be known as postmodernism.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis advising team:

Dr. Anthony Bannon, Director, George Eastman House

Marta Braun, Ryerson University

Alison Nordström, Curator of Photography, George Eastman House

David Harris, Ryerson University

My knowledge of theory grew through discussions with Dr. Anthony Bannon, and my understanding of the material and ideas were shaped in the hands of Marta Braun. My work profited from the preliminary advice of David Harris and Alison Nordström, who has also served as a final editor to this text.

I would like to thank my peers, Angelica Soleiman, Siobhan Creem, Dee Psaila and Anne Maryanski, who bore through the debate and subsequent stages that shaped what is written on the following pages. They played witness to both my sane and crazed moments and have offered their continued friendship and contributions along this path I travel.

Additionally, I would like to thank my mentor, Harold Jones for his ideas, knowledge, and continued support throughout my graduate career.

Dedicated to my Family,
who has supported my endeavours no matter where they took me.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis endeavours to answer two questions: how did the journal *October* contribute to the creation of a theory of photography during the first five years of its publication, and how did this new form of photographic theory fit in to the formation of postmodernism? At *October*'s foundation, photographic criticism was a tool that could be used to comment on the modernist establishment and its ideals, but through their analyses, the founders of *October* also established a new form of photographic discussion, no longer grounded in art. Instead, they considered photography as a form of communication used by culture, no different from movies, music, or a printed ad; photography was a way that society had learned to understand a common set of signs, symbols, and images. This discussion played directly into the onset of postmodernism by foregrounding a common ideology that reached beyond the field of art and into cultural institutions. Thus, photographic theory, as a discourse, provided a forum where the evaluation of modernism could link many cultural practices in one discussion, creating the critique that is now called postmodernism.

This thesis is an attempt to master what came before my time, to understand the role of photographic theory in the shaping of postmodernism and the role of postmodernism in shaping photographic theory. It began with the desire to understand why Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and his book *Camera Lucida*, (translated into English in 1981)[1] were referred to in so many articles that I had been asked to read during my years of learning. Barthes's influence seemed to coincide with the beginning of postmodernism in the United States, and in trying to grasp how to define postmodernism, my research on Barthes led me towards other writers, namely Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Allan Sekula, Benjamin Buchloh and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. All of these writers

[1] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); first published as Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, c1980)..

published articles in *October*, and some continue to write for the journal. When I concentrated in on the first five years of the journal, 1976-1980, I found that much of the written work focused on photography or used photography as a tool to explain theoretical phenomena.

These writings developed into a theory of photography, one that coincided with the critique of modernism now known as postmodernism. For me, postmodernism was not only a critique that represented the period of photography's rise as an art commodity and a broadening of how it could be understood as both a cultural artefact and artistic practice, postmodernism also was the era just before my own time; postmodernism is to me what modernism was to the editors of *October*, the outdated model that their education was based on. I wanted to understand what my education had been grounded upon, and to do this I focused in on their journal in an attempt to understand how their use of the photographic discourse added to the establishment of postmodernism, causing it to become the current establishment.

While *October* stands as only one journal in a large field of critical inquiry over a thirty year period, from 1976 to the present, it was one of the first voices to add to the creation of photographic theory, a critical discourse that has led to an emphasis on "visual culture." As the study of visual culture begins to overshadow the traditional study of art and photographic history, it is important to understand the basis for this shift. By joining the critique of various art practices to a larger understanding of societal concerns, journals such as *October* played a key role in educating and changing the institutions of art; they shifted the focus from a modernist, formalist view to a postmodernist discussion of how society forms the individual, whether an artist or a viewer. They insisted on the use of French theory, specifically the influence of semiotics, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism, as the tool that could adjust critical discourse away from modernist criticism and towards a fuller understanding of social and cultural theory. Their pursuit was not to justify photography as art, but to define art as a language of culture, thus allowing artistic

practice to be accessible to all members of society. In short, *October* played a key function in creating our current understanding of photography's role as commodity in the art establishment and as a form of cultural communication, a dual perception that has forever changed the discourse of photography.

The editors and authors of *October* began by defining their past; they understood from where the current discourse had evolved and what influenced the critical thinking before their time. As for this thesis, my hope is that I provide an understanding of the past so that the discussions that surround me can be better understood. I have witnessed teachers, critics and theorists discussing how the death of photography has arrived, or that we are now in a period that we can call "post-photography,"[2] but what exactly are they referring to? During the 1970s, it was thought that painting had died;[3] yet in 2006, universities still bestow degrees in painting and galleries continue to sell it as a commodity. It is my view that through an understanding of theory, we might find that photography is not dead, but that it has changed by shifting away from how the past has come to understand it. If this much is true, then there is a new definition of photography already being shaped by photographic theory.

---

[2] Joan Fontcuberta discusses this phenomenon briefly in "Revisiting the Histories of Photography," in *Photography. Crisis of History*, translated by Graham Thomson (Barcelona: Actar, [2004]), 10.

[3] See Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69-86. This is Crimp's reaction to Barbara Rose's 1974 article "Twighlight of the Superstars" where she argues that the exhibition *Eight Contemporary Artists*, held at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1974, is allowing the current artists to destroy the notion of what painting is, thus one interpretation of this is the end or death of painting, as much as its basic concepts are undermined. Crimp' subsequent discussion of this text places the situation into a larger context.

Methodology

In this thesis, I begin in Chapter 1 by describing context for *October*. In Chapter 2, I move to the intentions of the editors of *October*, in order to describe the journal's importance to the critique of modernism. I then analyze three seminal articles that were published in *October*'s formative years, as they contain some of the theoretical ideas that established the basis of photographic theory. In the conclusion, I discuss how these writings, through their establishment of photographic theory, provided a postmodernist critique of modernism, broadening both the understanding of art and photography as visual communication.

Chapter 1: *October* Climate: The Background

> Critical theory became a dynamic part of cultural practice: if an avant-garde existed anywhere, it might be argued, it existed there.
>
> -*Art Since 1900*[4]

The term "postmodernism" can mean a great many things. Most generally, it can be defined as a cultural movement, which began in the 1960s with Pop art in England. However, this time period also saw a rise in theory as many intellectuals and writers began to focus their intentions on a critique of the previous cultural movement, modernism. While some definitions of "postmodernism" are limited only to art history and artistic practice, many artistic and cultural institutions appropriated the theoretical discussion that was already occurring in other fields. What all of these fields had in common was an ultimate goal of a critique of modernism, a common goal that enveloped scientific, historical, social and artistic frameworks into one discussion. Simply stated, postmodernism, as a whole, is a cultural movement that is a reaction to modernism; if that is true, then to appreciate postmodernism one first must understand modernism.

As a cultural movement, modernism has roots that date back to the 1850s. Modernism corresponds to the onset of the modern world; it parallels the dominance of economic and social innovation by insisting that constant innovation will lead to progress, the movement's ultimate goal. Modernism supported progress by encouraging a re-examination of everything from artistic to philosophical practice in the hope to push culture forward. It held that the new inventions were not only useful, but that they were inevitable, and that society must learn to adjust to new ways of

[4] Hal Foster et al., "Theory journals," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 571.

thinking or it would perish. Artists were encouraged to be revolutionaries, to abandon traditional forms, and thus movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Minimalism were born.

One of the major schools of criticism that is linked to modernism is formalism, which held that the form of an artwork was the most important aspect. Characterized by the saying "art for art's sake," formalism emphasised aesthetic pleasure found in how an artist foregrounded his particular medium. In painting this might be how color, canvas, brushstrokes, and composition were used to create the work, thus the formal elements became the subject of the work of art. This denied the need for the subjects to correspond to an object in the world, such as a portrait or landscape might, thus the prominence of abstract art during formalism. The emphasis on addressing the medium further stressed the autonomy and individuality of each medium.

Modernist and formalist thought privileged a small class of individuals including artists, art historians, and art critics, who distinguished between high art and popular products of "urbanized mass culture."[5] High art was equivalent to high culture, and it was felt that art as an intellectual pursuit would allow for the advancement of society through critical thinking, thus meeting the goals of modernism by showing progress as an intellectual pursuit. In this framework, criticism informed the intelligentsia about what art is good and what art is bad, or in other words, what was high art and worth collecting and what was everyday, common goods. The formalist critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) led this definition with his 1939 essay "Avant Garde and Kitsch"[6] by equating high art with the avant-garde and naming the everyday kitsch. In this way, formalist criticism rose as the leading artistic discussion during the modernist period.

---

[5] Charles Harrison, "Modernism," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 191.

[6] Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49; republished in Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticisms*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22.

By the mid-1970s, modernism could no longer explain or justify new forms of art, such as earthworks, performance, conceptualism, and feminist art; in turn, these new art forms began to question the modernist establishment by suggesting that the definition of art could be extended to common goods, by expanding the notions of who was included in the art establishment, and by challenging the form of the art object as it had been defined by modernism.[7] The critics Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson had been educated under the traditions of modernism and formalism. Both women had been working at *Artforum*, a journal begun in 1962 with the mission to provide an alternative to the existing American art magazines, namely *Artnews* and *Art in America*. The magazine's founder Philip "Leider was committed to new and more muscular writing than the vaporous, belle-lettristic style of the other magazines,"[8] which printed the writings of formalist art critics such as Greenberg.

But Krauss, Michelson, and many others began to feel that *Artforum* was no longer fulfilling its stated purpose; its formalist bent was unable to evaluate the new conceptual and political art that combined media and challenged the modernist ideal of pure medium and form as subject. With the hope to "reopen an inquiry into the relationships between the several arts which flourish in our culture at this time,"[9] one that would allow the entry of new forms of discourse provided by French theory (a concept that will be discussed further below), Krauss and Michelson, along with Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe founded *October* in 1976.

By the 1950s and 60s, critical theory had become essential to culture and political analysis in France, and theoreticians such as Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and Roland Barthes began to be highly influential in America. They used

---

[7] *The TATE Online*, "Glossary." <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/> (accessed 25 July 2006).
[8] Hal Foster et al., "Artforum," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 472.
[9] The Editors [Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson], "About OCTOBER," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 4. In this first issue, "The Editors" referred to Gilbert-Rolfe, Krauss, and Michelson, however, the second issue lists only Krauss and Michelson.

linguistics, semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis to critique cultural practices including literature and art, "so that the application of such 'French Theory' to visual arts seemed logical" to those associated with *October*.[10] The editors of *October* saw the entry provided by French theory as beneficial to the discourse of artistic practice because it pointed the discussion away from the closed social context of modernism, one that saw art pertaining only to high culture, and into a larger context of mass and popular culture. They advanced forward with the creation of their journal in an attempt to bring together the current theoretical concerns, politics and art practices, in a new kind of forum.

The critique of modernism, and the introduction of French theory, are part of the critical discourse we call postmodernism. A definition of postmodernism begins with an understanding that it is also a cultural movement that can roughly be placed in the United States between the 1960s through the 1990s. (To the best of my research, a definitive end date for the movement has not been set.) Postmodernism is often characterized as the collapse of social dividers in culture, particularly a rise in media driven popular culture and the working class. In postmodernism, art is a form of communication, equivalent to many everyday forms of communication (e.g. television, movies, newspapers, magazines), so the study of art and everyday life are combined by writers and theoreticians, such as those who work for *October*, into a larger study of culture. Since art is a form of communication, it can be studied as a language, a shift that allows theory to analyse the changes in culture and art under structuralism and poststructuralism. In structuralism, meaning is built though inter-relationships, often seen as binary opposites (e.g. black and white, rich and poor, yin and yang.) These relationships are ahistorical; they are independent of time and history, because they are believed to be based on the structure of language as it is established through signs and/or symbols.

[10] Foster, "Theory journals," 571.

Here enters the discourse of semiotics, the study of signs and sign groupings that is the foundation for structuralism and poststructuralism. A *sign* can be anything from a word to an image, a gesture to a sound, but in this discussion, I will use words as my prime example of signs. Semiotics defines a *sign* as made up of a *signifier* and the *signified* (or sign = signifier + signified). The *signifier* is a letter, group of letters, audible sound, or image, while the *signified* is the concept derived from the experience of the actual object, called the *referent.* When a referent (object) is interacted with, a memory or concept is created for that object. When we learn language, these interactions are paired with signifiers (words) so that the word and concept are linked in our minds as a sign; we show an apple to a child and say "apple" so that the child will understand the concept apple. The object (referent) is thus replaced by the concept (signified).

To continue with the apple example, the *sign* apple is communicated through the letters and/or sounds a-p-p-l-e and through a concept of an apple derived from a past interaction with an actual apple; the *sign* "apple" is understood as such only because our society has repeatedly and arbitrarily accepted this combination of *signifier* and *signified* to represent the object. Meaning then comes from how the word is used in an established language, a series of conventions that give meaning to signs within a constructed and systematic syntax. Stated differently, the word "apple" means nothing as a concept in a conversation until it is accompanied by other words in a particular order, for example words that describe its taste, colour, and location; (e.g. The sweet red apple is in the refrigerator, as opposed to: The apple and sweet are in the red refrigerator .) Thus, semiotics sees that the meaning of any *signifier*, such as a word, is always dependent on context and is always deferred to an excess of other signifiers, other words that describe the first word further.[11]

[11] Timothy R. Quigley, "Structuralism and Poststructuralism: Background Summary and Analysis," *The New School: Visual and Cultural Studies*, 1998/2005 < http://cepa.newschool.edu/~quigleyt/vcs/structuralism.html> (24 July 2005).

In structuralism, this equation (sign = signifier + signified) is said to be static because the language is already in use well before we begin to use it; meaning for each sign has already been established and a structure, based on how each signifier relates to other signifiers, is already in place. This leads many structuralist theoreticians to believe that the construct of language is also universal and fixed and thus meaning is not a "private experience," but instead is a "shared system."[12] In other words, meaning is dependent on more than context; the signifier (word) that is picked by a speaker or writer as opposed to another possible signifier (word) also charges it with meaning. (i.e. A speaker might choose "house" over "dwelling" or "residence"). Therefore, language is dependent on an individual's understanding of how a concept fits into the pre-set structure of words, and thus language becomes a key element of forming experiences for individuals.[13] Reality then would be based on a combination of shared language and individual experience.

Poststructuralism draws upon the basic beliefs of structuralism in that the world is understood through a network of signs that create structures of language, but the relationship between language and what it refers to is changed. Poststructuralists believe that structures are not static, and that the world has been formed through social constructs that are pushing culture towards hegemony, a world ruled by one governing country or political group. I see this as a world view based on a growing world economy: the thought that eventually all cultures will blend into one.

In a poststructuralist evolution of semiotics, words lead just to other words, so each word is only understood by reference to what other words or messages it is similar to or opposite to. If someone uses the term black, then another person may think of this as not white, darkness, absence of light, the presence of all colors, in this understanding such a simple term may even draw upon emotive and descriptive ideas such as sadness, evil, impure, or dirty. To resume the apple example, "apple" leads only to other words such as sweet, red and fruit, which in turn lead to other words

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

such as taste, color and food, which will also lead to other words. Our concept of apple never actually accesses the experience of an apple and even more never refers to the apple itself because the experience of the apple can only be described, either to someone else or in our own mind, through the use of other words. Our use of language is also dependent on context, so that if a green apple is present a different concept or set of words comes into play (e.g. tart, green, and fruit) so that experience is derived through social contexts, interactions with others through the use of language. The only way to understand a sign's meaning is through previous and current interactions that were/are described through language. Language becomes a social concept, driving the understanding of the world, not through individual experiences but through a cultural experience of language.

When theorists, particularly those writing for *October*, begin to apply semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism, a work of art becomes a sign. The symbols and pictures within an artwork become signifiers and the things that they refer to become the objects that are signified, the referents. Art becomes a type of language that can be studied under the rubric of semiotics and is recontextualized as just a portion of a larger cultural context, again, blurring the line between the everyday object and the art object. This is particularly problematic in the field of photography, because in one way photography is created and intended to be art by some photographers, while in other instances it is an everyday object meant as evidence to record the world as it was at that moment. This emphasises the long running discussion of photography as art or non-art, returning theorists to the questions: What is photography? Is photography art? Postmodernism also adds questions: How is photography part of culture? Does the language of photography help to explain other sign-based languages? These are the questions that Krauss, Michelson and other writers in *October* asked.

In addition to French theory, the writings of German theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) became influential during this period..[14] Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," (1935, first translated into English in 1968)[15] is of particular importance because this text introduced the idea of *aura* into the discourse of photography and art. Upon its translation into English in 1968, this text influenced the new group of philosophical art historians, such as those that come to write for *October*, who saw Benjamin's ideas of *aura* tied to their understandings of originals, copies and reproductions.

To describe briefly the most vital aspects of this discussion, Benjamin's argument showed that the attempt to separate art from non-art caused collectors and museums to invent a way to evaluate possible works of art, to verify their artistic quality. This quality was to be established by the act of connoisseurship, where an elite group of individuals had the ability to subject work to "the test of chemical analysis" or to identify visually which works were authentic.[16] The work would be understood as a continuation of art historical classifications, such as originality, the presence of the artist's hand, and technique, all of which represented by the timeless structure of the art artefact amplified during modernism. "The presence of the artist in the work must be detectable; that is how the museum knows it has something authentic."[17] Authentic, original, hand-made, these are all words that are linked to the unique presence of a singular item, one that becomes Art with a capital "A"; the kind of item that can only exist in one place at any given moment, and in its company there

---

[14] Adorno's most cited writing is *Aesthetic Theory*, which was originally published in German as *Aesthetische Theorie*, eds. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970).
[15] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 219-53. Originally written in 1935 as "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," Benjamin reworked the text in early 1936, when it was published as a shorter French translation: Pierre Klossowski, trans., "L'œvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée," [1936], in *Écrits français*, ed. J.-M. Monnoyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 140-171 [text of the first published edition].
[16] Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 94.
[17] Ibid.

is no doubt that it is truly one-of-a-kind. This rarity and one-of-a-kindness is what Benjamin defined as *aura.*

For Benjamin, the photograph cannot have an *aura* (with the exception of those very early images made during the "primitive phase," which include the daguerreotype, ambrotype, and salt print: photographs made "prior to photography's commercialization"[18]); photography is a form of reproduction because it exists first as a negative that can be printed over and over for the production of infinite copies. Moreover, a photographic negative is a copy of the referent, the object, the thing itself (a notion taken from semiotics, and one that ultimately leads to Krauss's view that the photograph is a trace of the original object, and thus an index). Photography is a copy of the world, of nature, and as for photographers, while choosing to crop and frame their images, they have done nothing more than replicate scenes with the use of mechanical devices called cameras. Even when photographers attempt to combat this mechanical replicating nature of photography by producing hand-made photographs (a practice pictorial photographers employed at the end of the nineteenth century to create a more painterly effect through the use of gum-bichromate and bromoil) the image still remains as something that the artists themselves did not create. For Benjamin, photographs are simply copies.

Yet, as a Marxist, Benjamin felt that mass reproduction also made the object accessible to the general public, encouraging the democratic class structure that Marxism supported. No longer is this object accessible to only a few, for its copy is available to all. For Benjamin, the loss of the aura was not necessarily a problem, but an advantage. Not surprisingly, his writings are popularized during the period in which the questioning of modernism occurs (roughly the 1960s through the 1980s), when artistic practice became thought of as a shared cultural experience. Instead of allowing art to be studied and controlled by an elitist institutionalized hierarchy, critics like Rosalind Krauss

[18] Ibid., 95.

and Douglas Crimp, critics who introduced the discourse that is now described as postmodernism, call for an art open to all classes of people. In this way, *October* played a key role in the construction of postmodernist discourse.

At the onset of postmodernism, the writers of *October* helped to redefine how artistic practice would be interpreted. They defined photography within the language of a new discourse that included semiotics, linguistics, and psychology, adding to French theory and traditional art histories in a way that would highlight photography in its cultural context, one that is now called visual studies. Further, their discussion of photographic theory added to an understanding of how other artistic mediums as well as museums, universities, and other institutions were developing under the rubric of postmodernism, citing that these changes were parallel to those that photography had experienced throughout its own history.

I have chosen to analyse three articles from *October* that discuss photography in this developing climate. For Rosalind Krauss, in particular, photography had inherent qualities that the new movement was assuming as its own, so her discussion, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," becomes of importance to both photography and art. Noted theorist and Belgian art historian, Thierry de Duve uses the index as a part of his discussion, defining a paradox of photography that includes the psychological effects experienced by the viewer. Finally, art historian and visual culturist Douglas Crimp clarifies how photography is the prime example of the new postmodern notion of the copy, one that plays off Walter Benjamin's notion of aura and ultimately allows the reproduction to be seen as a lingering ghostly presence of the original.

Chapter 2: "But why *October*?"

Art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions.

-"The Editors"[19]

Just over thirty years ago, "The Editors" of *October* decided to dedicate a scholarly journal to the mantra (printed on their covers as): Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics. It was their intention to create a journal that would question and counter the position of the existing art journals, whose emphasis was on a style of criticism that used connoisseurship to select which artworks should be championed. This connoisseurship was based on the judgement of works of art and justification of particular artists through a linear, deterministic art history, one associated with modernism and formalism as discussed in Chapter 1. The editors of *October* felt that these journals created a format that produced "a form of pictorial journalism which deflects and compromises critical effort" through "extensive reviewing and lavish illustration."[20] Additionally, they saw that any discussion about a specific medium, for instance cinema, was forced into a specialized journal, perhaps *Film Culture*, which limited the discussion solely to a singular subject. They recognized the need for an academic journal that could bring together discursive art practices, theoretical writings, and a new discussion of contemporary events. This style of journal would move beyond the existing discourse in an effort to frame the production of art in the United States within a larger context by "bringing current theoretical concerns to bear on contemporary art practices."[21]

"The Editors" chose the title *October* as a referent to a time when history saw "radical departures articulating the historical movement which enclosed them, sustaining it though civil war,

---

[19] The Editors, "About OCTOBER," 4. See footnote 9.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] Douglas Crimp, "Preface and Acknowledgements," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), viii.

factional dissension and economic crisis."[22] They were referring to the journal's namesake, a film by Sergei Eisenstein entitled *October* that was created for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, which took place in Russia in 1917. Careful to note that they did not wish to perpetuate the notion of revolution, they instead hoped "to reopen an inquiry into the relationships between the several arts which flourish in our culture at this time, and in so doing, to open discussion of their role at this highly problematic juncture."[23] This discussion would consider not only art, but also its relation to other fields such as politics, history, theory and/or science. For "The Editors," October was a symbolic term for evaluating artistic practice within its own moment of historical creation, comparing it to not what had come before it, but what was contemporary to it.

"The Editors" had realized that their view of contemporary artistic practice was one of witnessing departures from the traditional history of art. Theirs was a time of change, of innovation, of unrest, but within *October,* they hoped to open a discussion that would lead to changes in contemporary culture. By *October*'s sixteenth issue, Annette Michelson refers to the era as "late capitalism," noting that the ability to understand the constantly struggling and shifting discursive practices "requires the construction of a theoretical and critical framework radically distinct from 'progressive' presuppositions of continuity as the ground of cultural pluralism and identity as the criterion of coherence."[24] In other words, they felt a new theoretical discussion was needed, one that dismissed the ideas set forth by modernist formalism such as utopia and historical progress. This new discourse would favour structuralism and poststructuralism as new methodologies that would open the door to discussions focusing on how arts and culture merge, allowing artistic practice, theory and criticism to meet.[25]

---

[22] The Editors, "About OCTOBER," 3.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Annette Michelson, "The Prospect Before Us," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 122.
[25] The Editors, "About OCTOBER," 4-5

Characterizing the first five years of *October*, Michelson wrote that "the erosion of categories and dispersion of forms which characterize the situation we have come to know as postmodernist required, in our view, a special effort of reassessment and critical analysis."[26] More conscious of social concerns, artistic practice addressed the "material conditions of its origins and processes," met ever growing economic hardships, and converged into a practice where temporal media (e.g. performance, dance, and earthworks) were being created ever more frequently alongside traditional mediums.[27] This type of social concern had rarely been addressed in modernist discourse, so a new form of assessment was required, one that could elaborate on the interrelationships of various dialogues within art practices of the United States. *October* created one new forum of assessment by using a diverse set of methodologies (described in Chapter 1) to create a critical analysis of the situation. Art history, as a field, was opened to the application of other discourses such as linguistics, semiotics, literature, psychoanalysis, and sociology. The goal was simply a better understanding of the current artistic practice and climate, and the path to this better understanding was through diverse inquiry, thought, and discussion that would support this new type of practice.

While this seemed like a large task, "The Editors" understood that their objectives were idealistic.[28] By addressing the gap between artistic practice and cultural discussion in the form of criticism and theory, the editors opened the door for their writers to discuss more than art practice. Hence, politics became a leading subject in many articles. The editors and writers found a platform through which they could engage an audience of those committed to the visual arts, an audience "made up of artists, critics, scholars, students."[29] Their target was the institutions of art, the classrooms, studios, workshops, galleries, libraries, and museums, the same institutions that were

---

[26] Michelson, "The Prospect Before Us," 119.
[27] The Editors, "About OCTOBER," 3-5.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec, eds., "Introduction," in *OCTOBER: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), x.

creating, promoting, selling, and validating the artistic practices of that time. By critiquing these art practices with scholarly thought and academic writing, *October* was and continues to be a part of the transformation that took place in these very institutions.

October has published two books that anthologize what the editors viewed as the journal's best writings. The introduction of *October: The First Decade* (1987), a book which marked the tenth year of publication, emphasized a consideration for the "effect" of "social discourses" on the formation of individuals within art and noted that this shift marked "the point at which theory remains unsatisfied with its own constructions and looks beyond itself."[30] This echoes the introduction of other types of theoretical discussion that could assist in evaluating these new concerns of art practice. The introduction to *October: The Second Decade* (1997), cites the journal's position as ever more needed rather than complete. While acknowledging that the unnamed elusive problematic that haunted their beginnings had become known as postmodernism, the editors still saw that artistic and discursive practices in the United States were under continued jeopardy due to ever shrinking support for cultural and social services.[31] These services included (and continue to include) welfare, education, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), all of which have suffered cuts in funding. However, this shift in emphasis marked a new type of concern for the vitality of the arts in the United States; this discourse, no longer focused on creating a new kind of discussion to address art practices turned instead to address cultural concerns based on money and politics. It will be interesting to see if a third anthology will be introduced at this 30 year juncture and what stand will be taken on the current politics of art in the United States.

---

[30] Ibid., xi.

[31] Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier, and Silvia Kolbowski, eds., "Introduction," in *OCTOBER: The Second Decade, 1986-1996*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press,1997), ix.

With hindsight, one can now see the influence of the editors and writers of *October*; their writing has changed how art, more specifically, photography is discussed today. It is not revolutionary to think that *October* contributed to changing the standard for art historical writing, but describing that change would be impossible in a paper of this length. Instead, the following discussion will be limited to photography, an artistic practice that *October* saw as one of a series of radical inventions that were culturally motivated, causing the "theoretical implications" of artistic practice to come under question and "shift the role and site of signification and pleasure."[32] From its beginnings, photography struggled as a science, art, and popular culture artefact, never fully being accepted into any of these categories because of its ability to be within all of them. By the middle of the twentieth century, photography had made its way into art museums, and this progression had not stopped the furthering of photography as a tool for media, advertising, and the making of every household snapshot album. In short, photography was one of the diffuse practices that defied being fully discussed until the introduction of postmodernism, and it is still debatable if this movement truly and fully comprehended photography.

For *October*, its editors, and its writers, photography could be at the same moment visual pleasure on the wall of the museum, signification in the halls of the science center, and proof on the pages of the newspaper or on the table in the courtroom. This is not to say that three photographs have three different meanings, but to say that the same photograph can serve all three purposes. To provide a theoretical and extreme example for the purposes of discussion: during the first portion of the twentieth century, a modernist critic might have studied a photographer such as Francis Frith (1822-1898), who took photographs in many countries including England and Egypt. This critic could have justified Frith's work as compositionally, technically, and thus artistically sound. His photographs show beautiful places and have lovely composition. They show a remarkable use of

[32] Michelson, "The Prospect Before Us," 123.

contrast, and his ability to control the collodion wet plate process coupled with albumen printing shows wonderful technique. His prints stand above the average traveling Victorian photographer's work; therefore, Frith might have been simply understood as an artist and thus his work collectable.

However, from the viewpoint of the later part of the twentieth century, an understanding of Frith's work must include a look at his business practices and subsequent archive to tell a completely different story. The study tells us that in the late 1800s, Frith's company sold typical Victorian views to private individuals who then placed these photographs into family albums as documents that showed their travels or that allowed them to study foreign landscapes. This business continued to function long after Frith's death, and has now become an archive that is privately owned by John Buck.[33] This archive continues to sell Frith's photographs along with other photographers' pictures of towns and villages, and these combined images form a body of work where images "were often taken from the same spot but many years apart, giving historians a unique opportunity to study landscapes, streets and buildings across a century and more of change."[34] Thus, a Victorian social use of photography and a current historical importance is added to his images. Frith's work has thus been recontextualized by the cultural discussion that insists on an understanding of photographs through their use as well as their aesthetics. This is the type of research that is now required to understand a photograph in all of its contexts, as an artistic image, as a social document, and as a historical object. Thus, a photograph belongs to the art museum, the science museum, and the historical society; a photograph is part of the discussion of many academic institutions attempting to better understand and contextualize how culture has been formed.

Frith is just one instance of recontextualization by academic institutions. Imagine every field of artistic and cultural practice becoming open to this type of discussion. The so called art object

---

[33] "History of the Archive," *The Francis Frith Collection*, 1999-2006 <http://www.francisfrith.com/pageloader.asp?page=/help/frith/history.asp> (25 July 2006).
[34] "About Frith Homepage," *The Francis Frith Collection*, 1999-2006 <http://www.francisfrith.com/pageloader.asp?page=/help/frith/frithhome.asp> (25 July 2006).

hanging on the wall of an art museum is to be understood within the context of the moment that saw its creation and as a visual statement. The artist's purpose must be considered along with the social situation that may have instigated this purpose. Art is suddenly equivalent to the cultural artefact, and similarly, any artefact could be considered for the gallery wall; now, every photograph is open to the discussion of art, science, and most importantly the driving force of either of these fields, culture. For me, this is culture in its broadest understanding; it is values, history, and knowledge shared by a society, it is defining factors that separate that society from others, and it is a field that can be studied only when the whole of society is scrutinized. To study culture means to study every factor of a society, from its artistic practices to its history, from its religious beliefs to its system of language. This situation, the study of culture, is created by the discussion that takes place in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States; this is the discourse that affects our view of photography today, and this is what one might begin to understand as the floodgates that were opened by journals such as *October*.

Chapter 3: The Photograph as Index

> The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.
>
> -Rosalind Krauss[35]

One of the first and most influential articles published in *October*, Rosalind Krauss's two part essay, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," sets the stage for a major discussion instigated within *October*'s covers, that of the index. The index was one of the "projects" that helped "to focus [*October*'s] attention"[36] on how language could be added to the discourse of artistic practice. Krauss's essay was meant as a way to explain the state of contemporary art, specifically painting; however, it arrived at these goals by using semiotics and psychoanalysis to discuss photography's relationship to language and define the characteristics of the photographic, as well as explaining photography's role in relationship to contemporary art of the late 1970s.

In trying to characterize 1970s artistic practices, a decade that would later be included under the umbrella of postmodernism in art, Krauss begins by describing what she calls a "multiplicity" prevalent in the diverse types of contemporary art. She states that, "unlike the art of the last several decades, [artistic practice's] energy does not seem to flow through a single channel for which a synthetic term, like Abstract-Expressionism, or Minimalism, might be found."[37] It is this defiance of "collective style" that leads Krauss to state that this type of diversity is free of the "restrictive notion of historical style," an idea contrary to formalist notions of art history. Krauss asks: "Are not all these separate 'individuals' in fact moving in lockstep, only to a rather different drummer from the

---

[35] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 75.
[36] Michelson, "Introduction," in *OCTOBER: The First Decade*, xii. See footnote 29.
[37] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 68.

one called style?"[38] In other words, instead of seeing the time period through modernist eyes as a lack of "collective style" or filled with eclecticism, is it possible that there is another viewpoint that will present something that ties all of these artistic practices together? Krauss's answer is that what binds this new movement together is something she defines as inherently photographic, the index.

As discussed in Chapter 1, semiotics played a key role in the development of a new discourse for 1970s and 1980s artistic practices not only in *October*, but also throughout academia in the United States. In this case, the term *index* is derived from Krauss's reading of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). An American philosopher, Peirce is cited as one of the founders of semiotics, introducing logic as a branch of that field. Additionally, Krauss's discussion includes references to Roman Jakobson, a twentieth century Russian linguistics scholar. His use of the term *shifter* is where she begins. In order to explain her notion of the index, Krauss applies Jakobson's linguistics to the realm of video.[39] She defines what would be called a *shifter* in linguistics; while the discussion of video is unnecessary for my purposes, the notion of *shifter* is important. Originally classified as a type of linguistic sign by Jakobson, a simple explanation for *shifter* is a word empty of meaning until it has something to refer to, such as "this" or "that."[40] In language, the term "this" is used, but without the person saying "this" and being able to physically point to which item or "this" he or she is referring to, the word itself means nothing. This item or object that the shifter is referring to is often termed the referent. Other examples of shifters are the words "I" and "you." In speech, I refer to myself as "I," and to you as "you." However, you refer to me as "you" and to yourself as "I." We are both "I" and "you" in the same conversation, ebbing and flowing between these two concepts of self. *Shifters* have no meaning without an object or person to refer to at a specific moment; in

---

[38] Ibid.
[39] This is a subject she has already addressed in her earlier article "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," which also places an emphasis on the relationships between video and psychology, as well as, video and temporality; see Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 51-64.
[40] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 69.

another conversation or at another moment, they might mean something entirely different. Thus, these words are not only tied to a referent but also to a time and a space; they are specific to their referent at a given moment in a given place.

Similarly, an *index* establishes meaning by pointing to an object; however, an index always refers to the same object. Instead, the effect of this pointing action manifests itself as a physical relationship with the referent. In Krauss's terms, an *index* is similar to a fingerprint; it is a physical trace of an object or referent. The *index* can also be thought of as a remnant, a clue, a symptom, or a shadow of the original object.[41] Photography is a type of *index*, according to Krauss, because it is a physical trace of the thing being pictured, whether it is an object, person, or event. In this way, photography often gains equivalence to evidence; it is something that proves the object, person, or event existed. The important ideas are that the photograph is a physical trace of a referent, as well as a type of sign that points to a referent (object, person or event); finally, these are the phenomena that cause a photograph to be considered as an *index*.

As with the *shifter*, an *index* is also affected by time and space. While a *shifter* constantly changes by referring to a different referent at each time and space, an *index* always refers to the same referent at the same moment in time and space. A photograph, as an *index*, thus records a subject at a certain moment and is thus tied to this subject as it is at that moment. In this way, a photograph is bound to time and space. However, the physical nature of a photograph allows it, and thus its subject, to travel both spatially and through time; it cannot stay in its specific moment forever.

I prefer to relate this notion to the story created in a narrative film. The film strip is made up of many specific images, or moments, that when tied together create a narrative. Meaning for the entire series of images is derived from this narrative. A photograph, however, is just one of the images from an entire film strip. Furthermore, this image can be taken out of the series of images or

[41] Ibid., 70.

moments, isolated and physically moveable in space, allowing the subject of the photograph to travel through time, away from the other images or moments that give it meaning. The object pictured in the narrative may have been destroyed, the person may now be dead, and the event portrayed in the series is completed, but for Krauss, the photograph remains as a remnant, a piece of evidence, and a physical trace of this referent; the photograph is its index.

For André Bazin (1918-1958), a prominent French film critic, the indexical power of photography can be pitted against the weaknesses of painting. In his "Ontology of the Photographic Image," (1945, first translated into English in 1967) he claims that painting is nothing more than a pseudo-reproduction of an object and that the photograph becomes the epitome of reproduction because it holds a type of "irrational power." When looking at a painting, the viewer sees an image that is a symbol of the original object. When viewing a photograph, this "irrational power" of the human mind sees the photograph as the object itself. He states:

> photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere appropriation...the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.[42]

Krauss uses Bazin's argument to support her view that the photograph actually avoids the typical representation of objects in art, one that is based on symbols, pictorial tradition and the internal logic of artistic language. Instead, the photograph can be substituted for the object, allowing it to enter a world that is "a-temporal" or separate from time and a "historical framework."[43]

Krauss relays these concepts through the use of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's (1901-1981) terms *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*. For Lacan, language was central to an understanding of the human psyche, and the development of language coincided with the development of the self (also

---

[42] André Bazin "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 241. Originally published as Bazin, "Ontologie de l'Image Photographique," from "Problems de la Peinture," *Qu'est-ce que le Cinéma* 1, "Ontologie et Langue," (1945): 11-19; English translation first printed in Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gary (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967).

[43] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 69-70.

termed the individual) in three concepts: *Real*, *Imaginary*, and *Symbolic*.[44] The *Real* corresponds to primal needs and the search to satisfy those needs. This stage in development is tied to nature before it is named by language or a sense of being, but according to Lacan this state of being is impossible after the instant language enters a child's development.[45] At that moment, the *Imaginary* is entered as the child develops a sense of otherness through the realization that its body is separate from nature. During this time, the child attempts to make the other a part of his or herself through emulation and a state of fantasy.[46] For Lacan, the *Imaginary* continues to influence the psyche even in adult life, but the *Symbolic* also plays a part in the development of the self at this time. As children grasp language, they take a role in the world of the other by abiding to the conventions of that already established society.[47] In the realm of the *Imaginary*, individuals are absent from a specific history; they are attempting to regain entry into the *Real* through the creation of a fantasy self, an impossible endeavour. As Krauss explains, the language learned during the *Symbolic* provides a tie to history, "for, in joining himself to language, the child enters a world of convention which he has had no role in shaping" because it was "pre-existent of his own being."[48]

A photograph, according to Krauss, is best identified with the *Imaginary* because it replaces its referent within the mind of the viewer, rather than recalling its tie to language as would a symbol. Since the photograph's subject is removed from its filmstrip narrative that provided its meaning, it can no longer be understood through the conventions of symbolic language and it becomes absent from this history, and thus time. While always retaining the possibility of historical, linguistic, symbolic meaning, when the image is removed from its sense of time this meaning becomes isolated from time and is thus a-temporal. Photographic meaning is then based on a trace relationship to the

[44] Dino Felluga. "Modules on Lacan: On the Structure of the Psyche." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University, November 28, 2003. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacanstructure.html> (accessed 1 August 2006).
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 69-70.

object it refers to at a given moment of time. The index also has this photographic quality, allowing it to represent an object in a way that makes the object without a space and time; the index and its object are timeless.

The photograph's tie to its subject is like that of the sign to the referent in semiotics. The photograph's meaning is derived from the image and concept (signifier + signified) of the object that is formed in our mind. This type of meaning becomes inherent in the photograph; the photograph will always carry this meaning, this tie to the referent with it. As the photograph causes its subject to become timeless, it also takes this meaning away from its time or "historical framework" of reality, causing the photograph, its object and its meaning to be isolated. This isolation is like taking one image of a film strip away from the other images; it removes the subject of the photograph from its context, the sequence of time that established its meaning. Without a connection to time or space that would create an understanding of what is seen in the photograph, the photograph lacks meaning. In this way, the photograph contains meaning that is always carried with it—its tie to the referent—and the photograph contains meaninglessness; it is displaced from the time that explains it and its referent. If the photograph is to be understood outside of the moment of its creation, it must acquire some explanation that remedies this meaninglessness.

Krauss uses Walter Benjamin's understanding of captions in his 1935 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to explain how this meaninglessness can be remedied. Benjamin suggested that the caption acts as a "signpost" that provides "directives...to those looking at pictures."[49] For photography, the caption is a remedy, the text that accompanies a photograph and provides something to explain it within the context of its time and space.[50] The caption, in this case, supplements what was once the index's referent, by connecting the photograph back to its original moment. Krauss gives examples of two types of captions, one actually called a caption and the other

[49] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," in *Illuminations*, 228. See footnote 12.
[50] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 77.

a sequence, but fails to discuss photographs that do not have captions. In the first example, these are the types of captions viewers have experience with in newspapers, magazines and books: written text that appears under or near an image. This type of caption provides more information than the title of a work of art; for, the referent seen in the photograph is often named and/or dated, allowing the viewer to relate to the photograph through memories of the event, similar objects, historical time periods or teachings, and other experiences or connotations related to what is seen.

In the second instance, the sequence, the individual image is placed within a series of images, as in the film strip analogy. In a sequence, the individual image obtains its meaning from the groups of images that come before and/or after it. Much like in a book, page one determines how the reader will interpret page two, and pages one and two influence what is read on page three. Thus, a sequence allows each image to add to its meaning those images before it and after, implicating other referents that are connected to the referent of the original image. Sequencing is particularly useful when the referent is an event because it can establish a storyline, again, as does a film strip or movie. The benefit of sequencing is, like the caption, in replacing the need for an actual object for the photograph to refer to; but instead of linguistically anchoring what is seen, a sequence attempts to return an image to a specific time and place, or, in the case of a non-narrative sequence, to a group of referents. Like a word in a sentence, the other photographs direct the understanding of the referent. Either way, captioning and sequencing provide directives to viewers so that they can relate the photograph either to written text or to surrounding images.

To reiterate Krauss's discussion up to this point: she has defined *shifter* and *index* and has begun to discuss how meaning is derived from the relationship between index and referent, between the photograph and the object that gives it meaning. Since this relationship allows the index to stand in for the referent, meaning can be altered as the object, and thus the index, leaves its moment of time and/or space. A caption, either text or sequence, is used to replace this meaning. When a

photograph has no connection to time, space, or caption, the photograph becomes meaningless or empty. Any photograph taken out of its context then is said to be empty; just like the shifter; it requires something to point to, a referent that will give it meaning, but depending upon how it is captioned, this meaning can change. For Krauss, a photograph is a sign, a signifier that points at a specific moment to a particular object. Without a referent, the photograph has no meaning, like the shifter. Nevertheless, the photograph always carries some meaning by being an index, a trace of its referent. The paradox is the photograph's inherent meaning; its indexical nature is always present even if it is not revealed through a caption. Therefore, the photograph always has meaning and remains meaningless at the same time.

Krauss relates the photograph's twofold ability to retain meaning and to be simultaneously meaningless to Marcel Duchamp's readymades, which she views as "the physical transportation of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection."[51] Duchamp's readymades are simply objects that are taken out of their original space, and placed in an art gallery where they were often re-captioned with ironic titles. For example, Duchamp's most famous readymade is a urinal removed from the setting of a washroom and placed in an art gallery and titled *Fountain.* Thus, the urinal becomes an art-image displaced from its "continuum of reality" by its "physical transportation" into an art gallery. The urinal still has its original meaning since it is still *seen* as a urinal because it *is* a urinal; this fact has not changed. However, its has been separated from its proper space-time of the washroom, and its new caption *Fountain* is a word that changes the meaning of the object because of its established use in language. The urinal becomes meaningless when removed and placed into the gallery, because its proper

[51] Ibid., 78.

space-time is no longer present to explain what it is and because of its particular caption. The urinal then is both meaningful and meaningless; a concept Duchamp calls the "snapshot effect."[52]

Snapshot seems like a particularly pertinent term, because we often think of a snapshot as a moment of time that was quickly captured by a camera, thus the event it captures is removed from its temporal continuity; as a photographic image that has a referent but has been removed from its space-time, it is an index. When the photograph becomes loose or free from the original space and time of its subject, it still retains the ability to derive its meaning from the pictured referent, but it is empty of meaning because there is nothing to explain it; the photograph is isolated from its space-time. This isolation from its continuum of reality causes Krauss to see the photograph as having meaningless meaning, this ability to be meaningful and meaningless at the same time is pertinent to the index.

Krauss uses Roland Barthes's discussion of the uncoded message from his work "Rhetoric of the Image" to further this discussion.[53] If for Krauss, photography is "wholly dependent upon the world for the source of its imagery,"[54] for Barthes when it becomes detached from this world, it becomes an uncoded message. The terms *coded* and *uncoded* are part of the vocabulary of semiotics. Language is a form of *code* for Barthes; that is, language is an established form of meaning within a culture. When an object is said to be *uncoded*, it does not draw from this pool of collective knowledge. He refers to the relationship between "signified and signifier" between referent and photograph as one that is "quasi-tautological."[55] Similar to Barthes's idea of the *message without a code*, tautology implies that a statement is true but empty and/or redundant, or in Krauss's terms, it is meaningful and meaningless at the same time. This semi-identity is derived from how the

---

[52] Ibid.
[53] See Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 269-85. First published in French as "Rhétorique de l'image," *Communications* 4 (1964): 40-51.
[54] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 2," *October* 4 (Fall 1977): 58.
[55] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 272.

photograph is both coded and uncoded, an explanation that Barthes begins by defining photographic elements that record a scene, specifically "framing, reduction, and flattening."[56] However, each object in the image is tied to the code of *language*; a photograph of a green pepper, a yellow banana, and a red tomato shows three recognizable objects or signs from nearly any traditional pictorial language (from a Western point of view). These objects can be arranged to make a photograph, but their arrangement is dissimilar to that of language; their arrangement is not like choosing the order of words in a sentence. The photograph is uncoded because it does not transform the signs through the use of an established syntax. In this way, the photograph contains elements of the language, but fails to draw from a collective form of language and thus becomes uncoded. The photograph is a message formed from a series of signs, but these signs are without a code.

As the world imprints itself into the photograph, Krauss feels that it becomes a trace of reality, thus obtaining its evidentiary or documentary role and the undeniable truth that these roles assume.[57] Yet this truth cannot be explained by the construct of a cultural language according to Barthes, and photographs become detached from their space-time, while they remain attached to their referents. This connection to the referent is not established through a cultural knowledge, but instead by the world itself. The term *index* serves to name this phenomenon where meaning is retained but isolation from space-time alters this meaning. As viewers, this separation is not seen, instead the photograph is perceived as depicting the past, something that has already happened. We do not see that it is of another space-time simply because the photograph, as a physical object, is currently present in our own world. Barthes decrees this as "a new category of space-time" and Krauss sees the creation of this kind of experience as the goal "that abstract artists now seek to

[56] Ibid. Krauss uses the term cropping instead of framing; see Krauss, "Notes on the Index...Part 2," 59.
[57] Krauss, "Noted on the Index...Part 2," 59.

employ,"[58] but I will discuss Krauss's application to art further after this new space-time is better defined.

According to Krauss, the inherently photographic experience is that of a photograph pointing to a moment of time, providing the viewer with the feeling of "*having-been-there*;" the photograph becomes evidence of another time and place, thus it has meaning, but since the object is not present, the photograph is separated from that which it refers to by being temporally distant.[59] Krauss adapts Barthes concept of "*having-been-there*," explaining that it provides an experience, unlike any formed by pictorial imagery, such as a painting. Barthes explains "*having-been-there*" as the illusion that has been created when the photograph is viewed, the illusion of being physically present while being temporally distant.[60] In other words, the viewers gain the feeling that an event actually took place in this way while being partially blinded to the fact that it could not have possibly happened in this manner due to how photography freezes time in a way that our eyes can not physically perceive. The distance of time separates the viewer from the actual event, creating a sheltered reality, which Krauss sees as the power of being evidence that a photograph possess.[61] Photographs are seen as the truth even though the viewer knows that logically they may not be the truth; "Truth is understood as a matter of evidence, rather than a function of logic."[62] Krauss connects the creation of truth from the "*having-been-there*" experience with the uncoded message, or lack of logical pictorial language, stating that these paradoxes create the experience that she sees as inherently photographic and thus tied to the index.

Krauss calls photography indexical because it presents an unreal connection to a referent that is, in reality, temporally distant. This *having-been-there* experience can now be applied to Krauss's

---

[58] Ibid., 60, 66.
[59] Ibid., 65-66.
[60] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 278.
[61] Krauss, "Notes on the Index...Part 2," 65.
[62] Ibid., 65-66.

discussion of photography's relationship to the art of the 1970s. In her writing, photography has two roles in the current art movement, one where the photograph, as an index, is used as documentation for ephemeral art works and another where the photograph serves as an example of the indexical qualities that installation artists employ in their work. The photograph was used by artists to document their work because of the drastic rise in artwork that was ephemeral during the 1970s, such as performance, film, installation, and earth-works. The documentation of Donald Judd's *Spiral Jetty* is a good example of this. Photography provided a way to record these works, making them portable both physically and temporally.[63] Photography was a way to record what had happened and to share it in the art gallery and museum after the fact, allowing the work to become known and providing a way for it to become a commodity. The photograph serves as an index for the ephemeral work of art's indexicality.

However, Krauss focuses the crux of her discussion on photography as a model for abstract art, which she also describes as the "genre of installation piece."[64] For Krauss, what seems to define these works is the presence of the index; like a photograph, cast or trace the work is "a sign connected to a referent along a purely physical axis."[65] Unlike the abstract expressionism or minimalism that preceded this art, the works are understood "as shifters, empty signs...that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent, or object."[66] Still, for the installation work of the 1970s, Krauss notes if the transformation of abstract work is to take place, the addition of "a surfeit of written information to the depleted power of the painted sign" must be added.[67] In other words, the pictorial symbol is reduced to a point where it becomes uncoded and is in need of captioning in order to be linked to meaning; thus, explanation is needed since the symbol

[63] Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 78.
[64] Krauss, "Notes on the Index...Part 2," 60.
[65] Ibid., 63.
[66] Ibid., 64.
[67] Ibid., 58, 67.

is no longer understandable and cannot be seen by the viewer. Krauss sees this need for captioning, coupled with other photographic elements, such as "cropping, reduction and self-evident flattening," in the work of several installation artists who exhibited at P.S.1's first exhibition entitled "Rooms."

In 1976, the Institute for Art and Urban Resources leased a "derelict public school building" in Queens from the New York City government.[68] This building was named Project Studios 1 (P.S.1) and was used as studio and exhibition space for the institute. The building had once been a school and it retained many of the qualities of such a location (e.g. blackboards) that indicated this kind of institutional past. The first exhibition in this space, "Rooms" used the decaying qualities of the building as well as many of the indicators of its past to create installation works that Krauss feels operate as indexes.

Lucio Pozzi installed a series of painted boards throughout the building. Each of these panels was painted two colors, and each was installed in a spot where "for institutional reasons, the walls of the school had been designated as separate areas by an abrupt change in the color of the paint."[69] The color divide of each panel was aligned with the line already present on the wall, and the colors on each panel matched the colors also already present on the wall. In this way, Pozzi's piece draws attention to the presence of the building, a presence that is specifically that of the past, a temporal distance. For Krauss, Pozzi's work uses cropping, by outlining a specific spot on the wall, a spot that can no longer be seen because the panel is physically replacing it. She feels that the panel thus becomes an index for what lies underneath it, and Pozzi reduces "the abstract pictorial object to the status of a mould or impression or trace."[70]

---

[68] Rosalind Krauss, "1976: In New York, the founding of P.S.1 coincides with...," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, eds. Hal Foster et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 576-577.
[69] Krauss, "Notes on the Index...Part 2," 60.
[70] Ibid., 63

Krauss compares this work to Elsworth Kelly's two-color paintings. For Krauss, Kelly's painting "is about defining the pictorial conventions a process of arbitrary rupture of the field (a canvas surface) into the discontinuous units that are necessary constituents of signs."[71] In other words, Kelly's use of a divided canvas surface physically causes the piece to be discontinuous within a pictorial language and thus the meaning is derived from this pictorial language, an internal logic. For Krauss, this differs from Pozzi's panels because the latter relies on its location for meaning. She states, "The painting as a whole functions to point to the natural continuum, the way the word *this* accompanied by a pointing gesture isolates a piece of the real world and fills itself with a meaning by becoming, for that moment, the transitory label of a natural event."[72] In this way, Pozzi's work becomes a shifter, dependent on an external object for its meaning in the same way that the word *this* needs an object to which it can refer.

In short, installation art no longer works within a tradition of pictorial reference or logic, installation works require a juxtaposition with an "external referent, or object" that operates as a caption.[73] This captioning could come through the use of text captions and/or sequencing as it does in photography and as it does in the repetition of Pozzi's work throughout the P.S.1 building. Additionally, these installation works, like photography, employ a type of cropping, narrowing the larger subject—in this case a building—down to only a small portion, a moment of the whole.

For Krauss, this transition from pictorial to indexical is across the board, causing all art to be suddenly and self-evidently "dealing with a jettisoning of convention, or more precisely that conversion of the pictorial and sculptural codes into that of the photographic message without a code." This is accomplished by taking on the "formal character of the indexical sign" through three components: a movement away from aesthetic conventions (seen in inherently photographic

---

[71] Ibid., 64.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

elements such as cropping), a feeling of self presence (linked to the feeling that one is present in a time where one might not be), and the "addition of an articulated discourse, or text," (a condition of photography that links it to semiological discussions of captioning).[74] With the concept of the index, Krauss supplies an answer to how the art of her time period can be understood as one that has abandoned the use of internal logic to establish meaning by means of an inherently photographic operation. Krauss's article shows how installation art begins to shift the focus of the artistic community away from masterpieces and towards the creation of experience for the audience, specifically an experience that gives the viewer a new sense of time through the uncoded language of photography. As Krauss's discussion gives way to her understanding of artistic practice as a form of communication, her explanation of the index urges both artists and theoreticians to consider the role that communication plays in their society.

[74] Ibid., 66.

Chapter 4: "The Photograph as Paradox"

> It seems, however, that with photography, we have indeed the paradox of an event that hangs on the wall.
>
> -Thierry de Duve[75]

Drawing on Rosalind Krauss's description of the index, Thierry de Duve furthers her discussion in his article "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox" (1978). This essay was published in the fifth issue of *October* (a special issue devoted to photography), and De Duve uses Krauss's discussion of the index as one in a series of diametrically opposed components of the photograph. Like Krauss, de Duve also utilizes semiotics and Freudian psychology to analyse how photography alters established forms of communication. According to de Duve, any photograph is perceived in opposite ways: as a snapshot as well as a time exposure, as a "superficial series" and a "referential series," or even as life and death. These oppositions define how the viewer relates to the image and charge the photograph with contradictory meanings. For de Duve, the presence of contradictory elements triggers parallel psychological reactions. He concludes that these contradictory psychological responses "set up a paradox, which results in an unresolved oscillation of our psychological responses towards the photograph."[76]

De Duve begins his essay by suggesting that photographs are typically perceived as either an "event" or a "picture." The term "event," for de Duve, represents the frozen moment that has little resemblance to life, reality, or the event itself.[77] Here, the photograph becomes an "abrupt artifact," a trace that recalls Krauss's explanation of the indexical nature of photography. De Duve likens

---

[75] Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 113.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

"event" to the *snapshot* because this sort of instantaneous image, such as a press photo, is often seen as a frozen subject whose actions continue on in life.[78] As time unfolds, the snapshot captures the object of the photograph and freezes it, and the stasis of the frozen moment, according to de Duve, "indicates that life outside continues, time flows by, and the captured object has slipped away."[79]

Contrary to this, the "picture" serves as evidence of an object that no longer exists, but is brought into existence by the photograph. In this case the photograph "ceases to refer to the particular event from which it was drawn" and instead is tied to the referent as its "autonomous representation."[80] Best explained with an association to *time exposures*, de Duve places funerary portraits as the prime example of this type of image because they extend the life of a person who is no longer. In this case, de Duve suggests that the life is extended onward into time, prolonging the life of the referent, allowing the object to become timeless.[81] The aesthetic best associated with the time exposure is the blurred portrait from the nineteenth century, which is, according to de Duve,

> a metaphor for the fading of time...The painterly unfurling of depth finds its photographic equivalent in the lateral unfurling of the photograph's resolution, not only its blurred margins, but also its overall grain. It allows the viewer to travel through the image, choosing to stop here and there...to amplify the monumentality of a detail, or to part from it. The kind of time involved by this is travail is cyclic, consisting in the alteration of expansion and contraction...[82]

De Duve relates this experience to memory, noting that the "charm of a photo-album" is similar because it allows the viewer to relive every memory, an act that is consoling since the photograph is inherently representative of a loss of either the moment in time or the subject pictured.[83]

While it might seem impossible, de Duve believes that these two perceptions of photography exist in every image. As a sharp snapshot and a blurred time exposure, the event and the picture: each photograph is charged with life and death, action and rest, hesitation and continuity, each

---

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 116.
[82] Ibid., 121, 123.
[83] Ibid., 123.

photograph proposes a paradox that can be explained by de Duve's new "semiological terminology:" *series*. By proposing two *series* or lines that intersect, de Duve locates the "semiotic structure of the photograph" or, in other words, the photographic experience at the point where these lines meet. Thus, he adds "a slightly different vocabulary from the usual semiological terminology" of syntagm and paradigm and introduces the *superficial series* and the *referential series*.[84]

In semiotics, syntagm and paradigm are two axes that can be used to describe the formation of language. Syntagm represents how words relate to each other when they are linked together, for example how the three words in "the man cried" form meaning when placed in a sentence.[85] Syntagm describes words in combination. Paradigm describes how words relate to each other as they are chosen during the formation of a sentence, for example the sentence could have been "the man sang" or "the boy cried" or "the boy sang." Paradigm describes words in selection.[86]

Like paradigm, the *superficial series* is about substitution. For de Duve, a description of the *superficial series* points to the photograph as an object, separated from reality.[87] Superficial of course brings notions of the surface or exterior of an object, and in this case, like a dummy or cast, the photograph is more like a sign so it is able to serve as a substitute for the object, its referent. However, because the superficial series also steals the life from the subject and projects the subject, this series represents the world in an unreal way by producing an object in such a way that the human eye and the mind's perception cannot see.

Like the concept of syntagm, the *referential series* is linked to the world. As de Duve describes the *referential series*, it is a physical sign, still linked to the world of reality through the act of taking the photograph. As an optical referent, this series portrays reality by becoming an extended moment

---

[84] Ibid., 114.
[85] Daniel Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners," Chapter 4, Paradigms and Syntagms, *The University of Wales Aberystwyth*, 26 February 2002 <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html> (accessed 6 August 2006).
[86] Ibid.
[87] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 114.

that is related to memory, and in that way the moment seems lost.[88] To de Duve, each of these series has an effect on each kind of photographic image, that of the snapshot (event) and that of the time exposure (picture), so four possible combinations arise: the superficial snapshot, the referential snapshot, the superficial time exposure and the referential time exposure.

I will begin by discussing just the ramifications of the snapshot within these series. If the snapshot is considered within the *superficial series*, it becomes a singular event, taken out of its time. De Duve explains this with the "possible posture" of a horse mid-gallop and the "unperformed movement" of the horse running along a track. Photography steals the life of the horse, leaving only a singular caught moment of the action behind, and because reality is not "made of singular events," the image is separated from a temporal context and is unbelievable to the eye; it shows the unreal event.[89] However, when the snapshot is considered along the *referential series*, it becomes a continuous event. Because viewers are aware that in reality the horse was able to complete its run around the track, they mentally complete this action, but they also see this action in the past tense. Thus, the event from which the photograph has taken a piece is understood as reality, as if it were being watched at this moment and as if it has already taken place, a phenomenon that de Duve calls "lost reality."[90] Again, de Duve is discussing the moment when these two lines cross, so viewers experience both of these aspects of the image: the freezing of time that feels unreal at the same time as the continuous event recalled from the past as real.

De Duve also discusses this relationship in the terms of linguistics by relating the two types of snapshot series to syntagm (a constructed sequence of words) and paradigm (assumptions based on word selection).[91] As a part of this conversation, he states:

---

[88] Ibid., 114, 124.
[89] Ibid., 115, 117.
[90] Ibid. 116, 124.
[91] Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners."

> Either we grasp at the thing (or its sign, or its name); the gallop of the horse; but this thing does not occur in the referential series which in fact contains only the verb: the horse gallops. Or if we wish to grasp the verb, the flux, the movement, we are faced with an image from which this has escaped: the superficial series contains only the name, the shape, the stasis.[92]

Here, the discussion is placed into the vocabulary of semiotics, to nouns and verbs. For the superficial-snapshot, only the noun is present, but its separation from the action, its verb, comes to the surface of the image. In the referential series, only the verb is present, causing the missing object to become prominent. If the viewers' minds focus on one aspect, the other becomes apparent, thus one paradox is that the photograph holds both the aspect of the noun and the aspect of the verb at the same moment, causing viewers to fluctuate between these two disparate moments.

To place the object and action into a context, de Duve applies Roland Barthes's discussion of *here* and *formerly* from Barthes's text "Rhetoric of the Image."[93] De Duve employs the same passages that Krauss discussed in her "Notes on the Index" (discussed in Chapter 3), but he sets us two space-time pairings: *here-formerly* and *now-there*. I feel that it is important to note that Barthes may have proposed both these relationships, yet their interpretation is dependent on how his text is read and/or translated. In a translation of "Rhetoric of the Image," the following passage appears:

> What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then* ... its unreality is that of the *here-now*, for the photograph is never experienced as illusion, is in no way a *presence* ... ; its reality that of the *having-been-there*, for in every photograph there is the always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered.[94]

From this text, the interpretation of all four space-time elements (*here*, *formerly*, *now* and *there*) seems to be already paired as *here-now*, and *having-been-there* (*formerly-there*). Also apparent in Barthes discussion is the presence of paradox in the "illogical conjunction" between elements of the photograph. The reason I bring this up is not to point out that Barthes was the true inventor of this

---

[92] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 116.
[93] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 278. See footnote 53. This translation uses the term "having-been" rather than "formerly."
[94] Ibid.

concept, since de Duve makes no claims against that fact. Instead, it is in how the wording of this translation reveals the pairing of these elements as a key to de Duve's final argument.

In the quoted passage, Barthes proposes a new kind of space and time, one that de Duve sees linked to his notion of the superficial-snapshot and the referential-snapshot. In his translation of this text, the terms *here* and *formerly* relate respectively to the superficial and referential series of the snapshot. *Here* refers to the noun, the object actually being in a certain space. The space is the surface of the photograph where the object is caught, separated from time.[95] *Formerly* then refers to the time aspect of the space-time ratio, allowing the verb to take place; the horse ran. However, this event has no space in which to happen because it is limited to the space of the superficial series, the surface of the image. An irrational relationship is formed and *here-formerly* becomes another paradox.

De Duve then introduces what he sees as a new paradoxical space-time relationship that can be applied to the time exposure and its superficial and referential series. Appropriating Barthes's terms *now* and *there*, de Duve sees their relationship as opposite of the paradox of *here-formerly*. Along the line of the superficial series, the time exposure provides an undeniable presence that is associated with memory, a kind of recurrent time that provides an opportunity for life to be relived.[96] In this case, the superficial series is associated with the verb "to live," and the viewer is filled with the feeling of experiencing the moment, *now*. *Now* completes the temporal quality of the relationship. De Duve then associates *there* with the noun "death," because the viewer witnesses the absence of the object/person/referent and comes to understand that it is frozen in the moment of *there*, a space that can no longer be reached.[97] There completes the spatial aspect of this relationship. The *now-there* represents the absence of an object from the viewer's time, or, stated differently, the denial of a spatial relationship in the current moment. Like the *here-formerly* relationship, the *now-there* creates a

[95] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 118.
[96] Ibid., 117.
[97] Ibid., 117-18.

new kind of space-time that de Duve sees as yet another paradox of photography: that is the psychological paradox that these new space-time series as they are revealed to viewers as they confront a photograph. In his essay, de Duve actually sets up all of the previous intertwined paradoxes to demonstrate the creation of the larger psychological paradox that draws on the psychoanalytic concepts of Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

De Duve adapts Freud's concepts of trauma, anxiety, grief and mourning into his discussion as he identifies two psychological responses that occur within the viewer while regarding a photograph. The first response associated with the snapshot and is experienced through trauma; it is termed *mania.* The second response is associated with the time exposure and is experienced as a type of mourning; it is termed *depression.* De Duve's poetically explains trauma as an effect of the photographic rather that one caused by the subject matter. He describes the viewer's relationship with the well known Eddie Adams image of the death of a Vietcong Officer in Saigon, 1968.[98] In the image, a police officer points a gun at the man's head, his face contorted with the moment of his death. De Duve admits that while the subject seems traumatic, this is not why the experience of the photograph is traumatic. Rather, it depends on the relationship between *here* and *formerly*, the snapshot's space and time. He writes:

> I'll always be too late, in real life, to witness the death of this poor man, let alone to prevent it; but by the same token, I'll always be too early to witness the uncoiling of the tragedy, which at the surface of the photograph, will of course never occur. Rather than the tragic content of the photograph, even enhanced by the knowledge that it has really happened ('We possess then, as a kind of precious miracle,' says Barthes, 'a reality from which we are ourselves sheltered'), it is the sudden vanishing of the present tense, splitting into the contradiction of being simultaneously too late and too early, that is properly unbearable.[99]

This "unbearable" trauma creates the *mania* portion of the psychological response, arousing a sort of crazed manner in the viewer, obsessed with the horror that the man is forever caught in the moment

---

[98] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 124. The full title of the photograph reproduced in the article is "South Vietnamese National Police Chief Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executes a Vietcong Officer with a Single pistol Shot in the Head. Saigon, February 1, 1968.
[99] Ibid., 121.

of death that has in the viewers reality already occurred. This is a deep down psychological reaction, one that draws on emotions that are felt for the subject of the image.

As for the *now* and *there* relationship, De Duve identifies the time exposure reaction with Freud's idea of the mourning process, which de Duve characterizes as the "process in which the subject learns to accept that the beloved person is now missing forever, and that in order to survive, he must turn his affection towards someone or something else."[100] The photograph can become this "something else," called the substitutive object, because of its indexical quality. If the image is of the "beloved person," then it carries a trace of that person, one that the mourner can use to access memories of the deceased individual.[101] De Duve links this reaction to mourning, and sees mourning a type of psychological depression. The viewer is committed to the act of looking, stopping at particular details that help to recall a past moment, a kind of pause in time that de Duve relates to the *now* terminology.[102] This paused moment allows the mind to recall how something was by bringing it into the present moment. The mind feels as if the subject was present while understanding that it is actually recalling this same moment as *there.*

While these competing elements of the photograph can be explained through the use of *mania* in the case of the snapshot and *depression* in the case of the time exposure, one must remember that it is their continued dual appearance in every photograph that will cause the "paradoxical apprehension of time and space."[103] Again, Barthes's text can help to explain. As the *here-now* are paired, the full superficial series is opened in a new noun-verb relationship. As it takes on both the snapshot's ability to be the traumatic realization of a referent's death (or absence) and the time exposure's continuation of life, the superficial series becomes a new paradoxical relationship of stolen life and prolonged death. Similarly, for the referential series, the *formerly-there* (*having-been-there*)

[100] Ibid., 123.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

paradox is a verb-noun relationship that pinpoints a complete action in a frozen departed past. In either relationship, a portion of the series seems to be living while another seems to be dead. The paradox occurs as the viewer is forced to confront both sets of reasoning simultaneously.

De Duve equates the subsequent reaction of the viewer to a sort of "mania-depression" response. This name comes from the Hungarian psychiatrist Leopold Szondi's discussion of the contact-vector, which is one of four possible results in his photographically driven personality test.[104] Introduced in 1947, the Szondi Test is a projective test where subjects are asked to choose four images (two appealing and two unappealing) from a group of 48 photographs of mental patients. Based on which images were chosen, the psychologist could rate the subject in one of four ways, each of which revealed a hidden mental quality that the subject had in common with the mental patients that he or she selected. De Duve, however, appropriates the meaning of this outcome without regard for this original context. As one of the possible outcomes, manic-depressive categorizes the human response related to "fundamental attitudes of our being-in-the-world" according to de Duve.[105] A form of unconscious response, this result is often linked to an individual's connection to their surroundings, particularly those that are aesthetic, visual, and mood effecting.[106] In most cases, the ability to relate to the exterior world is troubling, as is the case with the viewer's ability to relate to the photograph; "the photograph puts the beholder in contact with the world, through a paradoxical object which, because of its indexical nature, belongs to the realm of uncoded things, and to the sphere of codified signs."[107]

De Duve's conclusion is that the paradox of the photograph does not allow the separation of mania and depression in the viewer. Every photograph insists on both of these reactions, yet

[104] Arthur C. Johnston, "Szondi Test: Its Interpretation and Graphilogical Indicators," *The Szondi Forum*, ed. Leo Berlips, 2006, <http://www.szondiforum.org/docs/t524.htm> (17 July 2006). The idea that people are drawn to others who have the same illnesses is a form of genotropism. The four vector outcomes for the test are homosexual/sadistic, epileptic/hysterical, catatonic/paranoid, and depressive/manic.
[105] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 124.
[106] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 124; and Johnston, "Szondi Test."
[107] De Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot," 124.

these reactions can not exist simultaneously in the human mind.[108] Humans perceive the photograph with simple instinctive responses that recall memories, allowing them to be lived in the present. As de Duve feels this is not possible given the constraints of space and time, the human mind is consumed with the photograph. The reason for this consumption is not aesthetics or technique, but the primal emotional defence responses caused by the psychological paradox of the photograph. As with Krauss's use of the photograph as a basis to analyse installation art, de Duve's argument adds to an understanding of photography, while using this broader understanding to move away from the photographic object and focus on the viewer's reaction. De Duve's discussion of paradox is placed into photographic discourse, but influences the larger subject of meaning in postmodernism, again critiquing modernist appreciation of art through an understanding of psychoanalysis and semiotics, the basis for the construct of the self within culture.

[108] Ibid., 125.

Why Chapter 5: The Photograph as Postmodernism

> How has the plenitude of copies been reduced to the scarcity of originals? And how do we know the authentic from its reproduction?
>
> -Douglas Crimp[109]

Thus far, Rosalind Krauss has introduced the photograph as a type of index, leading to Thierry de Duve's theory of the paradoxical nature of photography. My final analysis involves art historian and visual culture theorist Douglas Crimp, whose association with *October* began with a relationship with the editors of the journal, one that led Crimp to become part of the editorial staff as first the editorial associate (Issue 4, Fall 1977), then managing editor (Issue 6, Fall 1978), executive editor (Issue 26, Fall 1983), and finally editor (Issue 36, Spring 1986). Crimp devoted much time and effort to *October*, which had published several of his seminal essays including "On the Museum's Ruins," "The End of Painting," "The Art of Exhibition," and "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism."[110] However, after twelve years, the Summer 1990 issue contained Crimp's resignation from *October* over a matter of editorial differences.[111] By this time, Crimp had become an active member of gay rights and AIDS activists groups, namely ACT UP and Bad Object Choices. With the later group, he had helped to organize a successful conference, and had planned to publish the papers from the proceedings in *October*. When the other editors would not allow him to publish all of the papers, he withdrew from the journal.

---

[109] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity," 97. See footnote 13.
[110] See Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 41-58; Crimp, "The End of Painting," (see footnote 3); Douglas Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition," *October* 30 (Fall 1984): 49-82; and Crimp, "The Photographic Activity."
[111] Douglas Crimp and The Editors, "To Our Readers," *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 110-12.

I would like to focus Crimp's essay "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" published in the Winter 1980 issue, as it seems to build upon the complexity of photographic theory and postmodernism during this era. Less than two years earlier in an essay entitled *Pictures* about an exhibition by the same name that Crimp curated at New York's Artists Space in the fall of 1977, Crimp began to use the word postmodernism in his writing to describe "the predominant sensibility among the current generation of younger artists, or at least of that group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation."[112] He showed how the postmodernist "radical innovation" of the "current generation" did not confine their work to any particular medium, disbursing the categories of modernist mediums "into meaninglessness."[113] However, in "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," he goes beyond a simplistic definition of postmodernism as a movement that questions the ideals of modernism, and instead turns to analyse the way that the photographic reproducibility has changed our understanding of art originals. Crimp's discussion is closely associated with Walter Benjamin's discussion of the establishment of "*aura*."

As I have described above, Benjamin introduced the idea of *aura* and the phenomenon of the original into the discourse of photography when he published two articles: "A Short History of Photography" (1931) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935, published in 1936, first English translation in 1968).[114] For Benjamin, the concept of *aura* was defined by terms such as authentic and hand-made, providing the museum with a way to weed out the "fakes or copies or reproductions."[115] Benjamin believed that photographs are inherently copies because they are based on negatives that are not only reproducible, but also reproduce the object

---

[112] Crimp, "Pictures," 75.
[113] Ibid., 75-76.
[114] See Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) 199-216. First published as "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," 1931; and Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 1935/1936 (see footnote 12).
[115] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity," 91.

that they refer to, their referent. The power of the photograph is depleted through this ability to make copies, causing photography to remain outside of the discussions of modernist criticism.

Additionally, Benjamin saw that the *aura* of other forms of art is depleted during the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction," such as famous paintings and sculptures whose images have been reproduced ad nauseam. To represent Benjamin's idea, Crimp employs the example of the *Mona Lisa*, to which I will add a more modern contextualization. After the plethora of book covers, movies, posters, postcards, t-shirts, and text books that have been created in its likeness or through which this image makes an appearance, what is left that viewers could possibly expect to see when they stand in front of the actual painting?[116] The *aura* of the image and/or the painting, despite its one-of-a-kindness, is lost through the exhaustive copies that have been produced. It is this ability of mechanical reproduction that steals the originality from such a well known painting. Again, Benjamin sees this as a benefit, as do the postmodernists, because it allows for the dissemination of knowledge to all people, causing the *aura* of the original object to be lost.

A formalist critic defined an artistic work in the same way Benjamin established *aura*: a masterpiece based on rarity, on the individual nature of the artist's hand, and ultimately, a timelessness that freed art from the discussions of other establishments such as history. (For further discussion, see Chapter 1.) Crimp suggests that photography, as an art form, was repressed by modernism because it did not conform to these definitions and states that "modernism depends both upon [photography's] presence and upon its absence" because the nature of the photographic helped "to shape the discourse of modernism."[117] For Crimp, photography is a cultural phenomenon of mass production and reproduction that allowed the constraints of *aura* to define the modernist standard for a work of art; thus, photography then becomes pivotal in Crimp's definition of postmodernism as a "return of the repressed" and "a specific breach with modernism." For

[116] Ibid., 94.
[117] Ibid., 91.

Crimp, postmodernism is ultimately about "art's dispersal, its plurality" which is established through the copy, a concept inherent to photography.[118]

With this understanding, Crimp's explanation of an expanded meaning for the copy begins with a description of performance art and *presence.* Using performance artists as examples, Crimp notes that the overall effect created through their work is a kind of art that privileged the spectator by producing "performed tableaux that were there in the spectator's space but which appeared ethereal, absent."[119] Thus, he defines the word *presence* as, first, the notion that the artist is present, and second, as the notion of the ghost, spirit or spectre whose presence is actually absence. Finally, there is Crimp's third *presence,* which is a combination of these two, a feeling that is more than being there; it is "a ghostly aspect of presence that is its excess, its supplement."[120] It is the kind of presence that is spoken of in the sentence "the actor had presence." The actor is there physically, but he is more than there, there is something unearthly that can not be described, a feeling. Crimp relates this kind of unearthly presence to what occurs in a photograph. He describes this phenomenon as:

> representation through photographic modes, particularly all those aspects of photography that have to do with reproduction, with copies, and copies of copies. The extraordinary presence of their work is effected through absence, through its unbridgeable distance from the original, from even the possibility of an original. Such presence is what I attribute to the kind of photographic activity I call postmodernism.[121]

For Crimp, it is the "extraordinary presence" of the photograph as a copy distanced from its original that he sees as the "photographic activity" of postmodernism.

This kind of *presence* is the opposite of aura, so much so that it represents the lack of an original. The photographic copy becomes so far removed temporally from what it references that it lacks the presence of the original, yet as an index it retains the possibility of reference to the original.

---

[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., 92.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid., 94.

This is the same meaningful meaninglessness discussed with Krauss's index and the paradox of photography presented by de Duve. For Crimp, photography in postmodernism represents the haunting presence of a referent that can never be obtained as an original, and photography gains not the presence of an original but the presence of a lost original.

While for modernist critics it was not possible for photography to have an *aura,* for the postmodernist, as Crimp writes. "inevitable are all of those projects to recuperate [the aura], to pretend that the original and the unique are still possible and desirable. And this is nowhere more apparent than in the field of photography itself, the very culprit of mechanical reproduction."[122] In other words, photography had been the first medium to make mechanical reproduction possible, causing the loss of aura to permeate all of art history. Under postmodernist influence, photographers would struggle to give photography an *aura,* in an attempt to show that the original and unique are still existent in our culture. Crimp cites postmodernism as the moment that all photographs gain an *aura,* and thus a place in the institutions of art, while asking: "how is it that photography has suddenly had conferred upon it an aura?"[123]

The photographic aura is acquired within the art institution in the same way that art institutions previously established aura: through connoisseurship, history, and rarity.[124] The "old-fashioned art historian" enters the scene, establishing a history of photography that pinpoints specific artists as masters in their field. This creates a lineage that the newer artists can draw upon, establishing a history that the connoisseur can look for in the style of each photograph. In this case, style no longer is related to the artist's hand, it instead becomes the photographer's eye, his oeuvre.[125] Rarity is bestowed by declaring that a vintage print, one that is made at the same time period as the negative by the photographer, is the most valuable and that all subsequent prints, while

[122] Ibid..
[123] Ibid., 97.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.

stylistically valuable, are not as rare. Specific photographic mediums, processes such as the daguerreotype or salt print become historically important purely due to age (these are the photographs produced closest to the 1839 invention of photography that Crimp discussed as pre-commercialization). Finally, newer artists begin to edition their prints, and as with printmaking, rarity is established because only a limited number of pieces is printed within that edition. (This is the idea that a photographer would only print a small, set number of prints from any given negative, thus undermining the ability to make infinite copies.) Through these methods, photographs are able to have aura they could not previously have during modernism, allowing them to be sold as art commodity during postmodernism.

For postmodernism, no matter the medium, art is based on connoisseurship, on established history as it was in modernism; however, postmodernist critics question who has the power to create this history, for someone had to be the expert that declared that *this* photographer had an eye; thus, the discussion of the subjectivity of criticism was opened. As Crimp's analysis turns towards the subjectivity of critics, he too questions the decision of how a photographer becomes deserving of artistic merit. One critic might say he is, while another says he is not; this is opinion. Crimp sees that during postmodernism, the problem is that *every* photograph is "subsumed under the banner of subjectivity."[126] This is the same as saying that a photograph by Ansel Adam, William Wegman and the family snapshot all become considered for their artistic merit during postmodernism. The terms of artistic style and mode are thus extended to the carte-de-visite, the advertising image, and the newspaper photo since each of these is created by a photographer, and each can be considered under the rubric of style. Given that, in postmodernism, all of these photographs suddenly have *presence* equivalent to *aura*, then "at the origin of every one there is an Artist and therefore each can find its place on the spectrum of subjectivity," thus each also has its place in the museum as an art

[126] Ibid.

institution.[127] Crimp takes the discussion to this extreme, to the point where every photograph is art, in order to show how postmodernist photography actually subverts or displaces the idea of aura and the original.

For Crimp, the only type of original that can posses an aura is the physical world, nature and the unending expanse of time.[128] Copies of this original can be seen in any piece of art, painting, sculpture, or photography, each attempting to represent something from the world, whether image or idea, real or fiction. I choose the word *attempting* because the world can never be truly represented. Just as Roland Barthes wrote that the photograph can only portray a glimpse of reality and a glance of unreality,[129] so too can any created image or object, cultural or artifactual, stand only as partial reality and unreality. This idea is established by Barthes's *here-now* and *having-been-there* and this is the feeling Crimp so rightly names "déjà vu, nature as already having been seen, nature as representation."[130] Citing photographers such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, Crimp notes that they work with the established modes of modernist connoisseurship and the notion of the original in an attempt "to subvert and exceed them," in a way that will prove that aura is nothing more than a copy of an original (such as nature) as well.[131] That is to say that these photographers make pictures to undermine the understanding that aura is only possessed by "originals," and to prove that every art object is a copy of nature.

To provide a tangible example for this, Crimp uses the photograph Sherrie Levine reproduced of Edward Weston's portrayal of his son Neil. For photographer Levine, her "stolen" photograph of Neil's torso seems like a classical nude. It does not point to Weston's image, but to the moment that the light sculpted Neil's torso in this particular way. In this way, Levine uses her

---

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid., 99.
[129] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 278. See footnote 53.
[130] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity," 99.
[131] Ibid., 98.

image to suggest that Weston did not invent this image either; he too simply took it from life, stealing what nature had created.[132] To get to the original, would not only be impossible but would be an utter letdown, for what the art image suspends here is the unexplainable beauty of nature. The fact that Weston stopped to take the photograph of Neil is no different from Levine taking a photograph of a poster of Weston's image, which is to say that this is no different than the tourist who stops to photograph the Grand Canyon; they all are simply observing what nature has created and recording it to allow for a future déjà vu moment.

For Crimp, Cindy Sherman's cinema-inspired self portraits provide another version of déjà vu. In Crimp's view, Sherman bases her images in fantasy, a world created within the constraints of her own mind. This world mimics the one in which she lives; for Crimp, Sherman's activity reveals the fiction of the self, the roles that individuals play in their everyday lives.[133] Sherman's characters are the everyday woman in the anywhere city, the mundane life of the female, played out as if she were in a play. The original of the photograph, the referent drawn from nature that possesses aura is the self, a being that is constantly shifting and thus can never be found; Sherman is showing an example of "creating one's fictions through the appearance of a seamless reality."[134] For Crimp, this mimics the path that every viewer takes within their own life as they shape their own selves, thus creating the déjà vu that he sees as the effect of a copy or reproduction.

By the time the postmodernist movement begins, photographs had already permeated every aspect of human life. An advertising image portrayed a fake life, the photojournalist's picture imaged an inaccessible reality, and the art photograph revealed the kind of hyper-reality inherent to all images. Crimp's discussion extends this notion of hyper-reality to all forms of copy. As photographic activity created the copy of life, so too did any art or mass mediated rendition of life.

---

[132] Ibid., 99.
[133] Ibid., 99-100.
[134] Ibid., 99.

Once again, photographic theory was able to explain a larger phenomenon of art and culture: any image is a copy, any copy points to life, and life too becomes simply a reproduction of nature. In the never ending chain of copies, the original is never accessible and always remains something that the viewer desires. Crimp thus explains that, in postmodernism, the true original can never be accessed, and thus the aura becomes nothing more than a vaporous *presence.*[135]

[135] Ibid., 100.

Conclusion

October was only one element during a period that witnessed the shift from modernism to postmodernism, however, its editors and writers were on the battle lines of this transition. They established that a review of artistic practice should utilize a broad spectrum of influences, so that the inclusion of critical theory, semiotics, Freudian and Lacanian psychology became integral to the academic discussion of art. They extended this discussion to politics, bringing art into the political realm. No longer could a work of art be considered as it was during modernism, that is to say, outside of time and free from the constraints of ideology. For *October*, art became just one element of a larger discussion of culture as a force that shapes how individuals understand themselves through factors such as language, history, and established conventions. As photography gained a new language associated with the critique of modernism, images, objects and ideas become part of the discourse of artistic practice and that of mass mediated culture under the principles of postmodernism.

The development of a photographic theory was seminal in *October*. It was used to categorize and justify the photographic phenomena that the authors were witnessing in artistic practice. The editors and writers of *October* wanted to explain why photography had previously been unable to become part of the institutions of art. In the process, various authors forged links between what they defined as inherently photographic and how postmodern artistic practice was evolving. For Rosalind Krauss, contemporary artists had adopted the indexical nature of the photograph. Thierry de Duve defined the photograph as paradox in both its nature and in the viewer's psychological response to it. Finally, Douglas Crimp used photographic theory to explain the complete loss of aura during postmodernism as every image becomes a copy of life and even life itself becomes merely a copy of nature.

In the short five year span that I have reviewed, *October* took a running start into the existing field of theoretical discourse and artistic practice, establishing a photographic theory that shaped an understanding of the photograph as artistic image and cultural object. This photographic theory was developed with the language of critical theory, a broader context that analysed how society is formed through language, laws, history, and the creation of the individual. By addressing the photographic, the writers of *October* created a pivotal aspect of the postmodernist critique of modernism; photographic theory became a tool to describe the vast changes occurring in artistic practices at this time. *October*'s discussion of photography served as a means to better understand how contemporary artistic practices fit into the philosophy of culture, and how the photographic medium fit into both the world of art and the culture of mass media.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

------. *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie.* Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, c1980.

------. "Rhetoric of the Image." In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg, 269-85. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980.

------."Rhétorique de l'image." *Communications* 4 (1964): 40-51.

Bazin, André. "Ontologie de l'Image Photographique." From "Problems de la Peinture." *Qu'est-ce que le Cinéma* 1, "Ontologie et Langue." (1945): 11-19.

------. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." In *What is Cinema?*, translated by Hugh Gary, 9-16 (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967).

------. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg, 199-216. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980.

Benjamin, Walter. "L'œvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée." Translated by Pierre Klossowski. 1936. Text of the first printed edition reprinted in *Écrits français*, edited by J.-M. Monnoyer, 140-71. Paris: Gillimard, 1991.

------. "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," 1931. English translation printed as "A Short History of Photography." In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg, translated by P. Patton, 199-216. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980.

------. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, 219-53. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

Chandler, Daniel. "Semiotics for Beginners." Chapter 4, Paradigms and Syntagms, *The University of Wales Aberystwyth*, 26 February 2002. <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html> (accessed 6 August 2006).

Crimp, Douglas. "The End of Painting." *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69-86.

------. *On the Museum's Ruins.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993.

------. "Pictures." *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88.

------. "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91-101.

Crimp, Douglas and The Editors. "To Our Readers." *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 110-12.

De Duve, Thierry. "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photography as Paradox." *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 113-125.

Editors, The [Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson]. "About OCTOBER." *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 3-5.

Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Lacan: On the Structure of the Psyche." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University. November 28, 2003. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacanstructure.html> (accessed 1 August 2006).

Fontcuberta, Joan. "Revisiting the Histories of Photography." In *Photography. Crisis of History*, translated by Graham Thomson, 6-17. Barcelona: Actar, 2004.

Foster, Hal, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism.* New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

Greenberg, Clement. "Avant Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49.

------. "Avant Garde and Kitsch." In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticisms.* Vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939- 1944*, edited by John O'Brian, 5-22. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1986.

Harrison, Charles. "Modernism." Chap. 13 in *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 188-201. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Johnston, Arthur C. "Szondi Test: Its Interpretation and Graphilogical Indicators." *The Szondi Forum*, edited by Leo Berlips, 2006. <http://www.szondiforum.org/docs/t524.htm> (accessed 17 July 2006).

Krauss, Rosalind. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America." *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81.

------. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2." *October* 4 (Fall 1977): 58-67.

Krauss, Rosalind, Annette Michelson, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier, and Silvia Kolbowski, eds. *OCTOBER: The Second Decade, 1986-1996.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997.

Michelson, Annette. "The Prospect Before Us." *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 119-126.

Michelson, Annette, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp and Joan Copjec, eds. *OCTOBER: The First Decade, 1976-1986.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987.

Quigley, Timothy R. "Structuralism and Poststructuralism: Background Summary and Analysis." *The New School: Visual and Cultural Studies*, 1998/2005. <http://cepa.newschool.edu/~quigleyt/vcs/structuralism.html> (24 July 2005).