

# Co-creating in the Networks: A Reply to “What is 21st Century Photography?”

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*In this new essay, writer and researcher Andrew Dewdney responds to Daniel Rubinstein’s essay What is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Photography? published by The Photographers’ Gallery in July 2015.*

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Daniel Rubinstein has initiated a timely debate on the future of 21<sup>st</sup> century photography, which needs to be continued and I hope this critical rejoinder is read with this in mind. The essay conjures a complex and convincing vision of how photography now serves a new ‘unknown and invisible puppet master’ and I am with Daniel one hundred percent in the idea that we need to think very, very differently about what we now take to be the photographic image. But (there always is one), in time honoured critical fashion, agreeing with the point of an essay doesn’t mean agreeing fully with its argument.

In summary the essay says that the knowledge paradigm of the European Enlightenment and its representational logic in photography is unravelling. This, it is argued, is a consequence of the new conditions of global neo-liberal production allied to the new technological apparatuses of computing. Analogue photography is seen as a product of Industrial Capitalism and its mechanical technology,

expressed as representation. Algorithmic photography is an outcome of the post-industrial, global mode of production, expressed by computational networks. The essay's conclusion to this state of affairs is twofold. Firstly that 21<sup>st</sup> century photography is freed from the burden of representation, which can no longer contain the conditions of the real. Secondly, that 21<sup>st</sup> century photography names a new immersive economy of the human subject in which the real world is to be understood as nothing more than 'randomised information in a chaotic conflation of bodies and machines'.

This is a decidedly pessimistic, yet intoxicating position to land us all in and is the inevitable outcome of treating photography in equal measure as technology and as philosophy. Such a theoretical approach creates a strong impression but makes light of historical specificity and the complexity of human agency.

### **Photographic histories**

Photography never has been a single technical entity nor a unified philosophic vision. What we have taken as photography thus far is a hybrid of related technical apparatuses, social values, cultural codes, media forms and contexts of reception. Yes, 20<sup>th</sup> century photography as it came to be organised played a central part in industrial capitalism's dominant and ideological modes of reproduction. But, equally, 20<sup>th</sup> century photography was an ascending art medium taken up by the modernist artist and given exchange value in the art market. It is crucial to take account of the interrelationships and contradictions of art and reproduction if photography in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to be better understood. Art is no more an autonomous realm of freedom than photography is a slave to representation.

Historically photography functioned to technically register the visible in the photographic index (one of the much derided horsemen of the apocalypse in Rubinstein's essay) and control the ways in which the visible could be recognised through the cultural codes of visibility (the other three damned semiotic horsemen). Photography in the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century was tied to representation as part of the preeminent field of vision, but it was also entailed in countervailing visual strategies, expressed by a modernist avant-garde as well as sporadically in political agitprop. On the one hand photography was made to function as part of industrial capitalism's necessary mode of reproduction of the relations of production and on the other, it was regarded by a liberal artistic elite as a formal aesthetic medium.

In effect photography was divided into scientific, political and aesthetic knowledge domains and further separated across the practices of private, public and professional life. This set of divisions of knowledge, labour and the human self, formed the structure of modernist culture, in which the newly emancipated individual was at the centre. It is this order of modernism which is now unravelling in the face of global computational networks and which demands new understandings.

### **The politics of photography**

The problem with this modern settlement, in which the individual became the centre of cultural meaning, was that it involved a deceit of epic historical proportions being played out upon the labouring classes and social reality. The emancipation of the individual and the creation of modern class society, that the engine of capitalism demanded, came at the cost of the collective human condition. The exploitation of

the industrial working classes by the system of private ownership of the means of production, the profit principle and wage labour, institutionalised inequality. Yet in a rising democracy that structural inequality had to be made to appear natural and inevitable. Less than fifty years after Niépce, Talbot and Daguerre fixed the photographic image, photography was shackled to the worldview of capital rather than to the cause of the emancipation of labour. As Benjamin pointed out the revolutionary aspect of photography and later film was to bring the masses closer to reality, whereas for capital it was crucial to keep the organised working class ignorant of its own reality and photography was enlisted to play its part. In photography this political slight of hand was performed paradoxically by aligning photography with representation and objective truth, whilst at the same time giving to photography the status of an aesthetic medium of subjective expression. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century photography the working classes were surveyed, documented and classified by an objectifying camera. Conversely an aesthetic lens explored individual subjectivity in the space and time made possible by the exploitation of labour. Only with rising wages and relative affluence of the mid twentieth century did workers *en-masse* get to photograph themselves through the industrialised and semi-automated snapshot.

Yes, photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was structured by the new institutions of social reform and made to serve as the official mode of democratic and scientific representation. But, to make the point again, the necessary corollary to this was that the technical apparatus necessary to photography's objectifying role as representation, was simultaneously the medium of interior and individualist subjectivity in formalist photography.

What we now call fine art photography was inaugurated, practised and consumed by an educated class fraction and their photographic output has been accepted selectively as the historical canon of photography. The photographic canon was fashioned in the image of modernity and its formalist rhetoric. In essence the European/North American photographic canon was shaped by and expresses a historical aesthetic and consciousness defined by modernism.

The standard history of photography does not examine this contradiction, in which photography is flipped back and forth appearing here as an apparatus of transparent and mechanical reproduction and there as an aesthetic mode for the exploration of interiority. Really we should see photography, then as now as the paradoxical sum of its technological apparatuses and cultural organisation, rather than simply the ascendancy of representation.

### **Aesthetic Modernism and the Avant-Garde**

Aesthetic modernism was founded upon a rejection of the language of neo-classicism, rooted in the academies and based upon universal notions of beauty. Aesthetic modernism rewrote the rules of representation in order to explore an authenticity aligned to subjective intuition and unique vision. Aesthetic modernism promoted the artist rather than artisan, art rather than craft as the means to explore modern individual consciousness, whether in painting, sculpture, literature or photography. The exploration of the psychology of social life was left to the dynamic of the time based-mediums of film and video and their public forms in cinema and television.

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Rubinstein's essay, *What is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Photography*, which so clearly identifies the current moment of radical rupture, formulates its response to this situation in terms of an earlier moment of modernist infatuation with machines and technologies. The idea that 21<sup>st</sup> century photography names 'an immersive economy that offers an entirely new way to inhabit materiality and its relationship to bodies, machines and brains' is strongly echoed in the Futurist manifesto of 1909. Here Marinetti asserted, 'We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed'.

The comparison between the essay and the Futurist manifesto goes further when considering what the immersive economy of the algorithm will reveal. In the essay we are told 'we come to understand that the "real world" is nothing more than so much information plucked out of chaos: the randomized and chaotic conflation of bits of matters, strands of DNA subatomic particles and computer code.' In the Futurist manifesto there was a similar recognition of giving oneself up to the absurd: 'Let's break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let's give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd!'

How does this avant-garde embrace of chaos in a photography, defined as a new form of consciousness, stand

up alongside the more analytical and political idea that this same photography is ‘the exploration of the labor practices that shape this world through mass-production, computation, self-replication and pattern recognition’. What kind of exploration is this and what form might it take? Currently there is a deep chasm between the computational code of software and the cultural codes of visibility in which very little is known. Clearly the aim of practical criticism is to develop new understandings of precisely how computation is constitutive of meaning and moreover how the power of the new ‘puppet master’ of the algorithmic image is wielded. Essentially the task of unmasking power focuses upon the new means of reproduction involving the modes of production, the movement of capital, organised labour, military and political institutions. There is an organised, hierarchical social world out there in which art and photography are politically and ideologically entailed and yes, whilst the world is chaotic it is also structured and inequality stalks the world like never before. The investigation of Google, Facebook, Youtube and Instagram, for starters, would seem to be a good point of departure for a progressive investigative practice of photography.

## **Network cultures**

Modernism as the aesthetic and historical logic of progressive time is now confronted by the Internet as the default of knowledge and communication. Modernism as a rationale of contemporary art has reached its critical limit because it has no means of engaging with the decentred nature of networks and data. Hollowed out by commodification, modernism is recycled as heritage in the global art market, property development, designer interiors, new art museums and affordable art fairs. Knowledge and agency, however, now

travel along hybrid network lines, challenging the received authority of the cultural institutions of contemporary art and photography.

The “networked image” gives us a new historic opportunity to grasp photography as part of capital and labour’s system of reproduction, which is to say part of a system of power. The politics of the historic analogue photographic mode of production were contradictory and opaque enough and those of the algorithmic image are doubly so. Not only is the field of representation still operative and in crisis, but in addition networked computers now have agency to read, sort and circulate images. In the simulation of the photographic image in computational systems the representational image still disciplines and excludes meaning, but in more complex ways than its mechanical predecessor. We are indeed stuck in a general intellectual crisis of representational systems, which the essay *What is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Photography* tries to move us beyond. However, this global condition of the algorithmic image continues to function within the field of representation, precisely because it remains as yet the humanly understandable surface of communication operating within common sense.

It is not the stark choice between the past and the future we are presented with but a new complex moment of recycling the past and inventing possible futures. In a time where the future horizon has shrunk to that of the present and the past is endlessly memorialised, it is not a choice between a photographic past of representation and a future of immersive subjectivities. In the paradoxical present representations, data and code all multiply equally and exponentially.

The new conditions of accelerated capitalism and its computational logic does demand that we un-think photography as it has been known. This requires new research strategies, which go beyond enquiries by single academic knowledge disciplines or the individual practices of photography and art. A transdisciplinary approach to understanding the interface between mathematical and cultural coding is needed in order to engage productively with the flat topology of the computer screen. A complete rethink of the boundaries between art, media, society and technology is needed. Art as photography and photography as art is a busted flush trumped by the Internet and its networks. The job now is for the cultural institutions of modernism, galleries, museums and universities to seriously plug into the network and its users. Artists, photographers, curators, students and academics have a great opportunity before then to collaborate and co-create with network users and groups, in order not only to make the networks of power visible but to create new publics based upon equality of knowledge, access and experience.

– **Andrew Dewdney**

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