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Research Analysis

## **Abstract Photography**

### *Paper 1*

It seems to be an oxymoron to use the term *abstract photography* to some. The discovery of photography was just emerging as a new medium in the midst of modernism and postmodernism. Some seem to forget that photography was an essential catalyst in many movements: abstraction of surrealism, minimalism, purism, cubism, formalism, and more. Some tried, but only few succeeded. Even to this day, it's difficult for some people to overcome the stigma that photography is only for representing "reality." Once people can wrap their minds around photography as so much more, then the world can experience a renaissance of photography and begin to see its true potential and capabilities. Grundberg throws it out there that the idea of abstraction is what really matters, rather than actual abstraction through photography itself. As well-intentioned as this closed-minded idea maybe, I have to disagree and argue that photography is very self-sufficient in producing abstract art. Photography is more than qualified to produce more than an idea of abstraction; it is well suited to create actual abstract art! This paradox of abstraction versus representation is beyond the comprehension of many. However, in the realm of the art world where photography is art, it has unlimited possibilities.

Let us understand what abstract is: aesthetic, values, forms (line and shape), colors, patterns, non-representational; form is more important than content in most cases; reduces visual information to its basic essence. "The philosophical justification of abstract art may be found in Plato: 'I do not now intend by beauty of shapes what most people would expect, such as that of living creatures or pictures,

but...straight lines and curves and the surfaces or solid forms produced out of these by lathes and rulers and squares...These things are not beautiful relatively, like other things, but always and naturally and absolutely” (Murray 1). This was a somewhat easy concept for painters and sculptors to comprehend, but most photographers to this day still grapple with it. Modern art, when art peaked perhaps at its highest was out of defiance to constrictions, conformity, and to nourish art’s natural evolution by seeking problems with various answers through a succession of concurrent movements.

Photography can be used as a tool of art, where it serves more advantages than disadvantages. It is still fairly new in comparison to other media, and many of the great modern painters and sculptors shared the same ideas and dabbled with photography as a valid art form. Photography has not reached its climax or what I believe to be its ultimate end, should one exist? If it were to come to fruition, would it just become Cycladic as painting? Kadinsky used abstraction to seek the pure inwardness of an idea through art. Ozenfant and Jeanneret used abstraction in a purist manner in an attempt to balance joy and pleasure in art. Sol LeWitt used abstraction as a vehicle to carryout his conceptual pieces in the 1960s. The surrealists would use the camera in a ‘new vision’ to gain different perspectives, frame, cropping, close-ups, anything to make something mundane exciting and make the familiar unfamiliar. No need to even go in to detail about Picasso or Mondrian.

Many contemporary photographers continue to subscribe to the notion that photography is only meant to portray “reality” or to describe. However, not all is lost. A new small generation of photographers is beginning to push abstract photography more to the forefront. More is happening now at chipping away at this barrier than ever before. Photography is more than able to evoke emotions and thoughts through its expression, just as painting, drawing, sculpture or any other valid abstract art form. Grundberg believes that abstract photography, today, is nothing more than a style of cultural representation. This is a gross generalization. Depending on the concept, context, subject, and subject matter, abstraction could very well be a means of spirituality, expression, theoretical statement, or any other number of causes.

Edward Weston, one of photography's modern fathers, subscribed to Henri Bergson's idea of the search for the "life force" or the "essence of existence." Weston stated, "the camera should be used for a recording of *life*, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the *thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh" ... "seeing of parts – fragments – as universal symbols" (Hirsch 196). Steel and flesh may be two examples of subject matter, another may be bathroom tissue. Other progressive abstract photography artists have similar ideas. "Siskind went on to become one of the leading photographers of our time, finding revelations in all kinds of subjects that others never bother to look at – globs of tar on the road, oil stains on paper, stones in a fence, paint peeling on a wall. There is something breathtaking about the forms that a perceptive artist can find in hidden views of the world around us – hidden because nobody bothers to look at them" (Finn 87).

Weston wasn't the only genius to think outside of the photo box. Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were creating camera-less images in their darkrooms with abstract shapes and light-sensitive paper. Furthermore, "Coburn produced completely abstract photographs by devising an optical device based on the kaleidoscope" (Newhall 199). Speaking further on one of Coburn's pieces: "*The Thousand Windows*, was almost as fantastic in its perspective as a Cubist fantasy; buy why should not the camera artist break away from the worn-out conventions, that even in its comparatively short existence have begun to cramp and restrict his medium, and claim the freedom of expression which any art must have to be alive" (Newhall 199)?

Some authors, critics, and art historians can see it. "The camera can function independently, can see in ways that man is not accustomed to – can suggest new points of view and demonstrate how to look at things differently" (Wells 90). There are so many different ways of looking at, capturing, and portraying aspects of life or ideas. "Vertov is right. The task of cinema and of the camera is not to imitate the human eye, but to see and record what the human eye normally does not see. The cinema and the photo-eye can show us things from unexpected viewpoints and in unusual configurations, and we should exploit this possibility" (Wells 90). What

would be more interesting to the masses, to see a picture of something in everyday life from a familiar perspective or present a new visual experience and stimulus?

Photographs are not doomed to be merely descriptive or documentary. They can just as easily be evaluated based on their aesthetic value, just as any other medium. “The photographs in this category point out what their photographers consider to be worthy of aesthetic observation and contemplation. They are usually about the wonder of visual form in all its variety and how it can be rendered photographically. Photographs in this category are usually of beautiful things photographed in beautiful ways” (Barrett 91). I believe that this can also include photographing objects or subjects that are not conventionally beautiful but photographing them in beautiful ways.

“We should remember, though, that there has never been a single object, practice or form that is *photography* at any one time. Discussion of the nature of the medium has, in consequence, often been either reductionist – looking for the *essence* of the medium which transcends its social or aesthetic forms – or highly descriptive and not theorized. Photography was a major carrier and shaper of modernism. Not only did it dislocate time and space but it also undermined the structure of conventional narrative.” (Wells 26)

Photography is breaking its bondage and venturing out into the photographic possibilities of its artistic nature. No matter how much representational resistance it meets the perseverance of its abstract qualities are inevitable. Abstract photography is somewhat rare (in successful forms) but is very real and a force to be reckoned with. The art world will not be able to ignore this magnificent further development much longer. Abstract photographic art may not dominate the art world or market, but it will continue to grow with substantial recognition.

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### Further Notes and Readings

“One of the techniques adopted by the Surrealists to shock people into a ‘new’ vision was to photograph or paint the everyday in extreme closeup, using the camera to bring a new context to the subject. This fresh look at the familiar and everyday was also being explored by the wave of ‘New Realist’ or ‘straight’ photographers who were establishing a foothold on both sides of the Atlantic. In Germany, this movement was known as ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ (‘New Objectivity’). This new vision believed that the subject itself was of primary importance, and that the photographer’s role was that of selection and ‘accurate’ representation of the subject. The everyday household implements, machine parts, architectural details, people, and whatever else, had intrinsic ‘beauty’ and worth. The photographer invested them with significance and used a minimalistic technique so as not to ‘intrude’ upon the process. If the mundane becomes valuable through composition, everything is then of equal worth” (Yorath 60-61).

“When people talk about ‘Modern Art’, they usually think of a type of art which has completely broken with the traditions of the past and tries to do things no artist would have dreamed of before. Some like the idea of progress and believe that art, too, must keep in step with the times. Modern art no less than old art came into existence in response to certain definite problems” (Gombrich 442).

“It might even be said that modern art has found a new function in serving as testing-ground for new ways of combining shapes and patterns” (Gombrich 445).

“Kadinsky, like many of his German painter friends, was really a mystic who disliked the values of progress and of science and longed for a regeneration of the world through a new art of pure ‘inwardness’. In his somewhat confused and passionate book ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’ he stressed the psychological effects of pure colour” (Gombrich 453).

“It’s simple, in fact it’s simplicity itself. Brancusi’s cutting away to find the absolutely necessary images...He buys what Plato says about essences that lie behind appearances” (Bell 26).

“What you see is what you see” – Frank Stella (Bell 96).

“Abstract Art depends upon the assumption that specifically aesthetic values reside in forms and colours, entirely independent of the subject of the work of art. This view is of great antiquity and has resulted in much art of a semi-magical character. The philosophical justification of abstract art may be found in Plato: ‘I do not now intend by beauty of shapes what most people would expect, such as that of living creatures or pictures, but...straight lines and curves and the surfaces or solid forms produced out of these by lathes and rulers and squares...These things are not beautiful relatively, like other things, but always and naturally and absolutely’” (Murray 1).

“Purism claimed it would take Cubism to its proper conclusions, those of a cooperative and constructive epoch of order. It was a very ambitious movement, which had a brief life (seven years) and only through the architecture of Le Corbusier did it gain a large international reputation” – Christopher Green (Stangos 79).

“It was Puritan, but Ozenfant and Jeanneret were not kill-joys: they distinguished between joy and pleasure and they preached the end of pleasure in art, the supremacy of joy: pleasure, they believed, is unbalanced, joy is balanced, pleasure pleasing, joy elevating, pleasure satisfies appetites, joy satisfies the need for order in life, pleasure satisfies passing whim, joy satisfies something constant in us” – Christopher Green (Stangos 80).

“Like surrealist painting, surrealist photography alternated between strictly representational and ‘automatic’ abstractionist styles” (Grundberg 81).

“The six-foot high modular cube sculpture called Open Modular Cube (1966) that Sol LeWitt exhibited in the 1966 Jewish Museum exhibition Primary Structures has certain visual affinities to the reductivist tendencies in much abstract art of the 1960s – most specifically in its use of pared-down geometric forms and in its refined, machinelike finish” – on Sol LeWitt (Fabozzi 180).

“When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work. In fact it is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means” – on Sol LeWitt (Fabozzi 182).

“*Aesthetic formalism*, emphasizing form over content, emerged in part from an ecumenical belief that pure forms could transcend differences implicit in content and become as important as subject matter” (Hirsch 170).

“the camera should be used for a recording of *life*, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the *thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh” – Edward Weston (Hirsch 196).

“Weston’s work was about what lies beyond the subject and its form. For Weston, ‘the thing itself’ was not the recording of what was in front of the camera, but a search for what the popular philosopher Henri Bergson called ‘life force,’ the pure essence of existence. Hence Weston wrote of the ‘seeing of parts – fragments – as universal symbols’ that are interchangeable. Through this transformative structure, Weston worked to reunite rational thought and subjective feeling” (Hirsch 196).

“Photographs not only depict people, places, and possessions, they seem to do so with a flawless fidelity. As a result, they are thought to provide more reliable evidence and contain more factual truth than paintings, drawings, and other forms of image making” (Grundberg 158).

“This alignment remains true today: photography is associated with a broad range of critical, conceptual art practices, including those called postmodernist, while painting remains associated in many minds with emotional immediacy and self-expression” (Grundberg 158).

“These camera abstractions, which invoke imaginative and associative responses, also do not seem to fit into the rubric of modernist photography history, which assumes that photography’s role is to describe things in all their infinite detail and tonality. Detail, and all the other conventional attributes of so-called fine-art photography derived from modernist ideas about ‘the photographic,’ have been jettisoned by a young and ambitious new generation of camera image-makers” (Grundberg 160).

“Moholy conceived of his images as capable of restructuring human perception” (Grundberg 160).

“A number of artists born inot this camera-happy, mediated society are today resurrecting the idea of photographic abstraction, but not in the name of self-expression or social reformation. Rather, they are largely bent on critiquing the practice of abstraction, on revealing it to be as culturally coded and conflicted as any other type of image. They understand abstraction as a style, not as a spiritual pursuit, which often gives their work an art-historical, déjà vu quality. Abstraction, no longer viewed as an innocent, edenic island apart from the conditions of history, the marketplace, and mass culture, is revealed to be yet another brand or model of cultural representation” (Grundberg 162).

“What is paradoxical, however, is the extent to which photography has been enlisted as an agent in the questioning of abstraction’s domain. This may be because photography, the most representational of visual media, is ultimately unable to become abstract. Instead, it serves to represent the *idea* of abstraction, which at the end of the twentieth century is all that really matters” (Grundberg 164).

“Aesthetically Evaluative Photographs: The photographs in this category point out what their photographers consider to be worthy of aesthetic observation and contemplation. They are usually about the wonder of visual form in all it’s variety and how it can be rendered photographically. Photographs in this category are usually of beautiful things photographed in beautiful ways” (Barrett 91).

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on the road, oil stains on paper, stones in a fence, paint peeling on a wall. There is something breathtaking about the forms that a perceptive artist can find in hidden views of the world around us – hidden because nobody bothers to look at them” (Finn 87).

“Abstract art – Art which is either completely non-REPRESENTATIONAL, or which converts forms observed in reality into patterns which are read by the spectator primarily as independent relationships, rather than with reference to the original source” (Lucie-Smith 9).

“Form – The individual shapes and volumes, and their relationships, depicted in a work of art, whether FIGURATIVE or ABSTRACT” (Lucie-Smith 84).

“*The Thousand Windows*, was almost as fantastic in its perspective as a Cubist fantasy; but why should not the camera artist break away from the worn-out conventions, that even in its comparatively short existence have begun to cramp and restrict his medium, and claim the freedom of expression which any art must have to be alive? In this photograph the camera axis is oblique; our sense of equilibrium is challenged, and the facades seem trapeziform planes arranged as in an abstract painting. A few years later Coburn produced completely abstract photographs by devising an optical device based on the kaleidoscope. Coburn’s venture into abstract art, however, was brief and he laid the vortoscope away and made no more exposures with it” (Newhall 199).

“Around 1921 Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy began to make their somewhat similar *rayographs* and *photograms*” (Newhall 199).

“When asked which was the top of this image, Coburn replied, ‘It does not really matter ‘which way up’ a good ‘Vortograph’ is presented, but you have this one right” (Newhall 201).

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narrative. Its relationship to the contingent destroyed traditional hierarchies of meaning and it was central to the creation of particular forms of, and to inscribing desire into our relationship with, the world of goods” (Wells 26)

“Much of the commentary on that exhibition related to the reappraisal of Mondrian’s emergence as an abstract painter by Yve-Alain Bois and, in particular, the claim that this process should be understood primarily in terms of formalist analysis internal to the paintings as aesthetic objects” (Janssen).