

WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY?

*The photograph is married to the eye,
Grafts on its bride one-sided skins of truth;
The dream has sucked the sleeper of his faith
That shrouded men might marrow as they fly.¹*

Richard Hennessy

"You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear." Sherlock Holmes had a rather irritatingly lofty way of bringing home this observation to everybody, not least of all to poor Watson, so frequently portrayed with mouth agape in befuddlement or surprise and then, finally, with the gleam of understanding dawning on the distant horizon of his sight. Indeed, the distinction *is* clear, and much of the fascination of the Holmes stories resides in the amazing ability of the celebrated detective to squeeze the last ounce of significance out of the most unpromising material. Among the many anxieties which Conan Doyle masterfully manipulates is the rarely conscious fear of almost all of us that we are missing something, that important facts are escaping our attention as we go about our lives of routine preoccupation, and that out there, in that immense sea of sensorial information, lies the solution to the mystery of our lives. Acts of contemplation are called for by such feelings, and such acts have helped to produce the art, philosophy, science and the sublime speculations of the mystics in all civilizations. Yet few will spare the time and energy required; few will take the risk of stepping outside the flow of life, however briefly, for the somewhat justifiable fear of being unable to effect re-entry.

It is easy to see how photography, both the popular and more ambitious kind, can become a substitute for the contemplative act of observation. It is also easy to see how it excites the very fears which it assuages, for catering to unacknowledged emotions leads to obsessional behavior. Couldn't we characterize our age as having an obsessional hunger for images? This hunger has been largely created by photography, for yet another fear lurking behind the photographic impulse is the fear of deprivation. If all those smiling faces, vacation views, birthdays, pets, are being stored away for future use, is it because the photographer imagines a world in which they will cease to exist, at least for himself? Does he lack faith in the ability of life to renew itself and to do so in profusion? (Or is this

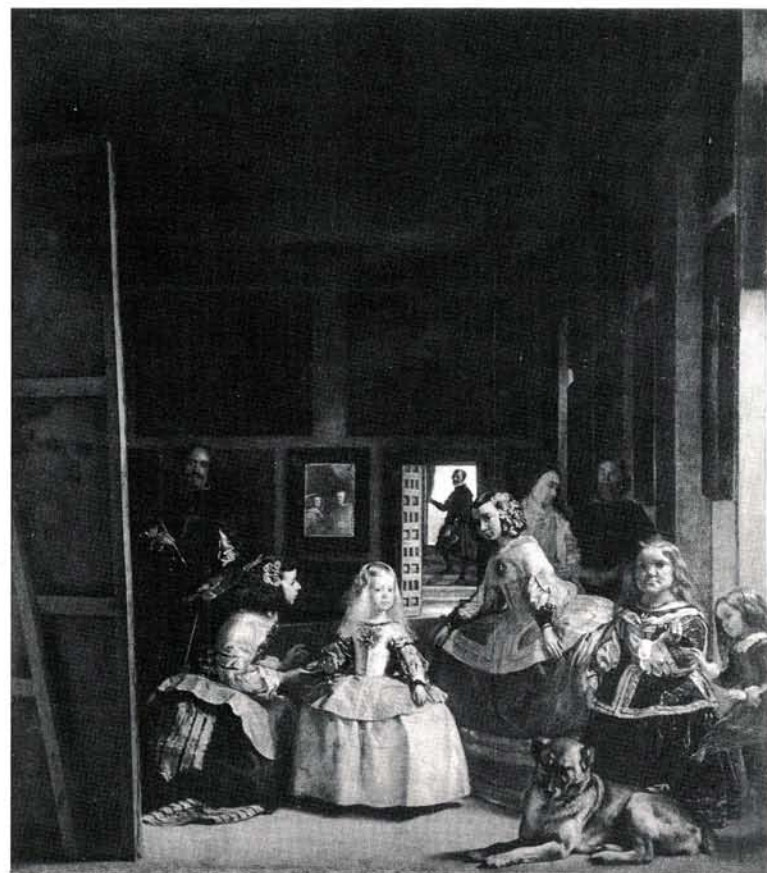
just an ugly case of possessiveness of only wanting *his* pet, *his* sunset, *his* child?) Dread—so protean, so easily assimilable to so many occasions—manifests itself in a good deal of photographic activity. Every photograph which exists to perpetuate something becomes its grave and tombstone. We live the irony of seeing the world slowly silting up with dead images of moments past, in a universe which produces "moments" in infinite abundance.

Deprivation, to be sure, is part of a vicious circle. It begins with the photographic image itself, which, no matter how much information it might contain, is pitifully limited in sensorial content. Rarely, if ever, is it remarked that black and white do not exist in black-and-white photography so called, only shades of gray. Black is the absence of color, white is all of color. A medium that cannot make use of the entire span of black to white with all of its attendant dramatic and coloristic—in a word, expressive—possibilities is hopelessly handicapped, as a pianist would be if faced with a keyboard of only 44 keys.

Similarly, photographic detail cannot compare in weight of sensorial information with that of drawing or painting. Here, the naive would have it hands down for photography, but anyone who has ever examined a photograph knows how quickly one is faced with loss of focus and the merely nasty residue of photochemical processes. In painting or drawing the detail never breaks down. When, upon examination, a painted cloud resolves itself into strokes, pigment, surface, and so on, we find ourselves pondering materials and activities of intrinsic beauty and interest. In painting

we progress from the depicted form, to the actual material in which it is rendered, and then (perhaps even with the aid of a magnifying glass) to the strokes with which it is built up. At no point are we looking at something remote from human endeavor. Everything is choice, delectation, effort and construction. The hand, eye and mind make themselves felt everywhere. The surface of a photograph cannot provide gratifications of this range or depth. There is nothing there to savor. The care, discrimination and knowledge that go into the production of a photographic surface operate at a distance from that surface. Photographic processes generate surfaces that have no more, and no less, sensorial-intellectual interest than that of a sheet of metal or glass from a factory.

The role of intention and its poetry of human freedom is infrequently discussed in relation to art, yet the more a given art is capable of making intention felt, the greater are its chances of being a fine, and not a minor or applied, art. Consider the paintbrush. How many bristles or hairs does it have? Sometimes 20 or less, sometimes 500, a thousand—more. When a brush loaded with pigment touches a surface, it can leave not just a single mark, but the marks of the bristles of which it is composed. The "Yes, I desire this" of the stroke is supported by the choir of the bristles—"Yes, we desire this." The whole question of touch is rife with spiritual associations. We say of someone that he is touched in the head, or that something is touching—by which we mean affecting. A great deal of what we know about objects is learned through touch or supplemented by it: the weight,



Diego De Silva Velazquez, *The Maids of Honor (Las Meninas)*, 1656, 125 x 118½" (The Prado).



Jean Dubuffet, *Tissu d'épisodes*, 1976, mixed media assemblage, 98½ x 125½".

relative solidity, contour, texture, temperature of things. Oral impressions are also important, certainly to anyone who has pondered the relationship obtaining between the mouth of a child and the world. Not only is the child establishing the boundary between what can and cannot be eaten when he puts objects into his mouth, he is also learning a lot about their shape, feel and taste. Symbolic ingestion continues throughout our lives and is reflected in such words of praise as "mouthwatering," as exclaimed before a stretch of pearly flesh painted by Rubens, or "delicious," as before an oil sketch of Fragonard's, or even "good enough to eat" before a bowl of peaches painted by Renoir. Painting has an extraordinary oral appeal, inherent not only in the loveliness of things represented, but in its own glistening, sumptuous materials. The "lusciousness" of de Kooning's recent works is a case in point: "licked" by the brush (and in themselves eminently lickable), they are possessed of a positively bacchic "juiciness." A native of Holland, de Kooning has made the gourmand enticements of the Dutch school of still-life blatant—those succulent oysters, tearful sliced lemons and half-empty wine glasses. Here is a man "whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine / . . ."²

It would be folly to try to say in just what, exactly, the enduring fascination of painting resides. I will offer only one suggestion. Painting's quasi-miraculous mode of existence is produced, I believe, by its mode of facture. All those things of the spirit and mind, thought to be so unseizable, so nebulous, so other,

find expression *through the hand*, taking up a material existence in the world. And what is achieved bears no relation to normal calculations of means and ends, the means so paltry—canvas, stretchers, pigment, whatever—the ends so vast—powers, glories, visions, ecstasies of pleasure and terror. Painting proclaims the true incarnation, the union of matter and spirit, in the act of painting—of body and soul. How could Western culture not love painting, thrust headlong as it was by Christianity into the pursuit of the miraculous?

Through the hand: this is the crucial point. Painting presents us with an image of the world reconstituted. It makes use of all modes of sensorial knowledge—the tactile, oral, auditory, even the olfactory—to supplement the visual. Whereas photography is only able to provide us with information derived from light, painting provides us with an image of the interrelationship of the senses, in the synthesizing and constructing activity of the human brain. It should further be borne in mind that the camera is a Cyclops—one-eyed. Unable to reproduce the stereoscopic effect of binocular vision, the camera produces images in which the depth and solidity of objects are diminished, as is the sense of distance.

Painting and drawing are able to communicate themselves more rapidly to the viewer than is photography. This arises from the fact that while a photograph may contain a great deal of information, relatively little of it is organized esthetically, with a view toward expressive communication. The comparison of photography with something as humble as comic

books will quickly make the point. One of these books may have a page with as many as 15 drawings on it, each quite small, yet instantly legible. As we move rapidly from one drawing to the next we experience, with extraordinary speed (faster than we ever could in a photojournalistic layout, or even in a movie), radical changes in angle of vision, distance of objects, and perspective, from a fist in the face, to a view from a tower, to a tumultuous fight scene. By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to think that photography could ever duplicate these feats. Why? Because it is not possible to organize all of the information in a photograph toward a single end. This is not to say that this information might not have personal, historical or scientific importance. Imagine a photograph of a nude with drapery. The photographer has *arranged* the figure, the drapery, everything in the image. We have a composition. But we do not have a construction. We have a pattern created by the alternation of lights and darks, but the greatest part of the imaged surface, that constituted by the skin, the background, the parts of the drapery not in folds, etc., is emitting random information, since it has not been reconstituted.

Should we be surprised that the distinction between a mechanically reproduced design and an object of fine art has been lost or felt to be unimportant in an industrial society like our own? All the major forces in it, whether finance, commerce or labor, are in direct opposition to the handmade and bent on destroying the distinction, as the history of advertising shows. That many critics, museum personnel and artists have succumbed to these forces does not mean that the situation is irreversible, that we can't start rebuilding these distinctions anew. The task will not be easy. The relentless, remorseless, not to say gleeful, decline in artistic taste that we have witnessed in the past 20 years will be hard to reverse.

As more and more people with less and less cultivation demanded a role in the art "scene," each new wave found an artist or group of artists already catering to its tastes, each more vulgar than the last. One could argue at length about the exact moment when design thinking took over from artistic thinking, but surely Pop art is a *locus classicus*. Here, reproductions of mass-produced objects, or the objects themselves, were actually confused with art objects. Of course, one almost had to have been there to understand the hysteria of the times. I believe that many right-minded people felt that mocking art was an effective way of making their political and social views felt, as if anyone in Washington has ever cared about such matters. Not so terribly original at that, this activity had already been certified and approved, as evidenced by the widespread and official acceptance of Marcel Duchamp, the first middle-class artist to give full expression to the middle-class ambivalence toward art—unseemly idolatry alternating with iconoclastic posturing.

From the Brillo Box to "the box" was but a step. Not exactly a giant one for mankind, it did herald the avalanche of Minimalism. Here is Pop art cleaned up, gentified, gone to college. But lurking in it is the same mockery, not just the mockery of artistic expectations, but the mockery of human need—needs for beauty,

imagination, energy, inspiration. Do human needs and artistic expectations always have to be at loggerheads? For almost all of art history they have not been. Little wonder that a public which had no critical apparatus for disposing of Minimalist impertinence, which found itself starving for visual material and softened up by the lunacies of Super-Realism, was ripe for a naughty adventure with photography, not so much Minimalism's opposite as its complement. Consider the sequence of Muybridge, Mies van der Rohe and Newman. The name in the middle represents a touchstone of 20th-century humanism, proposing a particular relationship between ourselves and our landscape. The names at either end describe the manic sublime in its geological and human manifestations, the 19th-century taste for the panoramic.

It would be a mistake to expect too much of a public raised on photographic reproductions of art, a public which is often bewildered and disappointed by the real article. Where is the cozy, lapsized format, they ask, or the slick "resolved" surface behind which the image remotely exists, like goldfish at the bottom of a pool? The artists who created Abstract Expressionism, and the incredibly tiny audience that collected and appreciated such painting at the beginning, were not "educated" in the modern sense. The big-time glossy art book and magazine were still things of the future. Yet today, it is precisely the "educated" who make their weight felt more and more, both as artists and audience (at times they seem indistinguishable). Their first knowledge of art is often acquired in a darkened classroom: that this has shaped their sensibilities seems undeniable, for everywhere one looks these days one confronts, in the art these people make and favor, the grayness, torpor and mind-numbing boredom of what has become for many *the*

art experience—the classroom lecture. Magazines have a unique contribution to make to the spreading confusion since both design and photography are completely at home in them, whereas fine art never can be. But what makes for snappy layout and striking effect on the page often just dies when put to the test on a wall.³

Photography bears the same relationship to fine art that figure skating does to ballet. The claims to parity made by apologists are usually based on utilitarian arguments of the "go further faster" variety which are esthetically irrelevant. By strapping foot and ankle into a skate, the skater renders a part of his body both ugly and less flexible (the same thing?), and, hence, useless for esthetic purposes, creating a terrible awkwardness that only habit disguises. Similarly, the photographer divorces the eye from the hand, cutting us off from one of the greatest sources of pleasure, knowledge, and just plain effectiveness, in our lives.

No one would want to deny the influence of photography on painting. I personally believe that it has not been insignificant, although not art photography so much as the scientific, snapshot and magazine varieties. But photography lies at the bottom of the visual food chain. In general, its influence has been ambiguous. The great postwar artists have had to deal with the inevitably cheapening effect on imagery which the proliferation of visual material—film, photography, television—has had. The Minimalists are in complete retreat before this onslaught, attempting to eliminate as much of the suspect quantity as possible. But some artists, like de Kooning and Dubuffet (particularly in his recent show of epic collages at the Pace Gallery), seem to have accepted the challenge with gusto. They have seized the opportunity to expand enormously their visual experience and are produc-

ing works of unparalleled density, into which the essence of myriads of images seems to have been poured. Ironically, Minimalist art shares cheap imagery's commonest quality, its easy comprehensibility, while de Kooning and Dubuffet, like all great artists of the past, do not aim for comprehension but for comprehensiveness.

If photography is a fine art, who are its fine artists? Is there anyone who has the nerve to claim that the name of a photographer could be placed alongside those of Joyce, Proust, Le Corbusier, Picasso, Brancusi, Brecht, Stravinsky, Eliot, to name a few of the great men who have enriched our century? Does anyone claim that there is a photographic oeuvre which can be put alongside the drawings or even the prints of Picasso, much less the paintings? To keep to prints, has any photographer created a body of work which can be compared with Durer's, Goya's or Rembrandt's? Everyone would feel the absurdity of such claims, photography's most fervent advocates no less than everyone else. (Many of these enthusiasts seem to have an addiction for low energy nonabsorbing visual material that only photography can supply, in the endless quantities they require—visual snack food.) The truth is that photography is a medium that will not allow of greatness, in which the practitioner can only hope to rise to technical competence and the small pleasures of small poetry. But great photographs without great photographers? Impossible. The clincher in this argument is supplied by the movies. A recent arrival, film nevertheless established its esthetic credentials quickly. Would the name of Eisenstein set many heads wagging if added to my list? Photography was simply a halt on humanity's long and determined march into the Plato's cave of the movie-house.



Eadweard Muybridge, *Tissacle 6000 Feet, South Dome from Glacier Butte, Yosemite Valley*, c.1871, black and white photograph.



Mies van der Rohe, *Riesor House, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, project, 1938* (Museum of Modern Art, New York).

As far as the ability of photography to create an illusion is concerned, the reader will not be surprised if I challenge that also, at least in its ability to create illusions of what most interest me in art—light, space, mass and motion, not to mention the registration of the movements of consciousness. The confidence of the average person in the descriptive reliability of photography is based more on knowledge than perception as such. This confidence contains within itself a devastating criticism of photography as a creative medium. All of us know as we gaze at a photograph that this fossil or light mold was generated by a concatenation of events in the past to which it stands in fairly direct relation as effect to cause. The naive viewer is more convinced of its faithfulness than he would be by a painting because he knows that a mechanical process was involved which allowed little role for the imagination. For, philistine that he is, he regards this faculty as the very principle of distortion and deception, thus implicitly accepting an industrialized society's insidious and often subliminal promotion of mechanical "perfection" in contradistinction to human fallibility. He and we are not so much confronting the image itself—as we would have to do with a painting, so firmly lodged in the eternal present of fine art—as a situation that existed in the past to which the photograph refers. This accounts for the curious tendency of all photography, however recent, *to look old*. Freshness is a quality totally lacking (the absence of the olfactory component is a contributing factor). These husks of light scarcely inhabit our own space and time, but, like all ghosts, have a tale to tell of other places, other times: hence their anecdotal air, their wistfulness, the faint vapor of sentimentality which they exude. The unrelievedly static quality of photography only adds gloom to all this dreariness. Life has

been stopped dead in its tracks—just think, DEAD IN ITS TRACKS!

The Rodin Museum in Philadelphia is a solidly built templelike structure set in its own garden, housing a group of superb sculptures by the master. It is a joy to be there. Curiously, a group of photographs of a plaster head is now exhibited in close proximity to the very sculpture. These works are "interpretations" of the head. The photographer has set himself the task of "bringing the sculpture to life," just as he has with Rodin's *Balzac*, photographs of which are also in the room. To be sure, it is a kind of life: spectral, voodooish, looming out of the darkness in a witch-doctor sort of way, the head could now almost be the chalk-whitened face of an actual aborigine. Now, turning from these meretricious images, we confront the sculpture. How mute, how blank, how inexpressive it seems by comparison. We must overcome our repugnance, force ourselves to examine it. It is dismayingly, disturbingly concrete. It cannot be put off. It is emphatically *here*. And suddenly we realize that *here* is the only place in which life will ever make any sense, that *here* is the only place in which a redeeming experience can ever occur. Stripped of the glamorous atmosphere in which photography surrounds and enshrouds everything, the sculptured head exists insistently in the raw present. We hear the "prayer of the bone on the beach."⁴ No, we do not choose to live in a substitute world, neither behind the looking glass nor in front of it. Yes, the words beauty, energy and imagination have become battle cries.

This is the world. Have faith.

For we shall be a shouter like the cock,
Blowing the old dead back; our shots shall smack
The image from the plates;

And we shall be fit fellows for a life,
And who remain shall flower as they love,
Praise to our faring hearts.⁵

What did Velasquez have in mind when he painted *The Maids of Honor*? Here is a literal "camera obscura," a darkened room. And what of the King and Queen, whose reflections swim upward toward the surface of the mirror in the background, like the image in a photograph under a developer? Where is the aperture through which they pass to be projected on the wall behind? Or rather, who is the aperture? Is it not ourselves, our very eyes and minds? Only we can determine the actual place in space of the royal couple. We are the necessary medium through which their existence is established and transferred to the mirror. This is a description of the photographic process in which we become the camera. The Infanta, herself the object of attention, looks past us, giving her attention to her parents. But the portraitist, Velasquez, gives us what his world most highly prized from him, his gaze—and what a gentle, compassionate one it is. He paints a portrait of the King and Queen, but he looks at us, almost as if we might be his subjects. His hand, hovering between palette and canvas, holds a brush. Here is a gift we will never finish unwrapping, one of the most deeply meditated paintings in the history of art.

The invitation it extends could not be more gracious. Velasquez has destroyed all sense of a literal picture plane by establishing a psychological one in the end wall of the room, a picture-hung plane. Our sense of continuity between real and depicted space is further heightened by the scale of the figures, which approximates our own. The painting has abjured defensiveness. It is a city without ramparts, a lover who needs no alibi. The play of gazes, in front, behind, past and toward us, weaves a web about us, bathing us in murmuring consciousness. We are guests of the mighty, the august, in rank and spirit. We stand at the center of their implied world, and are ourselves the center of attention. Velasquez has admitted us into his confidence. Surrounding us with all the pride of life, and with a generosity past all understanding or mere gratitude, he gives us the gifts of the holy man, the most ubiquitous yet most elusive things in life, the here and the now.⁶ ■

1. Dylan Thomas, "Our Eunuch Dreams," *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*, New York, 1957, p. 17.

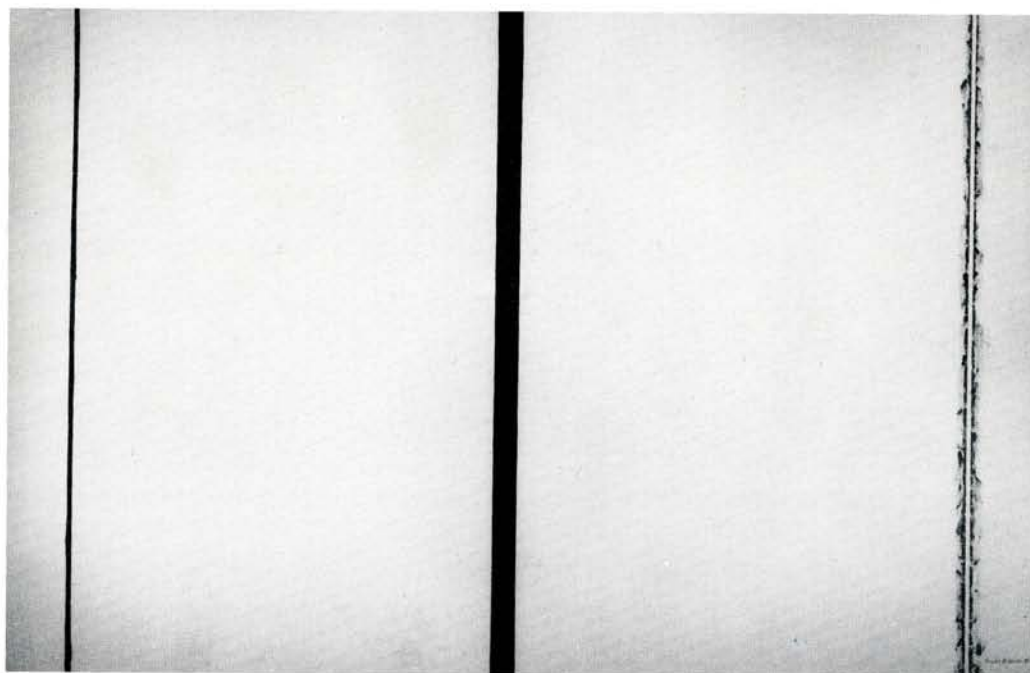
2. John Keats, "Ode to Melancholy," in Russell Noyes, ed., *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, New York, 1956, p. 1194.

3. Charles Baudelaire's "Le Publique moderne et la photographie," the second section of his "Salon de 1859" (*Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, Paris, 1976, pp. 614–19) is of interest here; neither time nor events has in any way dulled the relevance and truth of his remarks.

4. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, New York, 1952, p. 131.

5. Thomas, *op. cit.*

6. Clinicians have observed that the anguish caused by hearing loss is usually greater than that caused by loss of sight. Hearing continuously positions us in the middle of a sphere of information about our surroundings. Sight is blissfully resigned each night for sleep, and even when active can only produce a 180-degree field of awareness as opposed to hearing's 360-degrees. The psychological comfort produced by Velasquez's spatial scheme is analogous to the effect of hearing, and our positioning between parent and child suggests the flow of life in the succession of generations. Monet visited the Prado in 1904 expressly to see Velasquez's work. At last before the paintings he had pondered for so long, we can only guess at their impact, but surely the size and spatial richness of *The Maids of Honor* were crucial for him. Up till then what Monet had depicted as reflected had appeared to lie in front of the viewer, whereas the great water-lily canvases of his late years suggest a sphere of space; of light, cloud, and tree forms lying behind the viewer and in front of space falling away below his feet. As planned for the Orangerie, they became an environment. Reflection—a spiritual as well as physical activity—found a new embodiment.



Barnett Newman, *Shining Forth (To George)*, 1961, oil on canvas, 114 x 174 " (Le Centre d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou).