

Living Room

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5 Photographers, 10 Years After¹

The birth of photography—a term deriving from the Greek words for light and drawing—may generally be dated to the first half of the 19th century. Until the early 20th century, the two main fields of activity concentrated on landscapes and portraits. Before the advent of photography, portraiture—in drawing, painting or sculpture—was essentially a marker of social or economic class. With the emergence of photography and its growing popularity in the second half of the 19th century, this hierarchical tradition changed to the degree that everyman could own a photographed portrait of him/herself. The two major perceptions regarding the ontological status of the photographic medium in the world, at least until the mid-20th century, were that of photography as a window on the world, namely an objective indexical reflection of reality, and photography as a mirror or reflection of reality, namely a personal and changing subjective expression of reality as well as the self. In 1978 a comprehensive exhibition on this theme, "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960," was staged at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by the Museum's photography curator, John Szarkowski.²

The perception of the photographic portrait, in-between these two poles, ranged between the historical attempt to depict the figure of the photographed subject, with utmost precision, an attempt which relied on developing technological abilities, and an elaboration of the notion of portraiture to more abstract and metaphorical realms. One of the most striking precedents exemplifying the

withdrawal from focus on the subject's face as an exclusive expression of his/her portrait is discernible in the comprehensive series of photographs created by Alfred Stieglitz between 1918 and 1925, in which he focused on the figure of his wife, artist Georgia O'Keeffe. In the early photographs in the series O'Keeffe's face is still visible, albeit from a photographic angle unusual in that period, whereas later photographs in the series show only her hands as signifiers of her entire figure. This fundamental change in the perception of the portrait indicates, in a way, one of photography's most dramatic moments of transition to the modern era and its autonomous evolution as an accepted medium in the broader field of art.

The group of artists participating in the current exhibition developed artistically at the turn of the 21st century. In terms of academic indoctrination, they were educated on the work of the great photographers of the 20th century, on the one hand, and on the practical, real-time confrontation with the transition from analog to digital photography, on the other. This transition embeds numerous, intricate aspects, primarily an essential change in the material perception of the photographic act, a change associated with a transition from using film and photographic paper comprising a base layer, a layer of light-sensitive chemicals, and a protective top layer, to digital technology based on binary coding rather than on an analog association sustained by an optical mechanism and actual photochemical material. Simultaneously, a fundamental, general conceptual change occurred in the world with regard to notions such as truth, testimony, and original, concepts whose validity deteriorated in the second half of the 20th century in light of various postmodern theories introduced by such scholars as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and others.

In his seminal essay *Camera Lucida*,³ Roland Barthes formulated with great clarity the essential premises associated with the medium of photography and its indexical relationship with reality. He maintained that "in Photography I can never deny that the thing *has been there*," going on to explain that "The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: 'That-has-been,' or again: the

Intractable." Phenomenologically, Barthes argued, the photograph attests that "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." In so doing not only did he sanctify photography's indexical relationship with reality, but he also formulated, possibly for the first time, the complex link between that which is present in the image and the absence which remains in reality, between the act of photography and death.

The transition to digital photography dramatically changed the status of both photography and the photograph. The changes occurred, as aforesaid, under a combination of philosophical, technological, and cultural circumstances, and ultimately led to a situation where not only is it possible to produce an image which resembles traditional analog photography via digital coding, but it is even possible to "take photographs" without a negative, without a camera, and to produce a photographic image by means of simple digital simulation. The digital image known to us today has thus transformed into a simulacrum, a copy with no original or, in fact—an image which is both an original and a copy. The wide range of digital processing possibilities has undermined the causality of the photographic act and the analog image; it has undermined the confidence in the inevitable and indelible link between the object as it is in reality, and its emergence in the photographic image. Alongside this change, there was an imperceptible growth in the accessibility of the medium of photography and the dispersion of its products, which led to a flooding of the cultural field with diverse images and to dissolution of the familiar categories of meaning. Hence, the photographic image is no longer a derivative of a specific time-space relationship, of a given moment, decisive to a greater or lesser extent, but conceals an inherent measure of deceit, as described by Hubertus v. Amelunxen in his essay "Photography *after* Photography: The Terror of the Body in Digital Space."⁴

Although the fateful outcomes of this change have been well known and formulated in theory for several decades, in actuality, in everyday life, the

authority of the digital image remains identical to that of the analog image. We continue to read newspapers, we continue to watch news reports, we continue to photograph important events in our lives; we are still accustomed to believe. In this sense, it seems that the subversion of the photographic image's truth value is one of the most jolting experiences for us as human beings, and therefore, one of the formative changes of the 20th century.

Against this backdrop, it is important to read the work of the five artists featured in this exhibition with respect to the fact that they continue to engage in photography. An essentially direct photography; photography based on the relationship between photographer and subject in a given place and time; photography which is conscious of the power of the gaze and functions as a means for taking a stand in the world; photography which is not necessarily digitally processed, and does not focus on the technological dimension inherent to the medium and the fundamental changes it has undergone in this respect in recent decades. The work of these five artists seems to attempt to push a little further the very use of the notion of 'photography' as it has been conceived, contemplated, and used over the course of 150 years, before the digital era; before Photoshop, the Internet, and simulation. At the same time, their work does not reject the very use of these new tools, and mainly—it is highly conscious of the profound conceptual change they implemented in the broad cultural field. To some extent, it is based on the attempt to generate a fictive suspension in the duration of the work, which is akin to compensation for the loss of the hidden, mystical if you will, part in the old photographic process. In this sense, the exhibition strives to tarry and remain in a type of indeterminate intermediate realm between the analog and the digital, between testimony and fiction, between knowledge and quandary.

Another axis linking the works of the participants is the gender axis. The featured five artists met during their studies in the departments of photography and fine art at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. They completed their BFAs in the late 1990s, and have since continued studying, teaching, and

exhibiting in various venues, all the while maintaining their friendly relations and professional collaboration. Many of their works address questions of identity and gender, social belonging and detachment, identification and self-differentiation. While their areas of activity are ostensibly tangential, they each construct unique, highly divergent thematic, mental and formal worlds.

Ten years after their graduation, this exhibition strives to explore the overall position generated and proposed by their different work processes with regard to both the history of photography and the notion of portraiture. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, growing, excessive attention was dedicated to the body's presence and the representation of identity in culture and art. Upon the conclusion of the previous century and the beginning of the current one, the emphasis shifted to issues of space, of private/public relationship, and to essential questions regarding the organization of form and information in society. At the same time, many photographers turned to the photographic procedure itself, lingering on the power apparatuses it represents and simultaneously generates. The fact that all five artists graduated around the same time from the same academic institution is all but marginal to understanding the course of their work, as well as that of the entire exhibition. Throughout the history of art, a common school usually indicated specific influential teachers, a certain ideological orientation, and sometimes a common style as well, and it ultimately manifested itself in significant and influential presence in the world. Outstanding precedents of photography schools which formulated a general cultural position and had substantial influence on the occurrences in the international art field, may be identified in the so-called Boston School,⁵ on the one hand, and the group of artists that emerged at the Department of Photography of the Düsseldorf Art Academy in the late 20th century,⁶ on the other.

Focused scrutiny of the work of the five participating artists highlights the fact that their works, despite their divergence, mark a clear position with regard to the notion of portraiture: the procedure of portrait photography is no longer a

goal in itself, but rather a single element in an intricate visual semantic configuration, whereby these artists strive not only to explore their world, but also to take a stand in it.

Notes

1. The title of this essay refers not only to the chronological issue involving the biographies of the participating artists in the current show; it also alludes to Nan Goldin's book. See: Nan Goldin and Guido Costa, *Ten Years After: Naples, 1986-1996* (New York: Scalo, 1998).

2. John Szarkowski, cat. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978).

3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981 [1998]), pp. 76-77, 4.

4. Hubertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, and Florian Rötzer (eds.), *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (Sydney: G+B Arts, 1996).

5. In 1995, ICA, Boston staged the exhibition "Emotions & Relations," bringing together five photographers, friends, all of them graduates of the Boston School of Art: David Armstrong, Nan Goldin, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Mark Morrisroe, and Jack Pierson (their classmate, Pat Hearn, who later opened a gallery in New York where she exhibited the work of all five, may be regarded as a sixth party, as manifested in the catalogue). In this case, each of the photographers had a different, unique style; nevertheless, beyond the conspicuous formalistic differences, their work is inspired by a common spirit, which may be defined as a fundamental interest in the human image, or to be more accurate, in human existence. In this respect, one ought to note that the Boston School is, in fact, the

Boston Group, namely a school which evolved while accumulating artistic and social significance, and not necessarily from acceptance by some external academic authority. See: cat. *Emotions & Relations: Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia* (Boston: ICA, 1995).

6. During the 1960s artist couple Bernd and Hilla Becher established the Department of Photography at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. The photographic perception they promoted was one of a regulating practice centered on collecting, analysis, sorting, and classification of material settings and spaces. The act of regulation lent photography a conceptual nature, exposed the structuring modes of the visual image, and thereby also the modes of socio-cultural construction of the depicted material settings. The department spawned the next generation of German photography, who subsequently became the leading artists of their generation in the field of photography, among them Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Candida Hofer.