

PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEAUTY

In advocating the difficult art of defining concepts Socrates started a revolution which continues to our day. The implementation of this art is both difficult and thankless because it deprives man of the pleasure of talking without knowing what he is speaking about, a factor which contributes a good deal to the art of conversation. Let us begin, therefore, by making clear that our reflections do not aim at modifying experience as such. All photographers, professional or otherwise, who believe they have the right to the title of artist, are not only justified in their claim to a certain degree, but may reserve the right to say they are artists in any sense they may wish to give the word. One simply begs permission for the philosopher, meticulous in his use of words, to ask himself whether photography is truly an art and if so, in what sense?

Of course the problem has already been dealt with, quite apart from its philosophical interest, by artist photographers or painters as well as in the countless publications of writers belonging to the category of “art critics” or “art historians” who may have or may

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have not taken a definite stand on this question. The ambiguity of the titles of works on the subject gives a measure of the ambiguity of the problem. For instance, a volume, generously enriched with "reproductions" is presented as *Une brève histoire de l'art de Niepce à nos jours*. A history of art conjures up at once an image of the plastic arts, such as sculpture or painting, but "de Niepce à nos jours" is such an evident reference to photography as an art that the mind is led to assume it as such but remains almost immediately in suspense because the mere fact of presenting a history of photography as a history of art presupposes as solved problems which have yet to be posed. This impression is confirmed upon reading a serious critical study of the work entitled *La photographie est aussi un art*. What does this title really mean? According to the use which governs the position of adverbs, the sentence means that photography besides being other things is also an art. But it may also mean that, like other human activities, photography too is an art. It is an art in its own way, like painting, for example. One must choose but the choice to be made is not evident.

Confusion is compounded by the way in which the problem is presented. It is increased in certain "art books" where the text of the author depends heavily on illustrations with the price of the book determined by their number and occasionally their quality. The reader thus feels invited to judge on the basis of evidence but he has been made the victim of an illusion. In these books where he is constantly called upon to compare paintings and photographs there are neither photographs nor paintings. All the works included have been reduced to a sort of common denominator, which is neither painting nor photography but printing. One is given printed photographs and printed paintings as bases of comparisons. Thus the reader has before his eyes the products of a third art, quite distinct from the other two, but which can, like them, have its own beauty because it has above all its own essence—printing. Predestined by its very nature to "reproduction," this art occupies an important and unique—not to say quasi-monstrous and in any case frightening place among the means of mass diffusion of the works of the mind. Everything is being printed—poetry and prose, music whether written or played, painting, sculpture and even architecture. Modern editions contain,

as people today are apt to say, all Leonardo da Vinci in one volume or all the symphonies of Beethoven in one album of records. Nothing can be more legitimate nor better in itself. However, since critics use such documents as if they were works of art, they misinform and lead into error the reader who has confidence in them. These reflections cannot fail to lead us to the question of what are the results of two distinct arts, for example painting and photography, when they are metamorphosed into the products of a third art—printing—whose technique and aim are in essence different from theirs. There can be a beautiful painting, a beautiful photograph of the painting and a beautiful reproduction of this photograph turned out with any of the various means at the disposal of modern printing. But a printed photograph is no longer a photograph; a photographed painting is no longer a painting. Any comparison between images of this type is necessarily deceiving because it is difficult to know what elements of the original the image in each case conserves, omits or modifies. The author and his reader can readily compare in their minds paintings and photographs; in the book they are comparing in reality nothing more than “printed matter.”

It would be desirable in approaching a problem of this kind for each person to begin, if possible, by “laying his cards on the table,” that is to say by defining the general level on which he intends to keep the discussion and hold his ground. This is what André Vigneau¹ did so admirably at the beginning of his book. The concept of imitation dominates his analysis of the facts as being the only one capable of including them all. In printing photographs one can show that they resemble a certain model which in turn imitates a certain reality. “Reproduction” does nothing other than repeat to the second or the thousandth degree an operation which is observed at the very origin of art. As early as the time of Greek art, writes André Vigneau, “the invention of the forms and contours of divinities... was a copy of reality.” Thousands of the statues of the Greek gods bear witness to this fact; Vasari merely

¹ André Vigneau, *Une brève histoire de l'art de Niepce à nos jours*, with preface by Jean Cassou (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1963). This pleasant volume contains 192 pages of text and 173 illustrations. The critical study of Mr. Jean Keim, which I have mentioned is entitled “La photographie est aussi un art,” *Critique*, August-September (1964), 207 ss.

generalized on this proposition by laying down the precept that: "the most excellent manner to paint is that which imitates most closely and which makes the painting most resemble the natural object which it represents." Legitimate in itself, this concept of the art of painting implies a corresponding notion of pictorial beauty, and this concept in turn implies a definite solution to our problem. If the essential aim of painting is to imitate reality, the aim of photography is manifestly the same. It therefore does not suffice to say that photography "is also" an art. One must add that this art is essentially the same as the art of painting because even though they may use methods of their own, they aim at the same goals.

The philosopher need not invent his own concept. Like Socrates who formerly turned to the man on the street to learn the object of his profession, he can consult the *Petit Larousse illustré* to learn the meaning of this French word. Here is the answer: "*Photographie*, nom féminin, (du grec *phôs*, -*otôs*, lumière, et *graphè*, inscription). The art of fixing on a plate sensitive to light the images obtained in the camera obscura: *to learn photography*. Reproduction of this image: *to frame a photograph*." This excellent small dictionary reproduces almost verbatim the words used by François Arago to announce to the Academy of Sciences on January 7, 1839 the yet anonymous discovery of what we today call "photography." It was simply a "verbal communication," reported in the weekly *Comptes Rendus* of the Sessions of the Academy of Sciences, 8 (1839) 4-7. In the section on "Applied Physics" Arago announced what is still today essential about the discovery: "the fixing of images which are formed in the focal point of a camera obscura." This birth certificate of photography fixes its nature once and for all. "M. Daguerre discovered special screens upon which the optical image leaves a perfect imprint; screens upon which everything that the image contains is found reproduced with unbelievable exactitude and sensitivity. In truth, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the inventor has discovered the way of *fixing images*, if only his methods conserved colors." The implicit wish of Arago has today been granted. Any child old enough to look into a viewfinder and to press a button can today fix images and conserve the color of the objects themselves. Let us not add motion, which is quite different and presents

its own problems. Yet one can say that already in 1839 Arago defined, in relation to a few daguerréotypes, our present-day ideals of good, excellent, perfect photography. The samples submitted to the Academy were the Grand Gallery of the Louvre, the views, ever dear to photographers, of the Cité with the towers of Notre-Dame, various bridges of the Seine and the city walls and gates of Paris. No portrait is mentioned. Posing time, eight to ten minutes in full sun light at noon in summer but Daguerre thought that three minutes would suffice in Egypt. Many of the principal potential uses of the discovery were foreseen: travel mementos, archeological documents (the “Musée Imaginaire” is announced), scientific observations, notably in physics and astronomy (views of the moon); in brief, concludes Arago, “it is an artificial retina placed by M. Daguerre at the disposal of the physicist.”² It would be hard to express it more effectively.

One of the French ancestors of photography, Hippolyte Bayard, gave the name of “photogenic drawings” to the proofs he obtained shortly after those by Daguerre. It was a perfect term: “drawings engendered by light.” These simple words express the very core of the problem, because the question is to know what relationship there can be between the beauty of images inscribed on a light-sensitive screen by light and the beauty of works drawn or painted not by light, but by hand.

This modest fact dominates the problem of photography as an art. The active creator of the image is not the photographer himself so much as the camera constructed by man for the purpose of making it produce a certain result and by means of which the photographer can in a sense say that he did produce that result. The principle of these machines is simple. They are made up essentially of a camera obscura, no lens is necessary; a hole will be enough with a hand-regulated shutter to regulate the time of exposure. The camera obscura goes back to ancient times. Once the means of fixing the images were found the problem was solved. Any progress in the development of lenses and emulsions has in no way modified the basic principles. We are still at the stage of the “artificial retina put by Daguerre at the disposal of the physicist” or, by the same token, of the artist but it is not the

² On this text by François Arago, see Jean A. Keim’s essay, so valuable in many ways on “Photography and Reality,” in *Diogenes*, 50 (1965), pp. 64-78.

vision of the artist which produces the image; like all other photographers he captures the image with his camera.³

The qualities which determine whether a photograph is beautiful or ugly are the same which make an image more or less perfect than its model. The description of the daguerréotypes presented by Arago to the Academy of Sciences in 1839 stress the fidelity of the image to its model down to the smallest details. This is the same kind of perfection sought after by an amateur photographer. The first reaction of anyone who looks at a photographic proof is the same as that of its author. A beautiful photograph is first of all a good photograph, and the opinion of common experience is that a good photograph should resemble as closely as possible the object which it represents. The aesthetics of photography are based upon the aesthetics of the image; the more faithful the image is to its model the better it is.

The word "beauty" therefore does not apply univocally but only analogously or even equivocally to the products of the art of photography and to those of the art of painting. The source of much confusion lies in the fact that the artist painters often set themselves a secondary or an additional objective, quite separate from their usual objective, which is to produce beauty, and therefore to make images which resemble their models. In so far as the painter, for various reasons, which are not necessarily disinterested, decides to "catch a perfect resemblance," his aesthetics stem from the very principles that govern photography. He then enters into competition with the camera obscura, and although he deserves more merit than the camera obscura when he succeeds, he is often defeated. Even if the painter succeeds, posterity will often have no way of knowing it. The admiration which we have for portraits such as those painted by Raphael, Tintoretto or Rembrandt cannot

³ Numerous works on photography could be quoted. However, if the question at hand is to describe photography as it is, independently of its possible utilizations for various purposes and ends which are not directly its own, I recommend in particular Alfredo Ornano's *Il libro della foto...*, fifth edition, revised and augmented by Dr. Ing. Federico Ferrero, Ulrico Hoepli (Milano, 1965). All amateur photographers will recognize at once in this book the accepted principles of the technique which he himself has been using in some cases for many years; cameras, lenses, emulsions, exposure, negatives and positives, etc. The first camera I ever used, as a child, was called Franceville. It was a simple camera obscura with a hole that served as a lens. The shutter was a small metal plate which was raised and lowered with a finger.

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be based on the resemblance of the images to their models who are unknown to us; on the contrary, for us now it is the models who resemble their portraits. Guidance for aesthetic judgements of painted works, regardless of the object portrayed, is based on the work itself. Judgements of photographs are based on a criterion which is foreign to the photographs themselves: faithfulness of the image to its object.

To be beautiful in the same sense in which a painting is beautiful, a photograph must be beautiful in itself and for itself quite independently of the object represented, as can be, for instance, the figures of Mary and Joseph in the *Marriage of the Virgin* in the Brera Museum. This can be accomplished but then they are photographs which become, one might say, “de-ikonized” or “an-ikonical,” which means that they are images intended for our admiration despite the fact that they have renounced all the properties and characteristics essential to the image as such. One certainly has the right to use the camera obscura for ends other than those which Daguerre and Arago defined as the “fixing of images,” but then one abandons the realm of the “photographic” as such. Fidelity of the luminous image to its model is essential to photography; the right to a certain measure of infidelity to the model is essential in painting. Almost all discussions about the possibility of a photograph’s being artistic in the same sense as painting degenerate into confusion between two categories which must be rigorously kept distinct.

No one will doubt that the photographer has the uncontested right to make photographs which are as beautiful in their own right as are paintings. Art is free and taste alone is qualified to judge results. One must merely know whether photography can achieve this without betraying its very essence, and it is difficult to see how this can be possible. Any amateur photographer is a competent witness on this point because no one is more expert than he in matters of defective photographs, and for him a flawless photograph (*rara avis!*) is always beautiful. A bad proof is an imperfect image of the object and even beginners know the reasons for these imperfections. First, it is necessary to avoid making double exposures. This once common error of forgetting to wind the film is increasingly rare nowadays yet it is still possible to photograph through thick glass the reflection of an object other than the one

whose image one wished to fix. When this accident occurs, the mistake can be covered up by claiming that one wished to make a "superimposition" and from that point on one penetrates into the realm of art photography. In much the same way, a good negative, in the usual sense of the term, is never fuzzy, but yet a blurred negative can sometimes claim to be art. In principle, a good photograph is "straight." If, instead, it has been taken at an angle, one has the choice of destroying it, cropping it, or considering it an example of unusual and original perspective. At the very worst, it can be called amusing. Of course, these remarks must be taken with a grain of salt for it does not necessarily follow that it is enough to make poor photographs to make art photographs, but simply that if what is a failure in one case can mean success in another or at least pass as such, the word photography cannot apply to both in the same way. We are not dealing with the same thing. Doubtless, no one can keep a person from calling different objects by the same name but at least it must be done knowingly. It is not wise to lump together heedlessly in a single class objects which are specifically diverse.

The very possibility of error implies the existence of a certain technique or experience in the general sense of the term, which constitutes the basis for the professional competence of the photographer and the personal skill of the amateur. Neither one nor the other can flatter himself by thinking that he has completely mastered this technique. I asked a Parisian photographer one day how he went about making his beautiful portraits and he answered simply: "The physicist, Jean Perrin, told me that in photography there is always 30 % unknown. I draw on that 30 %." For the amateur, the proportion of the unknown runs to about 90 %, but this is without importance because the continued progress of technique tends to eliminate in large part the initiative of the operator. An old amateur today remembers the time when he used to choose his plates, when he prepared the various fixing solutions and proceeded on his own to develop the negative proofs on glass and the positives on paper. Slides on glass, particularly the admirable ones of Ilford, combined the two pleasures. With the current vogue of small formats and color photography, everything is done for us and without us. "Pay, and Kodak will do the rest." Still this rest must be done. And all this "rest" is wedged in between

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the moment when the photographer seizes his camera, focuses it on a possible objective, chooses a diaphragm and the speed (if his camera does not select it for him) and finally clicks the shutter release. At the moment he pushes the button the active cycle of the photographic operation is over for him.

Let us ask Socrates to help us define photography as such. "Is it knowledge or is it production?" "It is production." "A production of nature or of an art?" "Of an art." "An art which produces objects or which produces images?" "Images." "And it produces images by what means?", "as the sculptor does by cutting stone, the painter by imitating traits or as the looking-glass maker by multiplying their reflections?" "In the second manner, Socrates, but this time the image is not a simple reflection: it becomes an object in itself, because the screen which receives the image retains and fixes the image; it can only conserve that one image and not absorb any other." "Therefore we can say that photography is the art of producing by means of light and a camera obscura images which are received under certain given conditions that make it possible to fix and conserve them." "You are quite right, Socrates, because a photograph has no other obligation but to conform to this definition. And this is precisely why we began at first by taking for granted that the qualities which one can require from a photograph are the same as those demanded of an image. A good photograph and a good image are one and the same thing."

The reasons for conserving images are multiform. The cases in which they serve a useful or even necessary purpose are infinite. All the problems of identification fall into this category. There can be no civil status nor police records and research without photographs; the identification card is based on it too. No positive historic documents without photography; no archeology without photography; no newspaper information without photography; even medicine borrows the technique of photography since the radiologist succeeds in obtaining images of the interior of the human body which he himself cannot see. It would be idle to go on with this enumeration because long as it might be, it could never be complete. It is said with reason that photography is a social art, because it seeks the fulfilment of obvious social ends. In another sense, however, and although photography is often linked to the

sociological functions of the family and the nation, there remains finally the work of an individual who feels a personal "involvement" in photography and in his work. The work is so profoundly his that one cannot help wondering whether each photograph is not linked to the person who took it by a unique personal bond. That bond exists if only because he wanted to take that picture in the first place; he desired its existence; like a creature chosen by its God, it was loved before its birth. When the amateur photographer—who operates only for love of the image to be made, without any obligation or social goal of any sort, out of sheer love of the thing—clicks, so one sometimes doubts if one has heard it, he finds himself with the lens and the object in a completely personal kind of solitude, in a unique rapport which can never again be duplicated.

This rapport is complex, but one can isolate a few of its principal elements for the sake of analysis. In a general manner, one must bear in mind the pleasure of "making images" or "taking pictures." Since no talent and no personal apprenticeship are necessarily required in order to produce these pictures, this confers upon the whole operation an almost magic character which further enhances its value. Children are great consumers of film, and this is understandable, but the intense pleasure they find in "taking pictures" lies at the basis of the photographic activities of adults. It is sufficient to look around. Watch that boy, this girl, or even that adult leaving the store where they had left their films to be developed. As soon as they reach the side walk they open their box or envelope; it would be difficult—not to say impossible—for them to wait. They are eager to look at their photographs all alone, without the comments of the clerk, and they also want to see them at once, at least for a first glance. This is the moment of revelation of the image they made; whether good, mediocre, or downright bad it is really theirs, and it remains to such a degree an image of their own creation that there are some of us who for the rest of their life recall with regret a photograph they failed to take, but which one day they had wanted in vain to take.

In truth, making photographs is also called "taking photographs," "taking pictures." However, although the photographer is conscious that he is only producing images of real objects, he also feels personally active in this operation of which he is the

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author. Essentially a “poietic” activity, hence revealing factivity, photography presupposes from the start the choice and selection of the eye and thus of the mind. In this sense, the image exists first in the mind and then on the plate. The operator looks first through the viewfinder at the image which his act will fix on glass or on film. He therefore sees his photograph mentally before making it. All snapshots presuppose a picture worth taking. When, after having shifted his position a few times or moved his arms, the photographer sees in his viewfinder the image which he proposes to fix, he confirms his decision by clicking the shutter which in its turn sets in motion a whole series of mechanical and physico-chemical processes over which the photographer has no control. But the photographer is the master of everything that has preceded that act. He knows this and he will remember it every time he looks at his negatives or at his photographs. Part of the pleasure of looking at photographs lies in remembering the place, the circumstances, the selection and decision which, from the very fact that a given photograph included the preserved image, excluded by the same token so many other things. For instance, from a certain balcony of the Hotel Regina in Venice, one can ‘snap a picture’ of the Church of La Salute directly opposite, or of San Giorgio Maggiore to the left, but it is impossible to snap both shots at one and the same time. Any noteworthy picture that is pulled from a slide-box or projected on a screen has its own special history which is of interest only to ourselves, as becomes apparent as soon as one naïvely attempts to talk to others about it. We, at least, gaze at it thoughtfully, saying to ourselves: “Yes, it was really like that, and it was beautiful.” Or, on the contrary, with a sigh of regret: “That was the best one could do.” Why take one shot rather than another? Because the place is appealing and, on the point of losing it perhaps forever, one wants to capture at least its image to carry it away. There is in man a sort of voracity of “being” which fulfills itself without regard for economic or social considerations. Who can describe the pleasure of the image-hunter as he strolls alone along city streets or country roads whose natural beauty is not necessarily their principal merit? This pleasure lasts until the moment when a possible, hence virtual photograph captures his attention. It could be a picturesque corner, but whose total denudation constitutes its beauty. The mere fact

of being there, for both people or things, can attain a degree of forlornness which confers upon them an archetypal value whose memory the photographer wishes to substantiate. It remains to be seen whether the image is really achievable. It is not always realizable because what is possible for that optical apparatus which is the human eye is not always so for a Zeiss or a Voigtländer which are optical apparatuses of a different order.

This explains why no one takes an image for his model. The unreality of the image, except as an image, is essential to the perception of the positive or the negative. One recognizes on seeing them that the real object *is not there*. I cannot read without skepticism the accounts of the discovery of the daguerréotype which describe the first spectators as “transported by a juvenile enthusiasm which kept them from seeing that what they had before their eyes was nothing more than a simulacrum.” One is not any more deceived by the unreality of the object in a photograph than one is by that of an object painted on canvas. The difference stems from the fact that the painting emerges from an ensemble of images, memories and inventions freely grouped for the purpose of creating the appearance of an object which, although not without links with nature, will not be its product, whereas the photographer, once he has made his choice, will let light register the natural image of the natural object as it is. There is neither creation of the image at the start of the photographic act, nor progressive determination of its structure during the course of its execution as there is in the continuous creation which the painter accomplishes—brain and hand bound in organic unison—while painting the canvas. The mental image comes first in both cases, but the one which the photographer borrows from nature differs from the one which the painter invents because of a difference whose consequences affect the very substance and structure of the two works: the photographer mechanically registers the image, whereas the painter produces his in full consciousness and awareness. From this arises the fact that photography is not the created work of man in the same meaning of the word as is in painting. The difference depends not only on the fact that the eye and the lens differ as optical apparatuses but especially on the fact that the photographic image is formed on the wall of the camera obscura which does not see, whereas the visual image is formed on the retina

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of the eye which perceives and knows. These two types of images cannot be compared except by superimposing on the camera an eye capable of seeing the proof on film or on paper. The lens sees neither as an eye nor otherwise than an eye; it does not see at all.

These distinctions make it possible to determine with greater precision in which sense photography is an art and in which sense it is not. One scorns, perhaps unjustly “popular naturalism for which the beautiful image is little else than the image of a beautiful thing, or even more rarely, a beautiful image of a beautiful thing.” What could be more legitimate in the presence of a beautiful thing than to want to conserve a beautiful image of it? Because a good image of a beautiful thing is a beautiful image. It is so in two ways: in itself, in the way in which a successful photograph is beautiful, and in the way in which the image of a naturally beautiful object participates in the beauty of the model. The first of these two types of beauty is the one which any product can boast of when made with flawless technique. The second is a simple reflection of the natural beauty of the model which the photographer found ready-made in nature. The photographer who succeeds in taking a picture of this kind is doubly an artist, first as a producer of beautiful images and then as an imitator of natural beauty. However, he is not so in the quite different sense in which the painter and the sculptor are artists when creating the beauty of the model itself. Photography is thus most assuredly an art, but if the fine arts are those whose intrinsic and direct function is to create beauty, photography is not one of them because their aim is not to reproduce beauty given in nature but to produce it through art.

The reality of a photographic art *per se* is made evident by the facts. There is the proof by Nadar. This photographer of genius has left us portraits whose style is so immediately recognizable that, as one says of certain paintings: “It is a Rembrandt.” one can say of his pictures: “It is a Nadar.” Only an authentic artist can leave such a personal stamp on his works. Yet, this virtuoso of the camera obscura did not make these images himself; he made his camera make them. His photographs of writers and artists command attention, are moving, provoke thought. In point of fact, a number of them are unforgettable and one feels while looking at them that one has before one’s eyes as faithful an image of

reality as is possible (the small wart on the cheek of Liszt was not effaced), but because the reality that they so lovingly espoused is moving *per se*, these photographs too become moving. One never tires of contemplating the portrait of Delacroix (who, in his turn made a painting of it) or that of Baudelaire who cannot thereafter be visualized otherwise. Nor is it so much needed, for we are not concerned with beauty, but it is not necessary that the object be beautiful for good photography to be beautiful. Every amateur has in his portfolios photographs which he loves for the merely emotional value of the objects which they represent. Fleeting personal experiences but whose memory is unforgettable: a quaint street scene, a peeling wall overlooking a courtyard on which opens a solitary window with its green railing, its pot of geraniums and white curtains. The most precious photographs are among those one cares least to show. Be that as it may, none of these 'things seen' is a 'thing made'. The photographer does not produce paintings any more than the painter makes photographs;⁴ one may practice the two arts but one must not confuse them. Each art may produce beauty of its own kind, each differing from the other as the celestial body, Dog Star, differs from a barking dog.

It may perhaps not be superfluous at this point to examine briefly the case of certain types of photographs which might be considered as calculated to compound confusion. In this category do not fall the works of the "amateur photographer." Too enamored of photography, he is not concerned with making it pass for something different. He is well aware of what his artistic role is in the 'snapshot' which he takes with so much pleasure: all question of technique aside, it consists in 'framing' the future image. A photograph is a previous deduction which was operated on the continuum of reality. As such, it creates a privileged space which can become strange and disorienting from the very fact that it is presented on its own merits, out of the spacial context in which

⁴ "Cameras Don't Take Pictures," this title of a recent essay by Paul Byers (*The Columbia University Forum*, 9, 1966, 1, pp. 27-31) clearly indicates the author's tendencies (a professional photographer who has long collaborated with specialists of the behavioral sciences). It is quite certain that this type of photography has other goals than the taking of snapshots. But one must round out this happy formula by saying: "Cameras don't *take* pictures, but they *make* them." A similar remark can be applied to the amusing metaphor recently propounded by a printer of art books: "lens painting." Lenses will paint the day that paint-brushes make photographs.

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we are accustomed to seeing it. The photographer seeks to include certain things on his negative and to eliminate others. The image must not be allowed to run beyond its borders, nor can it include too many objects devoid of visual interest such as, to mention only one instance, those empty first planes in which beginners flounder. Insofar as the art of selection is concerned, photography includes an element of aesthetics and beauty whose presence is undeniable, but this beauty remains natural or, as one might say, conditioned beauty.

This is especially evident in photographs of the nude figure, a branch in which the production of the photographic image seems in the closest competition with painting. A good photograph of a beautiful nude is assuredly a beautiful photograph but, as has been shrewdly observed, in times such as ours when painting and sculpture have lost their interest in the figurative, photography is perhaps the only art which remains interested in the nude figure and this in itself raises problems.

In the first place, it is curious that books on the history of the nude figure in photography deal in the main with the female nude. That this may be so in books on the nude figure in art in general may be surprising, but the phenomenon is even more striking in the case of photography. The interesting pocketbook by P. Lacey, *History of the Nude in Photography*, includes only female nudes as if the male nude had never been, and did not deserve to be, photographed. The author harbors no illusions on the nature of this phenomenon. Eroticism is its principle and the triumph of the female nude is, besides, reassuring proof of the normality of public tastes. The author, P. Lacey, says that the vast majority of the photographs that the public looks at are without any aesthetic value. The pin-up girl is the most widespread photographic nude. He has moreover intelligently reproduced at the beginning of his book several photographs whose aim is to flatter sexual instincts alone. Insofar as an art — be it plastic or photographic — places itself at the service of eroticism, it ceases to be concerned with the arts of the beautiful. In effect, restricting oneself to the plane of imagery alone, the erotically suggestive is different from the naturally beautiful. Let us say, at least, that it can be so. The male does not desire the female for the plastic perfection of her forms. The female nude is sexually desirable according to canons which

vary with periods and peoples, as well as for reasons which have no necessary connection with the artistically beautiful. One of the objections of St. Albert the Great to the Paradise of Mahomet was that the type of houris promised to the Moslems suited in no way the tastes of the Germans as he knew them. Erotic photography generally seeks its models amongst prostitutes; it proposes to the eyes objects of imaginary desires. Art as such, whose object is beauty, has nothing to do with this category of facts.

But photography can aim at reproducing the forms of nude bodies which are pleasing to see in and for themselves. The photographer achieves a beautiful work, as did Eugène Delacroix, if the photograph of a nude torso seen from the back, which is attributed to him, is really his.⁵

One would therefore be face to face with the product of the art of the beautiful, if it were a product of art. It is obvious that the subject was arranged by an artist, probably by Delacroix, but this is as far as his contribution went. It is the lens and the operator in his function as a photographer, and not as a painter, that produced the image. What one justly admires in the image is nothing more than a fixed reflection of the beautiful in nature, not of a beauty created by art.

The friends of photography are mistaken in their concern at seeing it so clearly differentiated from the arts of the beautiful. This distinction, far from belittling photography, insures its independence and that of the criterion which permits us to judge its intrinsic photographic beauty. P. Lacey rightfully felt that we shall always misunderstand and underestimate the most beautiful photograph if we persist in judging it according to the criteria of the fine arts. What we must look for are photographs which combine the unique qualities of the camera with a sense of form and the photographer's mood. In a remarkably felicitous effort to insure the specificity of the two orders, the same aesthetician of the photographic lens further claims that in the ensemble, photographers are far more interested in the expression of form and style through the nude than are painters and sculptors today. One

⁵ A. Vigneau, *Une brève histoire de l'art etc.*, p. 70: Photograph by Delacroix. Study after the model. Bibliothèque Nationale. As a working photograph for a painter, compare the *Modèle photographié pour Delacroix* by Eugène Durrieu (circa 1854); reproduced in Yvan Christ's *L'âge d'or de la photographie* (Paris, Vincent, Fréal and Co., 1965), p. 75.

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might even go as far as to say that photography has at present become the last refuge for studies of the nude. When in fact the nude figure does appear it is only one form among others. The expression of its moods and of its nuances, as that of its real form, has been given over to the realism of photography. Yet the photographic nude is not simply that of literal realism which the avant-garde painters of the 19th century abandoned. In the works of the best photographers, the beauty and the sense of the nude appear with the same direct graphic qualities proper to the lens.⁶ In fact, the only beauty which photography can offer, other than that of its technique, is that of the nature which the operator was able to select and capture.

Regardless of how the problem is approached one is inevitably brought back to the central point: the photographic image and the painted image differ specifically in beauty as they do in nature and it is this difference in their respective natures which determines the difference in their types of beauty. The constant mixture of the two orders creates the confusion which obscures discussion of the problem. One must especially do away with the illusion that the photographic nude can never equal in beauty the nude in fine arts because of the inferiority of the means at the disposal of the photographer. That is not the point. It is easy to photograph a nude which will be more beautiful than so many painted nudes that one might mention, but then one sets up a comparison between two heterogeneous and literally incommensurable orders. The notion of art is applied to two types of operations which have nothing in common except the general sense of production according to

⁶ From P. Lacey, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and p. 25. There are numerous examples in P. Lacey's book. Thomas Eakins, first a painter, later Professor of Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, is represented by two nudes (one of which in the style of Boucher) visibly inspired by painting (pp. 40-42). On the other hand, Richard Weston (pp. 74-75) welds as perfectly as possible a perfect photographic technique with the natural beauty of the model who is served by this technique. There is also a nude figure by Emmanuel Sougez, born in Bordeaux in 1889, (pp. 106-107), whose modelling is of extraordinary beauty. A typical case is that of J. Frederick Smith of New York, who specializes in commercial art. His formula is simple: good photographs of aesthetically perfect female models according to the taste of the day. Smith prefers svelte models because their thinness remains feminine without accentuating female characteristics: "While feminine, it is not too emphatically female." (*op. cit.*, p. 200). Admirers of Bonnard will be amused to imagine what the painter might have done with the model of Willy Ronis (*Nu*, 1935), in André Vigneau, *Une brève histoire de l'art*, p. 163.

the rules of a given technique, because whereas the operation is entrusted to the hand in the plastic arts it is carried out by a machine in the case of photography. As we have said, the lens is not animated. Once the initial selection has been made the image makes itself so independently and automatically that it is virtually “instantaneous.” However swift and nimble the hand may be, there is no “instantaneous” drawing. Each line corresponds to a distinct movement of the hand and wrist, with this movement following a rapid decision of the mind that guides it. In painting and in sculpture, the hand is a tool which is as intelligent as the eye, and instead of being an optical instrument that passively registers a “shot,” the eye of the artist is a monitor and an informer that invite the mind to order the movements necessary to the production of a certain image whose ultimate end is both in itself and in a certain rapport with the resemblance of the model. Even in cases where this rapport is intentionally close, it is so in truth only by analogy. It is said of certain portraits that they reproduce faithfully the lineaments or lines of the model. But this is only a manner of speaking because the model has no lines. Only the drawing and the sketch are made up of lines. Now, each one of these lines is the result of a decision and a choice among other possible choices or decisions. That is why any artistic representation of a real object, living or not, presents a schematic aspect in relation to the model, and not only schematic but constructed. The presence of the artist alone explains the precise determination, never observable to the same degree nor in the same nature, in natural beings. Charles Du Bos expressed this admirably in his *Journal* for August 11, 1910: “One might say that the essential contribution of any artist worthy of that name to the material which he is handling is the bringing to it of a mind so logically organized that at the precise moment when he applies himself to rendering with the most meticulous fidelity the lineaments of his model—whether he wants to or not—he interprets this model as it exists aesthetically (in the realm of absolute and, as one might say, architectonic types) rather than as his model is in reality.”⁷

One last objection remains to be countered: the existence of a photographic method which proposes to produce by means of the

⁷ *Cahiers de Charles Du Bos*, 10 (1966) 36.

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lens, works which, like those of the painter and the sculptor, are valid in their own right and are willed for their beauty alone. Why should photography thus practiced, as it is in effect, not be counted among the arts of the beautiful? Let us answer one last time: it is quite legitimate to give words whatever meanings one may wish, provided their meaning remains precise and that in a discussion a given word will always mean the same thing. Now in the question at issue, the words “art” and “beauty” mean neither the same type of production nor the same type of beauty. One can make photographs that are pleasant to look at in their own right on two conditions: in the first place, that the model be artificially arranged in advance, in the manner of a still life, or in the inspired spirit of abstract art or surrealist art. But in this case it is the arranger of the subject who produces the beauty and not the photographer. And in the second, that the photographer do his utmost so that his work will impose itself visually as an artistic creation and not as a mere reproduction of reality.

There is no rule for judging beauty or the absence of beauty in relation to any given object. Those who take pleasure in looking at photographs of this kind are the only qualified judges of their pleasure. Looking at the problem from the outside, that is to say from the standpoint of the abstract definition of photography, one will have to note that the essence of the art photograph, as it is understood, consists in resembling photography as little as possible. For the “purist” photographer this is bad photography. The operator, moreover, quickly runs through the cycle of all possible devices: shots against the light, blurred effects, unusual lay-out and other artifices of the same type. Their nature matters little (deformations achieved through the lens, partial fogging in the process of developing, etc.) since, in the last analysis, these artifices will always be tricks or fakings obtained through a camera and are not the results produced by a hand. The “purist” photographer is truly the author of his work. Like Nadar, Carjat or Demachy, he leaves such an obviously recognized personal stamp on his works that his copyright and royalties are guaranteed by law,⁸ but

⁸ R. Gouriou, *La photographie et les droits d'auteur*, Librairie générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence (Paris, 1959). For the general notion of art implied in our remarks on photography we refer the reader to our earlier writings: *Peinture et réalité* (Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958); *Les arts du beau* (same

whatever liberties he may take with his images, the substance of his work will always consist in natural appearances inscribed and fixed by light on a screen. The essence of photography is thereby safeguarded in its integrity, without any reference to beauty being required, for the perfection of the image consists in its fidelity to the model as that of the work of the fine arts consists in its beauty.

publisher, 1963); *Matières et formes, poétiques particulières des arts majeurs* (same publisher, 1964). These three works have appeared in English: one, *Painting and Reality*, in the Bollingen Series, as well as in a Meridian paperback; the other two were published by Scribner's Sons, New York City.