

Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs



What was Photography?

Grant B. Romer

TECHNICAL NOTE

A widespread and very confused "Death of Photography" discourse grew as the commercial viability of silver-halide based photography declined in the 1990's. The ascendancy of digital imaging technology disrupted a long established order. As a result, the very definition of "Photography" and "Photograph" changed. Imaging Technology now merges increasingly with Information Technology, forever dissolving the long existing boundaries that once defined photography. The availability of silver-based photographic materials diminishes daily, to the dismay of photographers who have identified themselves with the materials, tools, techniques, craft and experiences of chemical imaging. The laments of those attached to the old ways of photography can still be heard, although they grow fainter every day.

Photography has transformed and progressed since its inception. The current transition is, in the minds of many, nothing more than continuation of the history of Photography. Change is inevitable in photography. The reign of one process ends as another begins. "Photography is dead! Long live Photography!" is the cry of those who feel that a new and better photography has ascended the throne of commercial dominance. Others see a break of continuity in the history of Photography. One can now have an argument as to what is "True" photography, as well as what is "True" in photography

From any distance, this argument parallels and seems as moot as the old "Can Photography be Art?" debate. Surprisingly, that argument may finally have been decided while this newer argument rages. For those concerned with the artistic viability of the medium of photography, in whatever form takes, the recent record sale of a work by Richard Prince and his subsequent comments, should be of great interest.

On November 8th, 2005, Richard Prince's, *Untitled (Cowboy)* 1989, set a world auction record, the first photograph to publicly sell for over a million dollars. The Ektacolor print, 50 x 70 inches, was described in the catalog as "number one from an edition of two, plus one artist proof". The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had already acquired the other of the supposed two prints in the edition. Their print is now prominently on display in the newly opened Contemporary Photography gallery. The "re-photograph" of a magazine Marlboro cigarette advertisement, sold at Christie's Post-War/Contemporary Art auction for \$1,248,000. Subsequently, two more of the same print sold at world record-breaking prices: on May 16, 2007 for \$2,840,000; and again on November 14, 2007 for \$3,401,000.

Many heralded the sale as a triumph, final recognition that Photography is truly an art. Ironically, the sale marked a very different finality in the mind of the artist. When interviewed about the event's importance to the photography community, Prince surprisingly responded:

I've never been included in any photography-based survey, museum show, and photo magazine. I've heard that Peter Galassi (Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York) hates my work. That he would never acknowledge it in the photo department at MoMA. I think he's wrong. ***I think my photo work is all about photography...***When you don't have any training in a particular medium you can bring something to it that hasn't been brung (sic)...I 'brung' the sheriff" and I shot him. ***I killed photography.*** Maybe they hated that. ***Maybe I should have 'rescued' photography.*** (artcritical.com, December 2005, David Cohen, Editor)

Clearly Richard Prince is no friend of photography! He, with these comments, virtually pulled the nose of all those who value photography as a special art form. Strangely, his very astonishing words went without critical response. They should have provoked a cascade of wonder in anyone who thinks about photography. Why would anyone want to kill photography? Did photography need killing? How could someone kill photography? Has Richard Prince really killed photography? Did photography need to be 'rescued'? If so, from what did it need to be 'rescued'? Could Richard Prince have 'rescued' photography? How is his photo work 'all about photography'? Is it possible that the 2005 sale was not the final triumph of photography in the long struggle for acceptance by the art community, but actually, the final and fatal defeat of photography? Is the "death of photography" actually a murder?



Prince is not considered, nor does he consider himself, a "photographer". He is an "artist", an inheritor of the mantle once worn by painters. "I wanted to paint but I did not know what to paint", is how he has explained his path to the "appropriation art", which has made him famous. In the early 1980's he began re-photographing advertisements featuring cowboys while working for Time-Life in the tear-sheet department. "In those days it was called "pirating", he recalls, "Now they call it 'sampling'". He delights in having many imitators.

The meaning of *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1989, is most commonly explained as satirical commentary on America values, by revealing the falseness and abuse of the image of the American cowboy, symbol of truth, honesty and authenticity. The image of the American cowboy had been developed, through popular literature and the entertainment industry, to symbolize bravery, independence, authenticity, and honesty, all characteristics that American's commonly believed, up to that time, to be expressions of the national character. 1989, the year he made the work was the last year of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Reagan had played a cowboy in many movies and television programs, cleverly exploiting that image in building his political persona. He was the first of the "False Cowboy" presidents. The American advertising industry had also exploited the image, most successfully in the "Marlboro Man" campaign, launched in the 1950's, when the cowboy appeal was at its strongest. Cigarette marketers cleverly attached the image of the cowboy, culturally equated with American "goodness", to a health destroying American "badness".

The children of Prince's generation (he was born in 1949) truly believed and participated in the cult of the American cowboy through the visual medium of television. Virtually every American child of the 1950's innocently impersonated the cowboy. Ultimate revelation of the falseness of the cowboy image, and the falseness of many other things believed to be true, became apparent upon that generation reaching adulthood in the 1970's. Gradually, just as cynicism became apparent in art after the First World War in Europe, the art of the post Second World War generation began to reflect cynicism about American values after the Vietnam War.

Thus, it is not surprising that Prince's photograph, presents a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a real falsehood. A man dressed as a cowboy was photographed. That photograph was then enhanced and re-photographed for photomechanical reproduction. The photomechanical image, which looked like a true photograph (a silver-halide based image), but was not (being ink on paper), presented the



TECHNICAL NOTE CONT'D.

fictitious "Marlboro Man". The "original" printed magazine page was then photographed by Prince and printed in multiple copies. After such a ride, one yearns to light up a cigarette!

No further reading seems necessary. However, Prince, when asked about the work, did not reply that it is "all about cowboys", or "all about America". Instead, his reply was that his work was "all about photography". Another, less obvious and darker level of meaning must exist in the work.

Art critics characterize Prince, as "a man of ideas". Indeed, he is. Those ideas are not always his own. The commercial photographers, who made the original photographs of the "Marlboro Man", have made much complaint about being "pirated" by Prince. Of course, the act of appropriation is integral to Prince's artistic motives. The inversion of "Originality", "Authenticity", and "Verity" is the essence of his Post Modern art. What could delight Prince more than to have "professional" photographers, themselves users of the quintessential "appropriation medium", complain about someone "taking their pictures"! He, literally, has tricked them into making fools of them. But, what would motivate him to do so?

In the 1970's, a "death of painting" critical discourse set the stage for the flourishing of the "appropriation art" that Prince pioneered. That discourse was nothing more than the end of one begun in 1839. "From today Painting is dead!" the artist Paul Delaroche is said to have declared at the announcement of the Daguerreotype. Whether he declared so or not, the eminence and legitimacy of reality-based painting began to die with the introduction of photography. Significantly, no one has credited Daguerre with declaring "I killed painting!" Maybe he should have rescued it.

From the beginning it was recognized that the essential power of photography existed in its seeming verity. Not by artistic trick of paint and brush, but by science and technology, a copy of a visual reality could be made with a speed and accuracy that no human facility could equal. In effect, photography appropriates reality and is commonly believed to be truthful. Thus, the photograph is believed, despite the many ambiguities that abound within any photograph that was ever made. Those that worry about the potential falseness of digital photography testify to the persistence of the simple belief in photographic truth. It, however, makes as much sense as believing in the "Marlboro Man".

Like some anti-hero outlaw in the phony cowboy world Prince derides, he brought the "sheriff" (the authority of photography) and "shot him" (with a camera). What audience would applaud him for that?



Only that which had sworn a vendetta against the disruptive technology that killed reality-based painting. Hatred and fear of photography surely existed deep in the sub-conscious of all post 1839 artists. Picasso, of all painters, perhaps most indebted to photography, evidently felt such emotions, He is reported to have once awakened out of a hashish-induced nightmare, screaming in horror, "I dreamt I invented photography!"

Many an artist of the 19th century yearned to "kill" photography and struck against it. But it was not until the 20th century when Marcel Duchamp made mockery of painting that the ground was prepared for the assassin of photography. That task was to be taken up by Andy Warhol. His 1964 enlargement of a crude half-tone reproduction of a photograph of Elvis dressed as a gun-toting cowboy, silk-screened in ink onto stretched canvas, presaged Prince's Marlboro Man. This and other works of the time belittled the "photographic standard". The qualities of great detail and tonal range, that gave the illusion of verity to photographs, were drained away from the originals. In response to a question about the lack of "truthfulness" in his photographic portraits of that era, he tellingly replied, "Who wants the truth?" He may just well have said, "Who wants Photography?".

Many artists followed Warhol's example, turning photographs into virtual paintings and paintings into photographs. Prince may very well not be the assassin of photography, as he claims. He may have shot the "sheriff", that is the authority of photography, but he did so when Photography, as a technology, an industry and as an artistic medium was weak and near natural death. It has been said by some critics that all of the artistic potentials of photography were exhausted by the 1990's. Cinema and television have had more influence in bringing an end to Photography's vitality than did Richard Prince. Digital imaging and the personal computer have certainly electrified and may have electrocuted Photography. "What is Photography?" and "What are Photographs?" are now questions as difficult to answer as "What is Truth?" or "What is Beauty?"

It seems that it would be much easier to answer the question: "What was Photography?" The history of the origins, progress and transformations of photography has been written by many different authors at many different times since 1839. It would be assumed that all one would have to do would be to consult those histories in order to answer the question. Certainly it would be useful to do so, since a line is being drawn that divides "What was Photography" from "What is Photography" out of need to differentiate between the past and present of photography. Surprisingly, the existing silver-halide



photographs are receding very rapidly in time. They look more and more like they are from another era. "Traditional" and "Classic" are now being commonly used to refer to silver-halide photography, although neither of these terms is adequate in describing what Photography has been.

Consulting the histories of Photography today raises more questions than answers. We are told that Photography emerged out of a latent human need; that it has steadily progressed towards perfection; and that it has greatly improved life. What was that latent need, what would constitute perfection, and how it improved life, are not satisfactorily accounted for. We might legitimately question whether photography was such a great blessing, after all. Indeed a case has been made that the institutionalization of the god of "Technological Progress" is a Caucasoid disease, a symptom of undisplaced aggression do to psychosexual maladaptation, spread to the rest of the world, primarily through photography. Obviously, this view is far from popular in Europe and America. However, the negative aspects of the medium must be noted and accounted for. Photography has been, in retrospect, variously characterized as a "heartbreaking trick", "a thing of Death", and "a gift of the Devil". Can the aptness of such judgments be totally denied? Is it not possible that future judgment will damn more than praise, Photography?

If it is appropriate to speak of the "life" of a technology or a form of creative expression, then its "death" can be anticipated, witnessed, recorded, and even celebrated. "Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!", is the response of those who understand that something has been lost and something gained in the recent transition. Identifying what those "somethings" are is an entirely different matter. The world-wide confusion and inability to answer questions about the basic nature of Photography is a symptom of decay, not only of the industry and technology, but also the histories and understandings of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whatever else Photography was, it is now essentially a great rotting body of knowledge. The greatest lesson the history of Photography teaches is that future generations will understand little of what Photography was in the past. What is our understanding today of the Daguerreotype and all the other obsolete processes compared to what understanding once existed? There is reason to believe that forgetfulness of what Photography was is a preferred state. The profound influence of Andy Warhol on the current understanding, application and valuation of Photography as a special art form has been noted above. His philosophy in regards to the valuation of memory, is particularly telling: "My mind is like a tape recorder with one button...Erase." That button has been pressed and what was Photography is being rapidly forgotten.



TECHNICAL NOTE CONT'D.

The consequences of the loss of knowledge of the materials, methods, industry and culture of non-electronic photography, as it may now be most aptly termed, will be the neglect and probable destruction of most of the photographs created before the turn of our current century. Certainly, in the past, the task of caring for the pre-existing photographic record has become more, not less, difficult with every transition of photographic technology. Painting was different, if not dead, after the advent of Photography, and Photography is now different with the advent of Electronic Imaging.

©2010 Grant B. Romer

Used by permission of the author.

