

# Notes on the photographic image

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In the relation between art and image, photography has played a symptomatic and often paradoxical role. Baudelaire made of it the sinister instrument of the triumph of technical reproduction over artistic imagination. And yet we also know of the long struggle of photographers (*pictorialistes*) to affirm that photography was not merely mechanical reproduction, but rather an interpretation of the world. But scarcely had they won their battle to endow the technical medium of photography with the status of artistic medium, when Benjamin turned the game on its head. He made mechanical reproduction the principle of a new paradigm of art: the productions of the mechanical arts were for him the means towards a new sensible education, the instruments of the formation of a new class of experts in art, namely in the art of interpreting signs and documents. Cinema was a series of tests of our world. Atget's photos were indices to interpret; Sander's collections were notebooks for teaching combatants in the social struggle to readily identify allies and adversaries. The photographic medium participated in the construction of a sensible world where men of the age of the masses could affirm their existence as both possible subjects of art and experts in its use.

It seems, nevertheless, that the destiny of the art of photography has no more confirmed Benjamin's diagnostic than that of Baudelaire. To support this claim, we can point to two phenomena more or less contemporary to one another that concern both photography and its interpretation. On the one hand, the 1980s saw photography invade art museums and exhibitions, taking on the dimensions of monumental paintings. These large-format photographs, amidst the proliferation of installations and video installations, assure, in a certain sense, the continuity of the pictorial surface. But, at the same time, what they present to us on this surface seems to turn its back on the forms of the pictorial revolutions of the twentieth century. Without even speaking of extreme examples like Jeff Wall's revival of the historical tableau, we can think of the multiplication of portraits and the new status of the portrait, illustrated by, for example, photographer Rineke Dijkstra's monumental portraits of otherwise

indifferent individuals, represented without any particular aura: slightly awkward-looking adolescents on working-class beaches, young mothers still burdened by their babies, or apprentice toreadors, whose red-faced figures clash with the bullfighter's traditional suit of lights. On the one hand, these full-length portraits present themselves as documents on social types or age groups undergoing transformation. On the other, the absence of expression, combined with the formalism of the pose and the size of the image, gives these indifferent figures something mysterious: something that for us also inhabits the portraits of Florentine and Venetian nobility which populate the museums. The teenager in the green swimsuit photographed on a Polish beach, with her slender body, her swaying hips, and her unfurled hair (below) is like an awkward replica of Botticelli's *Venus*. Photography is thus not content to occupy the place of painting. It presents itself as the rediscovered union between two statuses of the image that the modernist tradition had separated:



the image as representation of an individual and as operation of art.

How should we think this new coincidence and tension between the grand pictorial form and simply the images of indifferent individuals? The interpretation seems, at first sight, split between two extremes: at the one end, an exacerbation of the sensible presence of the photographed subject, in its provocative power with respect to modernist logic; at the other, an integration of this photographic realism – or hyperrealism – into the modernist scheme. In the first instance, we think of course of Barthes and *Camera Lucida*, the absolute reference for thought on photography in the 1980s. Barthes's manoeuvre was to break the representation of the indifferent in two. The indifferent is, on the one hand, that which is identifiable by the intersection of a certain number of general traits. On the other, it is the absolute singularity of that which imposes its brute presence, and affects by this brute presence. We recognize here the principle of the opposition between the *studium*, conceived as the informative content of the photograph, and the *punctum*, conceived as its affective force, irreducible to transmission of knowledge. This affective force is the transfer of an absolute singularity, that of the represented subject, to another absolute singularity, that of the viewing subject. It is easy to underline the double paradox of this theorization in light of the ulterior evolution of photography. It privileges a vision of photographic reproduction where it is the *having-been* of the body that comes to imprint itself on the sensitive plate, and from there touches us without mediation. This raising of the stakes concerning the indexical conception of photography was immediately countered by the digital invasion. At the moment when large-format photogra-

phy is about to overrun the museum walls and affirm itself as a visual art, it transforms the photographic gaze into the gaze of an individual who pages through albums. But this historical contretemps refers us back to a more fundamental torsion concerning the relation between photography, art and modernism. In a certain manner, Barthes contorts the formalist modernist, who opposed the form (artistic/pictorial) to the anecdote (empiricist/photographic). Barthes diverts the opposition by transferring the anecdote to the *studium*, in order to pit it against not the artistic form, but an experience of the unique that refutes the pretension to art as well as the platitude of information. However, this opposition between art and photography is perhaps more profoundly the leave given to another modernity, to which Benjamin's essay bore witness, and that inscribed photography among the instruments of a new social sensibility and a new social consciousness (three elements and not two). It is from this point of view that it seems useful to me to examine more closely the examples through which Barthes operates the opposition between *studium* and *punctum*. Let us take, for example, Lewis Hine's photograph of the two mentally disabled children (below).

Barthes tells us not to look at the monstrous heads or the pitiful profiles that signify the disability. Instead, he opposes to these the force of fascination that is exerted on him by the details without signification: the boy's Danton collar, the bandage on the little girl's finger.<sup>1</sup> But the *punctum* thus marked, in fact, obeys the same formal logic as the repudiated *studium*. It concerns, in both cases, features of disproportion. The privilege of the *punctum* here is simply to privatize this formal effect. We can read this analysis as the exact reversal of the critical logic previously put to work by the Barthes of *Mythologies*. What was at stake for him there, in a Brechtian logic, was to make visible the social hidden in the intimate, the history dissimulated as the appearance of nature. From this point of view, the very choice of the photograph is significant. The photo of the two disabled children appears as a *hapax* (ἄπαξ λεγόμενον '[something] said only once') in the career of a photographer who devoted numerous series to the representation of work and the campaign against child labour. The



‘stupidity’ of the detail drawn from the irreducible hardship and misfortune of the two disabled children can be read like a screen placed before other photos of children: that of the Polish child, ‘Willie’, working in a mill in Rhode Island, or Francis Lance, the 5-year-old newspaper ‘salesman’. Yet, these ‘documentary’ photographs are the bearers of a tension between visibility and signification that is perhaps more interesting than the image of the two disabled children. They are in effect made for the purpose of denouncing the scandal of child labour. Yet, Willie’s attitude, as he sits nonchalantly (taking his midday rest) in a doffer-box, or Francis Lance’s, proudly standing his ground on a train platform with his newspapers tucked under his arm, do not testify to any suffering. What strikes us is precisely the opposite: it is the selfsame ease with which they show themselves capable of both adapting to their work and posing for the camera, thus obliging Lewis Hine to insist, in his commentary, on the dangers of their work, which they themselves seem so unconcerned about.

### ‘Impoverished ontology’

The activity of the commentator seems to respond, in advance, to the ‘Benjaminian’ demand. It is, in particular, the relation between the child workers, the camera, the photo and the text that follows this logic, linking the appreciation of the photographic performance to new forms of ‘expertise’ and to the experimentation of a new sensible world. The Danton collar suffices to silently settle the accounts with this logic. The only sensible world that the photo witnesses is the relation of the absolute singularity of the spectacle to the absolute singularity of the gaze. Much the same can be said about Avedon’s photograph of the old slave.<sup>2</sup> Here the procedure is reversed: no detail distracts from a socio-political reading. On the contrary, the mask of the photographed subject speaks of nothing else than the condition of slavery. But the effect is the same: it is slavery in person, as a historical singularity, that offers itself entirely in the singularity of a single face. To declare slavery to be present in person, in front of our eyes, between our hands, is, in fact, to diminish the singularity of the other photographs that speak to us about what took place between the abolition of slavery and our present. For example, John Vachon’s photo, which shows us only the sign reading *Colored*, nailed high up on the trunk of a pine tree, next to which is the likely object of its discrimination: a simple drinking fountain. The multiplicity of racial discrimination’s forms of sensible existence, and the multiple singularity of these photographs that vary,

and thereby tell us of, the visual forms of the metaphor and of the metonymy, come to be crushed against this black mask that presents slavery in person. But this being of slavery identifies itself with its having-been. Avedon’s photo represents the slavery that is no longer on the face of a man who, himself, is no longer, at the time when Barthes wrote his commentary. When all is said and done, the singularity of slavery written on a singular face is nothing other than the universality of the having-been; in other words, death.

It is to this singularity that the image of the two disabled children, which conceals those of the playing children of the factories, ultimately comes down. But this singularity of the image is itself determined by the power of words alone. Taking up again the two traits of the *punctum* of this photo, it is first of all the bandage on the finger of the little girl. The French word with which Barthes refers to the bandage is *poupée*. Yet the French reader who does not know this usage of the word immediately has another image. The ordinary sense of the word in French is ‘doll’. And the identification of this poignant detail with the *poupée* inevitability evokes a whole series of images: from Hoffmann’s automaton, commented on by Freud, to the dismembered dolls that are a part of the surrealist imaginary, and that contributed more than a little to the transformation of Winnicott’s transitional object into Lacan’s object *petit a*. In short, the effect attributed to the phraseless singularity of the detail is the power of a word. And this power of the word is further accentuated by the proper name that qualifies another poignant detail: the Danton collar. The French reader has no idea what a Danton collar might be. However, the name is immediately associated with that of a revolutionary who had his head sliced off by the guillotine. The *punctum* is nothing other than death foretold.

The analysis of the photo of the two mentally disabled children is therefore linked with that which Barthes devotes to the photo of the handcuffed young man. The photo is beautiful, Barthes tells us, and so is the young man, but that is the *studium*. The *punctum* is that ‘he is going to die’.<sup>3</sup> Yet this death foretold is not visible in any of the features of the photograph. Its presumed effect rests on the combination of the brown colouring of the old photographs and the acquaintance with the individual represented, (in this case) Lewis Payne, condemned to death in 1885 for an attempted assassination of the then American secretary of state. But this affirmation of present death once again employs words to deny what constitutes the visual singularity of the photograph – that is, precisely that its present refuses any readings of the young man’s history, of the

past that led him there, and of the future that awaits him. The half-nonchalant, half-curious attitude of the young man says nothing about this history, much the same as Willie's relaxed pose said nothing about the hardships of factory work, and the gaze of the Polish teenager on the beach nothing about what reasons she might have had for exposing herself, nor her thoughts as she stands in front of the camera. What they speak to us of is only this capacity to expose one's body at the request of the camera, without, for all that, surrendering to it the thought and the feeling that inhabit it. This tension between exposition and retreat vanishes in the pure relation of the viewer with the death that comes to view him.

This disappearance is not only due to the fact that *Camera Lucida* is first of all a eulogy addressed to Barthes's dead mother. Behind the expression of personal grief, there is the expression of another grief, that of the gaze that endeavoured to tie the appreciation of the beauty of an image to that of the social reality that it expressed. Yet, his second grief also manifests itself in a type of reading which, contrary to Barthes, sees in the new modes photographic exposition the reaffirmation of a certain idea of the objectivity of the photograph. It is this thesis that was defended in 1988 by a period-defining exhibition entitled 'Another Objectivity' (*Une autre objectivité*).<sup>4</sup> The accompanying text, by Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, redefined, in its own way, the relation between two fundamental aspects of the modernist norm: on the one hand, the fidelity to the law of the medium; on the other, the fidelity to a certain type of exhibition surface, the *forme-tableau* in its formal separation from the multiple social uses of the image. The fact is that the law of the photographic medium does not offer itself up to a simple interpretation. We can liken it to the instrumental conception that makes the camera a means to furnish some objective information about what is in front of it. But, from this, we still have not defined the specificity of the art of photography. We can liken it to the reproducible character of the photographic image. But it is hardly possible to discern the specific quality of an image from the fact that it is reproducible. This is why the theoreticians of photographic objectivity displaced the idea of multiplication in favour of the idea of a multiple unity. Reproducibility thus becomes seriality.

Benjamin based his argumentation on the typologies of August Sander, while Chevrier and Lingwood favoured the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher. But the analogy is problematic. Benjamin expected that Sander's series would help the combatants in the

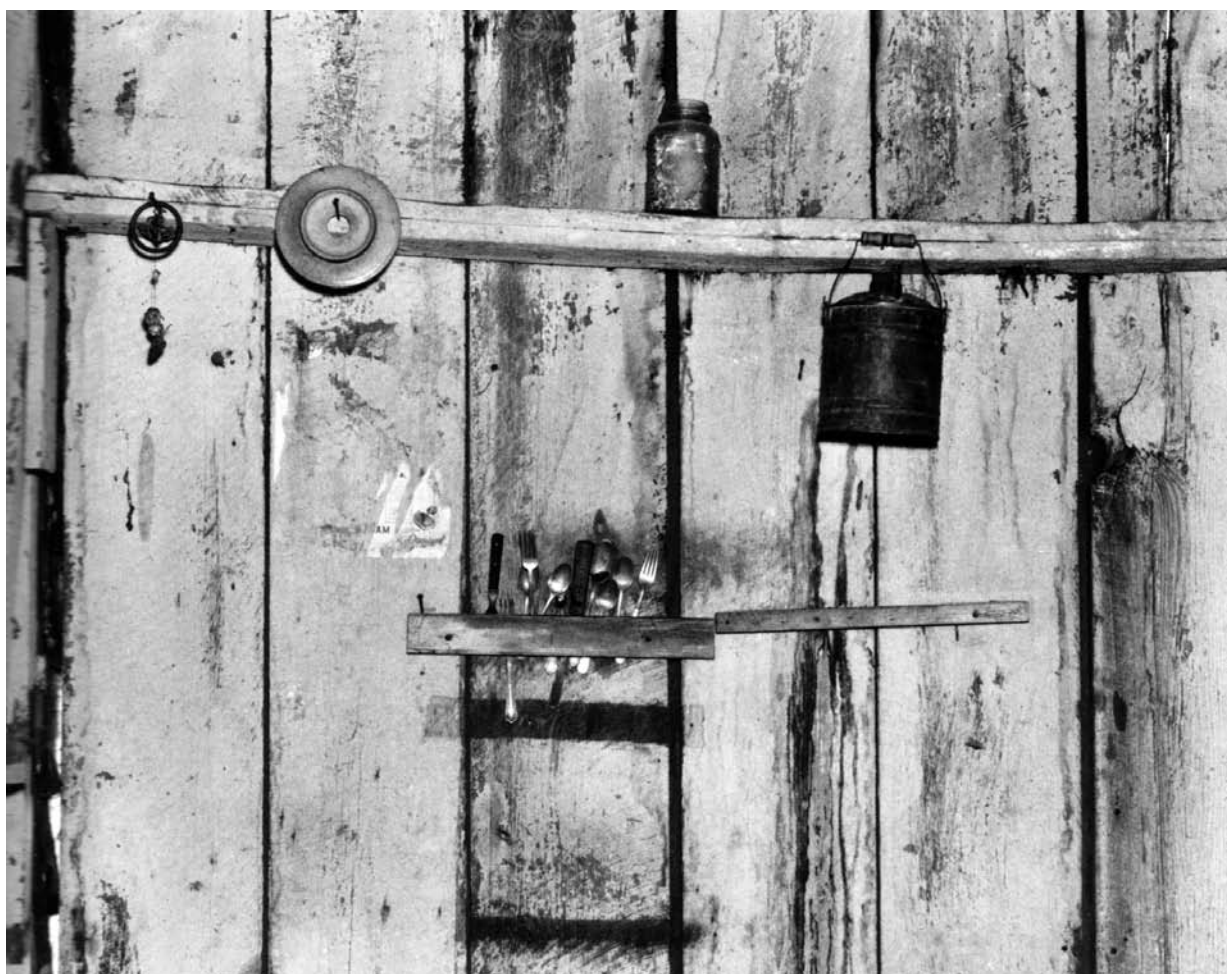
social struggle to recognize allies and enemies. There is manifestly nothing of the sort to be expected from the Bechers' series of water towers or disused industrial sites. They would even fall easily within the scope of Brecht's critique, which was taken up by Benjamin: photos of factories say nothing about the social relations that manifest themselves there. The interest of the series can therefore no longer be looked for in what it enables us to say about social relations. It boils down to an ethical virtue accorded to the multiple as such, in that it rules out the prestige of the one and of the aura, of the unique moment and of the ecstatic contemplation. But this principle is purely negative. Its artistic 'positivity' must thus come from a second manner of thinking the 'objectivity' of the medium. This is summed up, for Chevrier and Lingwood, in the notion of the *forme-tableau*, exemplified by Jeff Wall's backlit photographs. But what relation should we think between these large scenes in the form of historical tableaux and the identical rectangles that make the Bechers' views of water towers and smokestacks resemble pedagogical charts? None, perhaps, if not the Greenbergian idea of the surface that encloses the artist's performance and prohibits him from leaving himself, from showing empathy for his subject or from considering himself as a form of social experimentation. In this sense, the Bechers' industrial sites are a manner of concluding the dream of the artist engineers and factory builders of Peter Behrens's era, in much the same way as Barthes's fascination with the Danton collar served to repress photographer Lewis Hine's engagement on the side of the oppressed and forgotten of the factories and hospices. The reference to the essence of the medium is again here a manner of settling accounts with the epoch where the medium was thought of as the organ of a new collective world. Simply put, this settling of accounts is more complex in the case of the Bechers and the theoreticians of 'objective photography', for whom the repression of the constructivist dream also wants to be the affirmation of a fidelity to the values linked to the industrial universe and the workers' struggle: the sobriety of the documentary gaze that refuses the humanist pathos, the formal principles of the frontal perspective, the uniform framing, and the presentation in series that links scientific objectivity and the disappearance of the subjectivity of the artist.

It remains the case: that which is given to see by the objectivist mindset is fundamentally an absence – disused edifices in the place of social classes and types. Yet, photographing absence can be interpreted in two ways: it can be a manner of showing the programmed

departure of the industrial world and worker; but it is just as much a manner of playing on the aesthetic affect of the disused (*desaffecté*) that sends us back to the side of Barthes's 'having-been'. This tension in the objectivist idea of the medium is more perceptible still in the series of containers taken by a follower of the Bechers, Frank Breuer, presented during the 2005 *Rencontres photographiques* in Arles, in the transept of an ancient church, along with two other series, devoted to warehouses and to logos. From afar the spectator perceived them as abstract scenes or as reproductions of minimalist sculptures. Upon approaching, however, one discovered that the coloured rectangles on a white background were containers stacked in a large deserted space. The impact of the series was down to the tension between this minimalism and the signification that it concealed. These containers were to be, or were to have been, filled with merchandise unloaded at Antwerp or Rotterdam, and probably were produced in a distant country, perhaps by faceless workers in Southeast Asia. They were, in short, filled with their own absence, which was also that of every worker engaged to unload them, and, even more remotely, that of the European workers replaced by these distant labourers.

The 'objectivity' of the medium thus masks a determined aesthetic relation between opacity and transpar-

ency, between the containers as brute presence of pure coloured forms and the containers as representatives of the 'mystery' of the merchandise – that is to say, of the manner in which it absorbs human work and hides its mutations. It consists in the relation between presence and absence, in the double relation of a visible form to a signification and an absence of sense. Jean-François Chevrier bases his argument on the idea of an 'impoverished ontology' of photography. On one level, this is to say that photography does not have the strong ontological consistency that would enable its artistic forms to be deduced from its materiality. But we can give this poverty a more positive signification. If photography is not under the law of a proper ontological consistency, linked to the specificity of its technical mechanism, it lends itself to accomplishing the ideas about art formed by the other arts. This capacity of the mechanical art to realize what other arts had tried to accomplish by their own means was developed at length by Eisenstein, in relation to cinematic editing, which, via the temporal sequencing of shots, realized what painting had tried to accomplish in fragments. Serov, for example, tried to bring out on canvas the energy of the actress Yermolova through cutting, with the help of the lines of the mirrors and of the mouldings of a room, several different framings



for the different parts of the body.<sup>5</sup> The editing of the different shots of the stone lions in *The Battleship Potemkin* realized this dream of the painter. Photography allows an accomplishment of the same order by capturing a motionlessness that literature tried to attain through the movement of the phrase or the power of the mystery sought in the contortion of the uses of language. The poverty of photography permits it to realize this inclusion of non-art that literature or painting can only imitate by artistic means.

### Exacerbating modernism

This is what can be demonstrated by a photograph situated in the interval between Barthes's 'having-been' and the objectivity of the Becher School. Walker Evans's photograph (left) represents to us a detail of the kitchen in a farm in Alabama. It responds, first of all, to a documentary function at the heart of a major investigation commissioned by the Farm Security Administration. Nevertheless, something happens in the photo that exceeds the task of providing information concerning a miserable situation: a kitchen with neither sideboard nor cupboard, tinplate silverware held in a makeshift rack, a lopsided wooden board nailed to a wall of disjointed and worm-ridden planks. What strikes us is a certain aesthetic disposition marked by disorder: the parallels are not parallel, the silverware is ordered in disorder, the objects on the high beam (functioning as a shelf) are placed in a dissymmetrical manner. This lopsided assemblage composes, in total, a harmonious dissymmetry, the cause of which remains uncertain: is it the effect of chance, the fact that the objects found themselves in front of the objective? Is it the gaze of the photographer, who chose a close-up of a detail, thus transforming a completely random or simply functional layout into an artistic quality? Or is it the aesthetic taste of an inhabitant of the premises, making art with the means available by hammering in a nail or putting a can here rather than there? It is possible that the photographer wanted to show the destitution of the farmers. It is also possible that he simply photographed what was in front of him without any particular intention, and that the photo thus benefits from the beauty of the random. And, it is possible that he took pleasure in seeing a quasi-abstract minimalist scene or, conversely, that he wanted to underline a certain beauty of the functional: the sobriety of the plank and of the rack could, in effect, satisfy a certain aesthetic of design, attracted by the simple and brute material, and the art of living and doing transmitted by generations of simple people. All in all, the aesthetic quality of the photograph stems from a perfect equi-

librium, a perfect indecision between the two forms of beauty that Kant distinguished: beauty adherent to the form adapted to its function, and the free beauty of the finality without end.

We don't know what was going through Walker Evans's mind in framing his photo as he did. But we do know that he had an idea about art that he inherited, not from a photographer or painter, but from a writer, Flaubert. The idea is that the artist must remain invisible in his work, like God in his creation. But it would be going a bit too far to say that the camera realizes on the cheap – that is, by its mechanism alone – that which, for the writer, involves a never-ending work of subtraction. For impersonality is not the same thing as the objectivity of the camera, and the issue is perhaps not so much to subtract but rather to make the 'impersonalization' of the style coincide with the grasping of the opposite movement: that by which indifferent lives appropriate the aesthetic capacities that subtract them from a simple social identification. The photographer's gaze upon the singular arrangement of the silverware in a poor Alabama kitchen might remind us of the gaze that Flaubert lent to Charles Bovary as he looked at the head of Minerva, drawn by young Emma for her father on the peeling walls of Father Rouault's farm. This is not merely to say that the camera directly expresses a poetry of the banal that the writer could only make felt through laborious work on each sentence. It is also the power to transform the banal into the impersonal, forged by a literature that hollows out from the inside the apparent evidence, the apparent immediacy of the photo, just as pictorial silence overran the 'Flaubertian' phrase. But this effect of painting on literature and of literature on photography is not the same as a simple shared capacity to transfigure the banality of life into the artistic splendour of indifference. This 'indifference' is also the meeting point, the point of tension, between the subtraction of the artistic effect that characterizes the work of the artist and the supplement of aesthetic sensibility that is adjoined to the lives of indifferent beings.

The consideration of both the *punctum* and the objectivism of the *forme-tableau* also lacks this relation between social banality and aesthetic power that inhabits the photographic portrait of the indifferent being. To understand what the 'indifference' of the photograph of the kitchen in Alabama or of the Polish teenager has in common with that of 'Flaubertian' literature, and to what type of 'modernity' this indifference bears witness, one must no doubt integrate these images into a completely different evolution of representation (*figuration*). To sketch out this history, I would like to

dwell for a moment on a singular analysis that Hegel devotes, in his *Lessons on Aesthetics*, to Murillo's paintings of the child beggars of Seville, which he saw in the Royal Gallery in Munich. He evokes these paintings in a development whereby he attempts to reverse the classic evaluation of the value of pictorial genres according to the dignity of their subjects. But Hegel does not content himself with telling us that all subjects are equally proper to painting. He establishes a close relation between the virtue of this painting and the activity specific to these young beggars, an activity that consists precisely in doing nothing and not worrying about anything. There is in them, he tells us, a total disregard towards the exterior, an inner freedom in the exterior that is exactly what the concept of the artistic ideal calls for. They are like the young man in one of the portraits at the time attributed to Raphael, whose idle head gazes freely into the distance. Better still, they testify to a beatitude that is almost similar to that of the Olympian gods.<sup>6</sup>

There is one notion in particular in this passage that grabs our attention, that of being carefree. It seems to reply in advance to an analysis of the aesthetic revolution that holds sway today, that by which Michael Fried characterizes the theorizing and the practice of painting implemented by the contemporaries of Diderot. Presenting the characters in the scene as completely absorbed by their task is, for him, the means by which the painters of that period, following the example of Greuze, posed and resolved the big question of artistic modernity: how can a work be made coherent by excluding the spectator from its space? This 'anti-theatricality' is for him the essence of pictorial modernity, defined not in a 'Greenbergian' manner as simple concentration of the artist on his medium, but rather as definition of the place that it gives to the person who looks upon it. The *forme-tableau* of Jeff Wall's lightboxes or of the large-format cibachromes and chromogenic prints by Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky or Thomas Demand seems to Fried to renew, in exemplary fashion, the tradition of this modernity. But it comes at a price, and the active 'absorption' of the pictorial character, originally illustrated with such impassioned attention by Greuze's characters, increasingly becomes an inability to see and to feel seen. Thus, for example, the tourists in Thomas Struth's photographs of museums are represented in the absence of what they look upon in the Accademia (Michelangelo's *David*) or blurred in the darkness in Tokyo in front of a *Liberté guidant le peuple*, itself separated by a glass pane. Likewise, Rineke Dijkstra's teenagers are valued first of all for the awkwardness

proper to their age, for their lack of control over their bodies which makes them unconscious of what they offer to be seen.<sup>7</sup> The window cleaner who, in Jeff Wall's famous photo, washes the windows of Mies van der Rohe's pavilion, is not only separated from us by the back that he turns to us and by his relegation outside of the area directly illuminated by the sun; he is also 'deliberately forgetful' of the great event signifying the new day, 'the influx of the warm morning light'.<sup>8</sup> As for the traders at the Hong Kong stock exchange or the workers at the basket factory in Nha Trang, their 'absorption' excludes the spectator all the more effectively as it renders them almost invisible by depriving them of all interiority and making of their attention an entirely mechanical process. It would be off-key, Fried emphasizes, to see here any form of representation of capitalist dehumanization. This 'flattening of absorption' bears witness, on the contrary, to 'the consistency with which this artist resists or indeed repudiates all identification by the viewer with the human subjects of his images – the project of severing calls for nothing less'.<sup>9</sup>

'Objective' photography therefore demonstrates here the exacerbation of a modernist project of separation. The visual attention that is paid by the modest people, in Greuze's paintings, to each other and their surroundings is replaced by their ant-sized representation in Gursky's photographs. But this transformation, in turn, reveals the presuppositions of the analysis: the active absorption of characters by their task is, ultimately, only their passive absorption into the space of the painting. What they are or do matters little, but what is important is that they are put in their place. It is with regard to this positing named absorption that Hegel's insistence on the carefree inactivity of the young beggars becomes meaningful. Inactivity is not laziness. It is the suspension of the opposition between activity and passivity that aligned an idea of art with a hierarchical vision of the world. Murillo's child beggars belonged to the type of picturesque paintings that eighteenth-century aristocrats collected as documents on the exotic life of the working classes. Hegel's analysis removes them from there by giving them a quality which they share with the Olympian gods. This 'carefree' attitude is more striking than the new indifference of subjects and their common capacity to be 'absorbed'. It posits as the exemplary subject of art this 'doing nothing', this common *aesthetic* neutralization of the social hierarchy and of the artistic hierarchy.

The aesthetic capacity shared by the Olympian god, the young noble dreamer and the carefree street child

neutralizes the opposition between the subjects of art and the anonymous forms of experience. 'We have the feeling that for a young person of this type any future is possible', says Hegel.<sup>10</sup> It is a peculiar comment, which makes the figures represented in a seventeenth-century painting contemporary beings whose future we consider. The young beggars testify, in fact, for another modernism far removed from that of Michael Fried's absorbed characters, without, for all that, becoming identified with the young velocipede racing experts extolled by Benjamin. The future that they bear is the blurring of the opposition between the world of work and the world of leisure, between the naked forms of life and the experiences of the aestheticized world. It is to this modernity that the assertion of Walker Evans's master, Flaubert, on the indifference of the subject, belongs. This does not mean the possibility for the artist to apply the 'project of severing', symbolic of Greenberg's or Fried's modernism, to any subject. It is realized only in that space where the artist rids himself of all the habitual attributes of the artist style and comes to encounter the attempts of obscure beings to introduce art into their sensible life, or any other of those forms of experience which their social condition is supposed to forbid. Flaubert may ridicule Emma's artistic pretension, but her art is forever linked to this artistic aspiration of a farmer's girl.

It is, similarly, a form of this encounter that James Agee and Walker Evans try to capture, one by brandishing Whitmanian enumerations and Proustian reminiscences to describe the houses of poor peasants, the other by rendering minimalist art and social document indiscernible when framing a dozen or so pieces of cutlery in front of four planks of brute wood. Before our gaze, there is thus neither simple objective information about a situation nor a wound inflicted by the 'it has been'. The photo does not say whether it is art or not, whether it represents poverty or a game of uprights and diagonals, weights and counterweights, order and disorder. It tells us neither what the person who laid the planks and cutlery in this manner had in mind nor what the photographer wanted to do. This game of multiple gaps perfectly illustrates what Kant designated under the name of aesthetic idea: 'a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept can be adequate.'<sup>11</sup> The aesthetic idea is the indeterminate idea that connects the two processes that the destruction of the mimetic order left separated: the intentional production of art which seeks an end, and the sensible experience of beauty as finality without end. Photography is exemplarily an art of

aesthetic ideas because it is exemplarily an art capable of enabling non-art to accomplish art by dispossessing it. But it is also such through its participation in the construction of a sensible environment which extends beyond its own specificity. What we are shown by the young beggars seen by Hegel, the head of Minerva on the walls of the Normandy farm, the lopsided cans on the beams of the Alabama kitchen, the nonchalant demeanour of the child-worker in his doffer-box, or the swaying hips of the Polish teenager, is that this dispossession which makes art cannot be thought independently of the despecification which removes all of these characters from their social identity. But this despecification itself is not the making of an artistic *coup de force*. It is the correlate of the ability acquired by the characters themselves to play with the image of their being and of their condition, to post it to walls or to set it up before the lens. Judgements about photography are also appreciations of this ability and of what it means for art. This link between artistic purity and aesthetic impurity both fascinated and worried the authors of *Spleen de Paris* and *Madame Bovary*. Walter Benjamin wanted to integrate it in a global vision of the new man in the new technical world. Barthes brought it down to the intimacy of the private gaze. Michael Fried now proposes to bring it down to the interminable task of separation attributed to artistic modernity. But this theoretical *coup de force* would not be possible if the art of photography today was not already the bearer of this tendency to break the historical complicity between the art of the photographer and the aesthetic capacity of his subjects.

Translated by Darian Meacham

## Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1981, p. 51.
2. Ibid., p. 34.
3. Ibid., p. 96.
4. Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Une autre objectivité*, Prato, Paris, 1989.
5. S.M. Eisenstein, 'Yermolova', in *Selected Works*, vol. 2: *Towards a Theory of Montage*, ed. Misha Glenny and Richard Taylor, British Film Institute, London, 1994, pp. 82–105.
6. G.W.F. von Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1986, p. 224.
7. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2008, pp. 211–12.
8. Ibid., p. 75.
9. Ibid., p. 173.
10. *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I*, p. 224.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W.S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 182.