**Digital Ethos: Transformations in Contemporary Photography Aesthetics Subsequent to Computational Art**

Paper *Digital Ethos: Transformations in Contemporary Photography Aesthetics subsequent to Computational Art* has been created.

Digital photography allows artists to think in a more daring and free way. This freedom influences the content, visual aesthetics of artworks in contemporary photography, which is influenced extensively by digital creativity. This paper will focus on the significance of digital technologies in changing aesthetics, planning, vision, fiction, realization of photography and avant-garde photography forms nourished by digital culture.

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**Introduction**

Photography is one of the creative fields at which technological advances influence artistic expression the most. The ease of manipulation brought by software and extra fea-
turies available in cameras made artists using photography reconsider their visions, themes, narration, syntax and ways of sharing their artwork. Sharing sites like Flickr, which expedite encounters of various individuals from different cultures, help in chang-
ing the perception of the much vital notion of time and enable artists to get faster feed-
back, revelation, exposure and layering of information to be conveyed.

While some photographers, who are deeply obsessed with analog processes, deny digital technology; it is quite obvious that artists, who are aware of the complexity and particu-
lar advantage that this technology brings, indeed end up with a novel aesthetics of pho-
tography. In addition to the regular montage and collage methods remaining from the
old analog days, digital imaging techniques allow artists to work with notions like aug-
mented perception, chronophotography, surrealism, pictorialism, superimposition, sim-
plification, creation of new worlds, appropriation...

AUGMENTED PERCEPTION

“Without perception there is no art. A work of art is an organized array of sensory
stimuli if, therefore, the senses are not stimulated, then the true work of art does not
exist for the observer.” (Wise 19) Though there are studies on exceeding human sensory
capabilities, our visual perception still takes ‘what the eyes see’ as the basis of appre-
hension. In this case, artists who intend to go beyond what one can see with the naked eye,
take advantage of software. These digital means enable artists to assemble and convey
information in a holistic manner that is otherwise not possible to record in a single pho-
tographical documentation act. The resulting totality leads to a particular aesthetic
form which turns out to be the synthesis of individual forms, in other words a ‘sui
generis’ situation. One can interpret this as a cubist approach.

If we consider the present digital platforms we use, various tools of social media on the
other hand; “literacy, TV, computer games, the Internet—all play a role in shaping how
we think. Technology is never innocent—we develop it and use it, and in turn it shapes us.
[...] Technology allows one to have experiences far beyond what are supported by the
normal human physiology. Sternberg and Preiss examine the implications of technology
on cognition. When technology is broadly conceptualized as ‘the building of artifacts or
procedures-tools-to help people accomplish their goals,’ then the influence of technology
on human development is as old as humanity. [...] At the very least, it is becoming in-
creasingly obvious that technology is altering mental functions (Sternberg & Preiss,
2005).” (Gackenbach 340)

This alteration takes us to the notion of cyberperception which is, after Roy Ascott, “the
emergent human faculty of technologically augmented cognition and perception.” Cy-
berception carries the potential of laying a firm basis for the development of higher states
of consciousness, i.e. augmented perception. This is why the congruence between computa-
tional and human behavior appeals to the artist and helps in augmenting his/her intu-
itive gift to generate aesthetic form. Andreas Gursky, one of the leading photographers
of the much respected Düsseldorf photography school of Bernd & Hilla Becher, Chris
Jordan of USA and French photographer Jean-François Rauzier take advantage of digi-
tal imaging and post-processing in order to take his work to a level that cannot be real-
ized otherwise.

PICTORIALIST TENDENCIES

There is a never-ending relationship between photography and painting. When photog-
raphy was invented, it took painting’s function of recording history and was more
trusted as a documentary tool since it witnessed experiences more realistically than
paintings, which are actually constructs from scratch. Later photography proved its in-
dependence and stopped being seen as pure evidence. This is when it found the oppor-
tunity to act like painting and be taken as an apparatus of fiction. This new relationship
gave birth to ‘pictorial’ photos that emulated optical qualities of paintings, which in turn
paved the path to hyper-realistic paintings that are easily mistaken for photos.

If we look at the early stages of this relationship; “by the last quarter of the 19th cen-
tury, photographers around the world had supplied ample proof of the camera’s unique
ability to record people and places. At the same time, there were others who were taking
pictures for a different purpose. Convinced that the camera could be used to go beyond
simply recording what was in front of the lens, these photographers, both amateur and
professional, were determined to produce images of artistic merit. [...] Their aim was to
convince art critics, other photographers, and the general public that photography
should be regarded as a legitimate form of art. [...] At the time, people regarded the
world’s great paintings as the highest form of visual art. It was only natural that artis-
tic photographers began by trying to produce the same kinds of images as those created
by the greatest artists. They chose the same types of themes, settings, and composi-
tions. Like painters, they emphasized the contrasts between dark and light tones (called chiaroscuro). [...] Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of this early artistic movement was the way in which many photographers manipulated their images." (Sandler 57) Henry Peach Robinson's book 'Pictorial Effect in Photography,' published in 1866; referred to this movement, influenced by the 'photography-as-art' approach, as pictorialism.

The intimate connection between painting and photography is still so strong that many contemporary photographers like Helena Blomqvist (Swedish), Désiré Delron, Jasper de Beijer (Dutch), Christian Noirfalise (Belgian), Yao Lu, Lu Jun (Chinese), Nazif Topcuoğlu (Turkish), Alessandro Bavuri (Italian) are taking advantage of the digital imaging technologies in order to create photos that resemble paintings. "Peter Bunnell, in his work titled 'A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography 1889-1923' (1980), associates the antiphotographic art photography known as 'pictorialism' with a reaction against 'the dehumanizing effects of science and applied technology.' Pictorialism, he adds, placed 'its greatest emphasis on the individuality of the artist as witnessed in the work of art and idiosyncrasies of its production.' " (Sternberger 37)

**PALIMPSEST-LIKE SUPERIMPOSITION: LAYERING TRANSPARENCIES**

A palimpsest (Greek "palin," again; "psëstos," scraped) is a re-used papyrus or parchment manuscript in which the original text has been washed or scraped off and a new one substituted. The modern version of this archaic surface of knowledge which allows accumulation of information is the Photoshop canvas, where you can completely cover a layer behind yet still make some details emerge from beneath. This possibility of layering various data from different sources one on plane is a more complex form of the good old analog collaging & montaging methods and enables artists to reach a richer expression through superimposed pluralities.

German artists Elger Easer, Kay Kaul and Michael Najar, Turkish artists Murat Duru-soy and Zeynep Kayan are among numerous photographers who benefit from superimposition, in which various images become interwoven into a reassembled complex fictive entity as a collage that brings memories and places together in one plane.

**INCLUSION OF TIME AS A NARRATIVE TOOL**

Periods included in single photographs are usually and naturally much shorter than periods documented in video works. Yet, when it comes to combining photos taken at different times on one photographic surface, it becomes possible to see remnants of longer periods of time. Performing time lapse photography and compositing images as a durational pattern of many traces left by different moments, lead to the positive notion of timelessness (lack of time dependence) due to the plural presences of time at once. Substance becomes multi-layered and hierarchy disappears: All elements are relatively equal parts to the whole.

An accumulated photographic rendering of one place with various lights, movements, figures, facets, objects and subjects coming from discrete slices of time, allows a richer visual definition of the particular milieu that can be a more faithful description of the observer's personal experiences. The resulting images after such accumulations are usually visual experiences impossible to the naked eye.

Ahmet Elihan of Turkey, Pablo Zuleta Zahr of Chile and Thomas Weinberger of Germany are some artists who manipulate the perception of time by incorporating distinct phases of moments purposefully selected from the chronological continuum.

**Simplification as an Elucidation Tool**

Even though the presence of the traces from different times can help artists to improve their expression, it is also possible to take a completely opposite direction and take information out from a single layer of time. This subtractive approach limits duration to an even smaller fraction of time, to the degree it does not exist. The lack of detail is not meant to hide information from the audience, but rather to enlighten artistic expression and make viewers focus on a particular content more easily. Following Mies van Der Rohe's famous quote; "[sometimes] less is more...."

Above mentioned simplification can be obtained by erasing the signs of specificity and turning it into anonymity, potentially pointing to the banality of our homogenized environments. An alternative way is to remove the traces of typical presence in order to create a disturbing sense of absence where existence and attendance are normally expected.

These exclusions of native details from recorded reality that may lead to floating com-
Photography for some, is reflection of reality. Yet, the illusion of a single reality, is criticized by W. Flusser: “The [observer] trusts [technical images] as he trusts his own eyes. If he criticizes them at all, he does so not as a critique of image, but as a critique of vision; his critique is not concerned with their production, but with the world ‘as seen through’ them. Such a lack of critical attitude towards technical images is dangerous in a situation where these images are about to displace texts. [It] is dangerous because the ‘objectivity’ of the technical image is a delusion. They are, in truth, images, and as such, they are symbolic...” (Flusser 2000) Some artists take this critical attitude to an extreme to defy Reality and create a new synthetic reality.

Quoting the Wikipedia definition, “surrealist works feature the element of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions. [...] Surrealism would advocate the idea that ordinary and pictive expressions are vital and important, but that the sense of their arrangement must be open to the full range of imagination. [...] Freud’s work with free association, dream analysis and the hidden unconscious was of the utmost importance to the Surrealists in developing methods to liberate imagination.” Artists using digital techniques to take photography from realism to surrealism, aim to free people from false rationality, restrictive customs / structures and prejudice.

Ryuta Amae (Japanese), Michael Najjar, Loretta Lux (German), AES+F (Russian), Anthony Goicolea (American), Rund van Empel (Dutch) are among artists who produce startling, otherworldly surreal images which involve composite elements called from different settings, figures, cultures, individuals and combine them into new topographies, characters and scenarios.

APPROPRIATION

The complex notion of appropriation is straightforwardly defined by Mikhail Bakhtin: “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but rather exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.” (Bakhtin 1981:294)

Art is such a field that one can easily borrow an idea, artwork, approach and use it/them in his/her work, with the condition of quoting the reference in ideal conditions. Very famous works like “Las Meninas” by Diego Velázquez have been reinterpreted in the form of “hommage à ...” by very famous artists like Pablo Picasso and Joel Peter Witkin. In photography, people like Thomas Ruff buy the copyrights of old photos taken by another photographer and retouch them in Photoshop, color them partially and finally transform them into their own artworks. In a recent series called ‘JPEGS’ (2004–9) Ruff uses readymade JPEGs by exploiting the lossy compression of visual data into spoiled artifacts. Ruff blows low quality low-res files up in order to reveal how much information is lost already before images are served to people and become iconic in world history. These images, blurred due to extreme up-scaling, are somewhere between legibility - illegibility and point to the skepticism that people should adopt against images that are supposed to convey actualities of world news.

CONCLUSION: CREATION OF A NEW WORLD

Mark Kingwell asserts that “photographs are not multiple depictions of some single reality, waiting out there to be cornered and cropped, and somehow regulating, even in the cornering and cropping, how / what the image means. Rather, photographs offer multiple meanings. The presented image is not a reflection, or even an interpretation, of singular reality. It is, instead, the creation of a world.” (Kingwell 2006)

Truth with the capital T is not taken as the departure point in this paper; on the contrary, personal definitions of temporary yet experienced smaller realities is suggested. Digital tools available for photography allow the artists in the field to think in a more daring and free way. This freedom influences the content and also the visual aesthetics of the recently created artworks in the universal practice of contemporary photography. Photography is probably one of the visual art platforms that is influenced the most by digital revolution and practices. Fortunately, it seems it will continue to be as it is the last decade.
digital production and creativity. Fortunately, it seems it will continue to be so in the future and digital means will strengthen photography's position in the art world as one of the most progressive expression platforms.

References and Notes:


