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SUMMER 1988

# GRAMMAR

"Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document"  
Optica Gallery  
Montreal

Documentary styles in photography achieved heights of artistic legitimacy in the early 1970's which seemed to be supported on a solid foundation of historical precedent and contemporary critical acclaim. The 1980's have brought a dramatic rupture in the evolution of traditional practice. Even the inherent realism of classical camera practice has lost its theoretical grounding under the combined pressure of several deconstructionist critiques. The post-structuralist project to dissect visual imagery into linguistic components, the Marxist censure of social documentary photography for concealing social contradictions in the "seamless" illusion of realism, and the avant-garde search for a new photographic formalism have together engendered a proliferation of rationally-controlled photographs. Recent formal experiments rely on theory-based image construction to minimize chance and intuition and maximize structural clarity.

The 15th anniversary exhibition of Optica Gallery, one of Montreal's more prominent artist-run spaces, summarizes, with the work of 13 photographers, many of the 1980's avant-garde explorations of formal novelty. "Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document" features the explicitly artificial image-construction of conceptual, appropriative, multi-media, and studio photographs. Structured on the ruins of the myth of photographic objectivity, the exhibition functions as a visual critique of realist representation. The title's provocative juxtaposition of "vulgar" with "documents" recalls the theoretical "debate on documentary," labels the appropriative strategy of re-working mass media images, and suggests an ironical shading into a scatological attitude towards the documentary-photograph-as-fetishized-art-object. Sherrie Levine's degradation of Edward Weston and Walker Evans originals to the common denominator of mechanical reproducibility best illustrates "vulgar documents." Playing on the public accessibility and popular acclaim of these high modernist photographers, Levine effaces the "signature" of individual style and defaces the

market value of the "fine prints."

"Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document" exemplifies a recent trend to argue the "debate on documentary" exclusively in terms of theory-referenced images which refute realist photography. This type of exhibition is constructed to marginalize contemporary realist styles and to locate documentary photography as a prior practice representing the *ancien régime* of modernism. Documentary photography serves as a mainstream benchmark against which the new studio-constructed appropriations are defined as avant-garde.

Certain theory-constructed visual strategies do solve some of the perennial visual and political problems of documentary practice. Laurie Simon's use of plastic dolls absolves her from the guilt of exploiting people for personal ends. Mitra Tabrizian/Andy Golding/Mark Lewis' conflation of movie publicity-posters with a leftist analysis of white male supremacy, and Eileen Cowin's feminist TV soap-opera stills of family stereotypes aspire to reaching the mass public, social documentary photography lost when *Life* and *Look* ceased publication in 1972. Editorial and contextual ambiguity is eliminated by Suzy Lake's visually incorporated text which fixes her oversized, cardboard authority figures to her cultural deconstruction. The viewer is forced by the minimalist, nominal subjects of Tim Clark's photographs to deconstruct the "real" subject of any photo into a composite of the photographer's found and constructed subject, and the viewer's subjectively perceived subject. The problem of the popular, but naive misinterpretation of realism-as-reality is eliminated by George Legrady's reduction of the photographic medium to a reproduction technique.

Studio-constructed formal strengths have been substituted for realist weaknesses. But studio-constructed photographs introduce weaknesses which displace realist strengths. Artist-imagined scenes designed to have the look of rational intent can seem cold, slick, insular, and rigid. Devoid of any realist references to lived experience, this type of work can above all appear unconvincing, narcissistic, and self-mocking. Photographs which deconstruct realism into consciously-arranged elements risk self-deconstruction. Laurie Simon's *reductio ad absurdum* to doll-house play of the two grand genres of classical landscape and environmental portraiture results in photographs which themselves are reductively simple. To simultaneously expose the ideology of cultural structure, and to use visual methods which explicate the photograph as a system of pictorial representation, becomes post-modernist dogma. The moral didacticism of "concerned photography" in the 1970s is exchanged for the 1980s visual tutoring in the basic "grammar" of photographic language.



Installation, Optica Gallery

Although post-modernist rhetoric critiques the high-brow elitism of modernism, appropriative practice creates its own exclusive class connotations. Exhibited in the socially remote domain of the avant-garde art gallery, re-worked mass culture images sacrifice popular appeal for the intellectual sophistication of art theory. The appropriation of dominant culture's successful selling tactics to produce leftist social exposés is double-edged. Sherrie Levine's critique of the artist-as-creative-genius and the photograph-as-marketable-art-object is annulled by her stylistic *imprimatur*, her signature—and her price-tag in commercial galleries. Tabrizian/Golding/Lewis' cultural critique replicates the high

gloss, the privileged inaccessibility, and the larger-than-life domination of the aesthetic system it purports to expose by re-contextualization. Whether appropriation is viewed as a critique or a reinforcement of dominant culture falls in the grey zone of subjective interpretation. Re-contextualization is fragile, and as prejudiced by the context of viewing as classical realist photographs are.

The methodology of highlighting the problems of a traditional practice suppresses the numerous deficiencies of the avant-garde alternatives. External references to lived scenes give realist photography a power to

describe, involve, and convince which studio work cannot replace. Instead, presented as opponents, appropriative constructions and realist photographs are complements of one another. While the understated formalism of realism underlines the photograph's relation to real subjects, the evident manipulation of studio-constructions accentuates artistic invention. The first facilitates descriptive clarity of content, the second emphasizes the "frame" of stylized authorship. Realist, as well as appropriative, conceptual, or multi-media photographs are "constructed" and "self-referential." The facile confusion of realist photographs with reality is important to deconstruct. But does a continuous procession of explicitly artificial photographs go beyond avant-garde novelty to expose the subjectively influenced formal construction of realist photographs?

The sub-text of an exhibition which proposes a "debate on documentary," but only promotes studio-constructed work, is an attempt to legitimate photography as an avant-garde art by equating the medium with painting and sculpture. The late 19th-century Pictorialists addressed the question, "Is photography art?" "Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document" asks, "Can photography be an avant-garde art?"

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