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A Note on Photography and the Simulacral

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## A Note on Photography and the Simulacral\*

ROSALIND KRAUSS

In 1983 French television launched *Une minute pour une image*, a program conceived and directed by Agnès Varda. True to its title the show lasted just one minute, during which time a single photograph was projected onto the screen and a voice-over commentary was spoken. The sources of these reactions to the given photograph varied enormously — from photographers themselves to writers like Eugène Ionesco and Marguerite Duras, or political figures like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, or art critics such as Pierre Schneider to a range of respondents that one could call the man-on-the-street: bakers, taxi drivers, workers in a pizza parlor, businessmen.

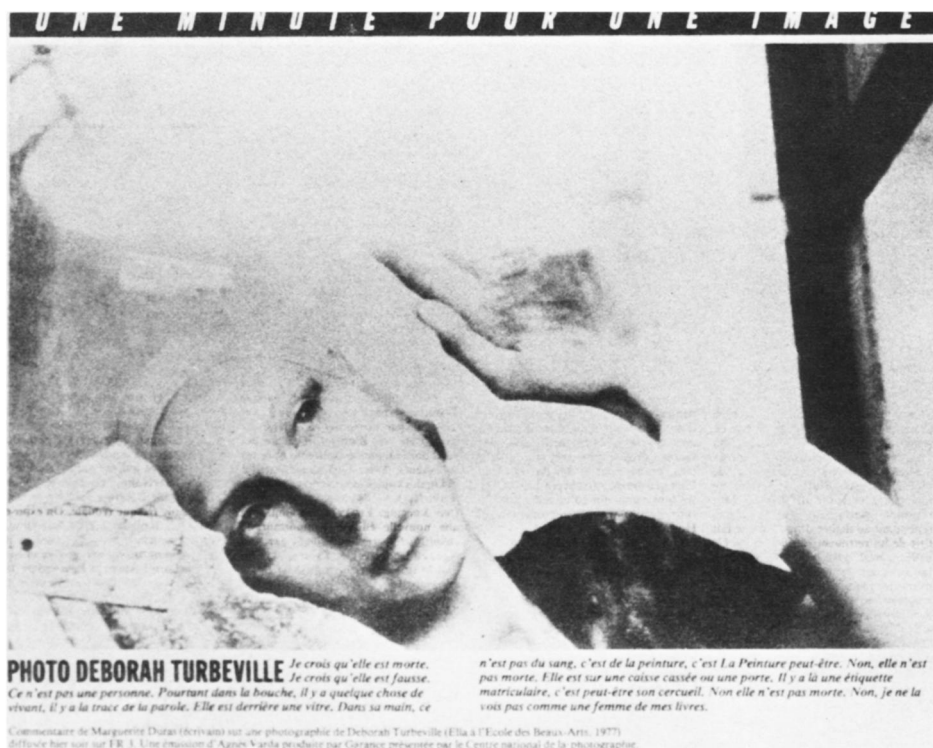
This very gathering of response from a wide spectrum of viewers, including those who have no special expertise in either photography or the rest of what could be called the cognate visual arts, in its resemblance to an opinion poll and its insistence on photography as a vehicle for the expression of public reaction — this technique was a continuation, whether intentional or not, of a certain tradition in France of understanding photography through the methods of sociology, and insisting that this is the only coherent way of considering it. This tradition finds its most lucid presentation in the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who twenty years ago published his study *Un Art moyen*. This title uses the notion of *moyen*, or middle, to invoke the aesthetic dimension of both middling or fair as a stage between good and bad, and to mean midway between high art and popular culture; it also employs *moyen* to call up the sociological dimensions of middle class as well as distributed middle or statistical average. But before looking into Bourdieu's argument about this art for the average man, it might be well to examine a few samples of Varda's photographic showcase, to which public response was vigorous enough to warrant a morning-after publication in *Libération*, where each day following the transmission the photograph was reproduced, its commentary forming an extended caption.

\* A version of this essay was delivered as the keynote address for the National Conference of the Society for Photographic Education in Philadelphia, March 1983.



Here, for example, is a photographer's response, as Martine Frank comments on a 1958 image by Marc Riboud:

Are these workers from a camera factory who have been sent to amuse themselves in the country; is this a photo contest; or is it a photography class? I can't tell. In fact, as a photographer, I have always been intrigued by this image and struck by the fact that amidst all these men there is not a single woman taking a picture. What's interesting in this photo is that it puts the whole idea of photographic talent into question because in the end all these photographers find themselves in the same place, at the same moment, under the same light, before the same subject, and one could say that they all want to make the same photo. Yet, even so, among these hundreds of photos perhaps there will be one or two good ones.



Varda elicited these comments from Marguerite Duras in front of a Deborah Turbeville photograph:

I think she's dead. I think she's fake. It's not a person; yet around the mouth there is something alive, a trace of speech. She is behind a windowpane. That's not blood in her hand, it's paint, perhaps it is the allegory of painting. No, she isn't dead. She's on top of a closed trunk or a door. There is a shipping label, perhaps it is her coffin. No, she isn't dead. No, I don't see her as a woman from my novels.

And Daniel Cohn-Bendit, faced with an image of three dancers made in Tokyo in 1961 by William Klein, began:

The first reaction anyway is: it's frightening, it's the devil, the devil without a face. I see this hand that . . . that denounces . . . that says,

uh . . . don't go any further . . . stay there, uh, there where you are. At first I didn't understand. The man, in the end, I think that, yes, it's a man at the right who is in drag, with his little finger lifted as though he were drinking a cup of tea. It's very disturbing. By chance I came across the puddle of water that is one of the most luminous moments of this photo, brighter than all the rest of this view that has something so oppressive and fearful about it. It's really the abyss, the pits, it's. . . .

In the *Libération* version of Cohn-Bendit's response, his comments broke off with this last "it's," this last attempt to say what it is that he's looking at, a last, though obviously not a final term to a potentially endless list of possible subjects, for this one-minute commentary contained seven candidates for what "it" is.

That, of course, does not distinguish the nature of Cohn-Bendit's reactions from those of Marguerite Duras, who for her part enunciated eight possibilities for the identity of her subject. Nor does it differ generically from the way the photographer Martine Frank approached her image, again beginning with an attempt to specify the subject before breaking into a slight reflection on the problem that so many shutterbugs in the same place might raise for the aesthetic status of photography. But what is striking in her brief meditation is that it remains in the transparent, behind-the-surface space of "it's an  $x$  or a  $y$ "—because her little cough of photo criticism is really a speculation on the photographs that one or another of these eager men might make rather than a pictorial, aesthetic consideration that reflects on the success of the very image she is now looking at, and reflects as well on its capacity to account for its own structural conditions. This commentary by means of "it's"—in the very primitivism of its character as aesthetic discourse—is, not surprisingly, even more present in the response from the men on the street.

Thus an industrialist commented on an image of Marie-Paule Nègre taken in the Luxembourg Gardens in 1979, a photograph that, to say the very least, uses the conditions of atmosphere and place to reconstitute the limitations of surface and frame within the space of the photographic subject. The businessman's remarks have a certain monotonous relation to what one has already witnessed:

It's the arrival of a train, it's the arrival of a train in a dream, a woman waits for someone and obviously makes a mistake about the person; the man she was waiting for obviously is . . . he isn't in the shot, he has aged, and she was waiting for someone much younger, more brilliant than the little fellow we see there. . . . She dreams and in her dream she is also much younger, at the time when her feelings developed as she would have liked to recover them there, now. It's a dream that doesn't work out.

## UNE MINUTE POUR UNE IMAGE

PHOTO MARIE-PAULE NEGRE

Commentaire de Bruno Tripièr



**C**'est l'arrivée d'un train, c'est l'arrivée d'un train dans un rêve, une femme attend quelqu'un et se trompe évidemment de personnage ; l'homme qu'elle attendait, apparemment, est... n'est plus dans le coup, a vieilli, et elle attendait un personnage... beaucoup plus jeune... plus... plus brillant que l'homme un peu falot qu'on voit là. (...) Elle rêve et aussi dans son rêve il y a elle-même plus jeune, à l'époque où ses sentiments se déroulaient comme elle aurait voulu les retrouver là à l'instant. C'est un rêve qui ne se fait pas.

Extrait du commentaire de Bruno Tripièr (industriel) sur une photographie de Marie-Paule Negre (Jardin du Luxembourg, 1979) diffusée hier soir sur FR3. Une émission d'Agnes Varda produite par Garance, présentée par le Centre National de la Photographie.

And finally, here is a botanist commenting on a recent image by Edouard Boubat, an homage to the Douanier Rousseau, which specifically constructs a relationship between photography and painting based on imitation:

In front of this tree, which is obviously a quinquéliba, the Crotons are of the family Croton Tiglium, and in the back you have Cecilia leaves which would lead one to the idea that the woman is called that; it's a very beautiful woman from what one can see. She is alone. She is cold because she is on a marble slab and she is filled with anxiety by all this vegetation that runs riot and could possibly threaten her, submerge her, cover her over, such that she seems to look for refuge in this kind of vault that she glimpses into and stares at.

In fact, within all this monotony of approach to, or judgment of, the photographic object by means of "it's," in a potentially endless taxonomy of subjects, the one notable exception is the commentary of the art critic Pierre Schneider.



**PHOTO EDOUARD BOUBAT** « En avant de cet arbre, qui est vraisemblablement un quinquéliba, les Crotons sont des Crotons Tiglium, et dans le fond vous avez des feuilles Cecilia qui pourraient faire penser que la femme s'appelle comme ça, c'est une très belle femme d'après les formes qu'on en observe. (...) »

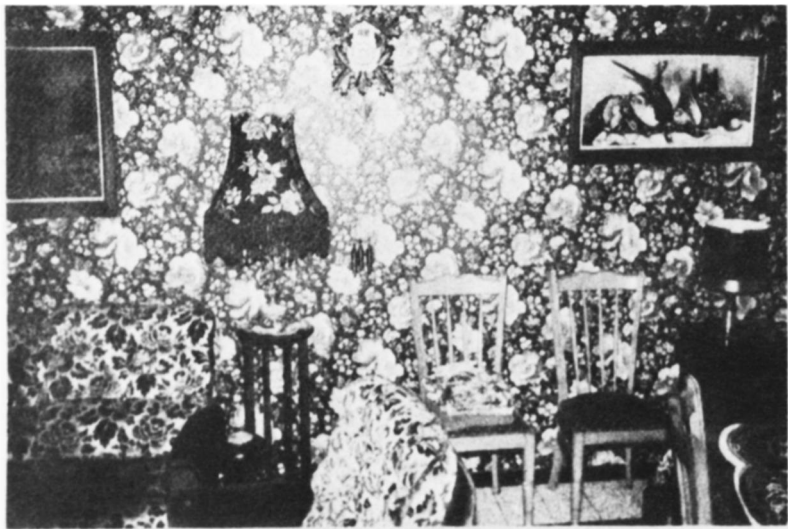
*Elle est seule, elle est froide puisqu'elle est sur un marbre et son angoisse est d'être recouverte par toute cette flore qui se développe et ritique de l'envahir, de la submerger, de la recouvrir, alors elle semble chercher refuge dans cette espèce de caveau qu'elle entrevoit et qu'elle regarde fixement. »*

Extrait du commentaire de ROBERT FAURON (botaniste) sur une photographie d'EDOUARD BOUBAT (hommage au Douanier Rousseau, 1980) diffusée hier soir sur FR3. Une émission d'AGNES YARDA produite par GARANCE présentée par le CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE.

Speaking of a work by François Hers, he said:

The wallpaper mural, with its motif of repeated flowers that one finds, for example, in hotel rooms, is an instant producer of insomnia. When I look at the decorations of this room I say to myself that all this, covered over by fabric printed with a repetitive, decorative motif, becomes surface; that is, if you take the paintings by Matisse from the 1920s where he paints many interiors in perspective, with heavy pieces of furniture completely modeled in three dimensions, well, their volume disappears and the picture becomes a play of colored surfaces that breathe because Matisse knows how to make them breathe.

This notion that the depicted object might be nothing but a pretext for the accomplishment of a formal idea—here, the play of colored surfaces—is, of course, second nature to the critic of modernist art, and so, as though by a re-



**PHOTO DE FRANÇOIS HERS Commentaire de Pierre Schneider (Ecrivain et critique d'art)**

*Le papier mural avec son motif de fleurs répétées, dans des chambres d'hôtel, par exemple, c'était facteur d'insomnie à tout coup. Quand je vois le mobilier de cette chambre, je me dis que tout ce que recouvre un tissu frappé d'un motif décoratif répété devient surface, c'est-à-dire, si vous prenez des tableaux de Matisse des années 20, où il peint beaucoup d'intérieurs en perspective, avec de meubles tout à fait modelés en trois dimensions, qui pèsent... et bien... leur volume disparaît et le tableau devient un jeu de surfaces colorées et qui respirent parce que Matisse sait les faire respirer.*

extrait du commentaire de Pierre SCHNEIDER (écrivain et critique d'art) sur une photographie de François HERS (Intérieurs 1980) diffusée hier soir sur FR3. Une émission d'Agnes VARDIA produite par Garantie - présentée par le Centre National de la Photographie. Une minute pour une image.



flex response, Pierre Schneider has recourse to this type of experience of a visual field in terms of its formal order when interrogating the photograph. But whether this makes his interrogation any more legitimate than the other, more possibly primitive responses—the judgments according to “it’s”—is a question to which we will have to return.

It is the thesis of Pierre Bourdieu that photographic discourse can never be properly aesthetic, that is, can have no aesthetic criteria proper to itself, and that, in fact, the most common photographic judgment is not about value but about identity, being a judgment that reads things generically; that figures reality in terms of what sort of thing an  $x$  or a  $y$  is—thus the repetitious judgments in terms of “it’s a so-and-so” that emerge from the Varda experiment. When the judgment backs up far enough to encompass the photograph as a whole and not just its separate components, then the assignment or judgment is commonly by genre. “It’s a landscape,” “it’s a nude,” “it’s a portrait.” But, of course, a judgment of genre is completely transparent to the photograph’s represented objects. If a photograph belongs to the type *landscape* or *portrait*, that is because the reading of its contents allows it to be recognized and classed by type. And it is the nature of these types—according to Bourdieu’s assessment of photographic practice—to be ruled by the rigid constraints of the stereotype.

The experience of photography in terms of the stereotypical—which is what the “it’s” judgment involves—is maintained almost without exception among the lower and less well-educated classes, whether urban or rural. Bourdieu’s analysis, which begins by asking the question, “Why is photography within our culture so fantastically widespread a practice?” proceeds to the understanding that photography as an *art moyen*, a practice carried out by the average man, must be defined in terms of its social functions. These functions he sees as wholly connected to the structure of the family in a modern world, with the family photograph an index or proof of family unity, and, at the same time, an instrument or tool to effect that unity.

Simply put, families with children have cameras; single people, typically, do not. The camera is hauled out to document family reunions and vacations or trips. Its place is within the ritualized cult of domesticity, and it is trained on those moments that are sacred within that cult: weddings, christenings, anniversaries, and so forth. The camera is a tool that is treated as though it were merely there passively to document, to record the objective fact of family integration. But it is, of course, more active than that. The photographic record is part of the point of these family gatherings; it is an agent in the collective fantasy of family cohesion, and in that sense the camera is a projective tool, part of the theater that the family constructs to convince itself that it is together and whole. “Photography itself,” Bourdieu writes, “is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1965, p. 48.

From this conclusion Bourdieu naturally goes on to discredit any notion of photographic objectivity. If the photographic image is considered to be objective, that designation occurs within an entirely tautological or circular condition: the societal need to define something as fact leads to the insistence on the utterly objective factuality of the record that is made. But, says Bourdieu, "In stamping photography with the patent of realism, society does nothing but confirm itself in the tautological certainty that an image of reality that conforms to its own representation of objectivity is truly objective."<sup>2</sup>

Given the narrow social functions that both promote and radically limit the photographic practice of the common man, the result is an insistent stereotyping of both photographic subjects and the way they are rendered. The photographic subject, the thing deemed worthy of being recorded, is extremely limited and repetitive. Its disposition is equally so. Frontality and centering, with their banishing of all signs of temporality or contingency, are the formal norms. Bourdieu continues:

The purpose of a trip (like the honeymoon) lends solemnity to the places passed through and the most solemn among them lends solemnity to the purpose of the trip. The truly successful honeymoon is the couple photographed in front of the Eiffel Tower because Paris is the Eiffel Tower and because the real honeymoon is the honeymoon in Paris. One of these [honeymoon] pictures in the collection of J. B. is split right down the middle by the Eiffel Tower; at the foot is J. B.'s wife. What might strike us as barbarous or cruel is in fact the perfect carrying out of an intention.<sup>3</sup>

And Bourdieu muses, "Conscious or unconscious? Of all the photos, this and another representing the couple in front of the Arch of Triumph are their author's favorites."<sup>4</sup>

Stereotypy lends to this practice a quality of allegory or ideogram. The environment is purely symbolic, with all individual or circumstantial features relegated to the background. "In J. B.'s collection," remarks Bourdieu, "nothing is left of Paris except atemporal signs; it is a Paris without history, without Parisians, unless accidentally, in short, without events."<sup>5</sup>

To all of those who are interested in serious or art photography or even in the history of photography with its cast of "great photographers," Bourdieu's analysis of the photographic activity of the common man must seem extremely remote. What can J. B.'s inept honeymoon snapshots, no matter how amusing their inadvertent play of sexual symbolism, have to do with serious photographic

2. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 60, n. 34.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

practice?<sup>6</sup> But this is precisely where Bourdieu's sociological approach becomes somewhat more painful, because it starts to cut closer to home. Sociologically speaking, Bourdieu claims, photography fills another function, namely that of a social index. The ubiquitous practice of these hicks with their Instamatics becomes an indicator of class or caste against which members of other classes react in order to mark themselves as different. One of the ways of expressing this difference is to abstain from taking pictures; another is to identify oneself with a special kind of photographic practice which is thought of as different. But the notion that there is really an art photography as opposed to a primitive photography of common usage is, for Bourdieu, merely the extension of the expression of social distinctions. His feeling that art photography's difference is a sociological *effect* rather than an aesthetic reality stems from his conviction that photography has no aesthetic norms proper to itself; that it borrows its caché from the art movements with which various serious photographers associate themselves; that it borrows certain aesthetic notions from the other arts as well — notions like expressiveness, originality, singularity, and so forth — but that these notions are utterly incoherent within what purports to be the critical discourse of photography; and that, finally, most photographic discourse is not inherently different from the judgment of the common man with his Instamatic. They reduce, on the one hand, to a set of technical rules about framing, focus, tonal values, and so on, that are in the end purely arbitrary, and, on the other hand, to a discussion of genre, which is to say the judgment "it's an *x* or a *y*." Agnès Varda's experiment does nothing, of course, to disprove all of this.

Bourdieu's insistence that photographic discourse borrows the concepts of the high arts in vain — because that borrowing only leads to conceptual confusion — is confirmed by the intellectual discomfort that is provoked by Pierre Schneider's comparison of the François Hers photo to Matisse's painting. And Bourdieu analyzes the various aesthetic unities of the other arts to demonstrate that the mechanical nature of photography makes them inapplicable. The specter raised by Martine Frank that those hundreds of Japanese men will in fact make hundreds of identical images, insofar as it is a theoretical possibility, explodes the grounds on which there might be constructed a concept of photographic originality and, for Bourdieu, reduces all critical discussions of such originality in the photography magazines to mere cant.

Photography's technical existence as a multiple thus joins the theoretical possibility that all images taken of the same object could end up being the same

6. Roland Barthes expresses irritation with Bourdieu's approach, denying its legitimacy as a means of discussing the nature of photography, but simultaneously denying the alternative of aesthetic categories: "What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? . . . another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture" (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981).

image and thus partake of sheer repetition. Together these forms of multiplicity cut deeply against the notion of originality as an aesthetic condition available to photographic practice. Within the aesthetic universe of differentiation — which is to say: “this is good, this is bad, this, in its absolute originality, is different from that” — within this universe photography raises the specter of nondifferentiation at the level of qualitative difference and introduces instead the condition of a merely quantitative array of differences, as in a series. The possibility of aesthetic difference is collapsed from within, and the originality that is dependent on this idea of difference collapses with it.

Now, this very experience of the collapse of difference has had an enormous impact on a segment of the very artistic practice that is supposed to occupy an aesthetic position separate from that of photography: the world of painting and sculpture. For contemporary painting and sculpture has experienced photography’s travesty of the ideas of originality, or subjective expressiveness, or formal singularity, not as a failed version of these values, but as a denial of the very system of difference by which these values can be thought at all. By exposing the multiplicity, the facticity, the repetition and stereotype at the heart of *every* aesthetic gesture, photography deconstructs the possibility of differentiating between the original and the copy, the first idea and its slavish imitators. The practice of the multiple, whether one speaks of the hundreds of prints pulled from the same negative or the hundreds of fundamentally indistinguishable photographs that could be made by the Japanese men — this practice has been understood by certain artists as not just a degraded or bad form of the aesthetic original. It has been taken to undermine the very distinction between original and copy.

From contemporary practice an obvious example would be the work of Cindy Sherman. A concatenation of stereotypes, the images reproduce what is already a reproduction — that is, the various stock personae that are generated by Hollywood scenarios, TV soap operas, Harlequin Romances, and slick advertising. And if the subject of her images is this flattened, cardboard imitation of character, her execution is no less preordained and controlled by the culturally already-given. One is constantly confronted by formal conditions that are the results of institutional recipes: the movie still with its anecdotal suggestiveness, or the advertising image with its hopped-up lighting and its format dictated by the requirements of page layout.

That Sherman is both subject and object of these images is important to their conceptual coherence. For the play of stereotype in her work is a revelation of the artist herself as stereotypical. It functions as a refusal to understand the artist as a source of originality, a fount of subjective response, a condition of critical distance from a world which it confronts but of which it is not a part. The inwardness of the artist as a reserve of consciousness that is fundamentally different from the world of appearances is a basic premise of Western art. It is the fundamental difference on which all other differences are based. If Sherman



*Cindy Sherman. Untitled. 1981. (Original in color.)*



were photographing a model who was not herself, then her work would be a continuation of this notion of the artist as a consciousness which is both anterior to the world and distinct from it, a consciousness that knows the world by judging it. In that case we would simply say that Sherman was constructing a critical parody of the forms of mass culture.

With this total collapse of difference, this radical implosion, one finds oneself entering the world of the simulacrum—a world where, as in Plato's cave, the possibility of distinguishing between reality and phantasm, between the actual and the simulated, is denied. Discussing Plato's dread of the simulacral, Gilles Deleuze argues that the very work of distinction and the question of how it is to be carried out characterizes the entire project of Plato's philosophy.<sup>7</sup> For Plato, difference is not a matter of classification, of properly separating out the various objects of the real world into genus and species, for example, but of knowing which of these objects are true copies of the Ideal Forms and which are so infinitely degraded as to be false. Everything, of course, is a copy; but the true copy—the valid imitation—is that which is truly resemblant, copying the inner idea of the form and not just its empty shell. The Christian metaphor rehearses this distinction: God made man in his own image and therefore at the origin man was a true copy; after man's fall into sin this inner resemblance to God was broken, and man became a false copy, a simulacrum.

But, Deleuze reminds us, no sooner does Plato think the simulacrum, in the *Sophist* for example, than he realizes that the very idea of the false copy puts into question the whole project of differentiation, of the separation of model from imitation. For the false copy is a paradox that opens a terrible rift within the very possibility of being able to tell true from not-true. The whole idea of the copy is that it be resemblant, that it incarnate the idea of identity—that the just man resemble Justice by virtue of being just—and in terms of this identity that it separate itself from the condition of injustice. Within this system, separations are to be made between terms on the basis of the particular condition of inner resemblance to a form. But the notion of the false copy turns this whole process inside out. The false copy takes the idea of difference or nonresemblance and internalizes it, setting it up within the given object as its very condition of being. If the simulacrum resembles anything, it is the Idea of nonresemblance. Thus a labyrinth is erected, a hall of mirrors, within which no independent perspective can be established from which to make distinctions—because all of reality has now internalized those distinctions. The labyrinth, the hall of mirrors, is, in short, a cave.

Much of the writing of poststructuralism, in its understanding of the Real as merely the effect of simulated resemblance, follows Nietzsche's attack on

7. See Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1969, pp. 292–307. This section on Plato appears in English as "Plato and the Simulacrum," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, no. 27 (Winter 1983), pp. 45–56.

Platonism in which he insisted that there is no exit from this cave, except into an even deeper, more labyrinthine one. We are surrounded, it is argued, not by reality but by the reality *effect*, the product of simulation and signs.

As I have said, at a certain point photography, in its precarious position as the false copy — the image that is resemblant only by mechanical circumstance and not by internal, essential connection to the model — this false copy served to deconstruct the whole system of model and copy, original and fake, first- and second-degree replication. For certain artists and critics photography opened the closed unities of the older aesthetic discourse to the severest possible scrutiny, turning them inside out. Given its power to do this — to put into question the whole concept of the uniqueness of the art object, the originality of its author, the coherence of the oeuvre within which it is made, and the individuality of so-called self-expression — given this power, it is clear that, with all due respect to Bourdieu, there *is* a discourse proper to photography; only, we would have to add, it is not an aesthetic discourse. It is a project of deconstruction in which art is distanced and separated from itself.

If Sherman's work gives us an idea of what it looks like to engage the photographic simulacrum in order to explode the unities of art, we might choose an example from serious "art" photography to look at the reverse situation — the attempt to bury the question of the simulacrum in order to produce the effect of art, a move that almost inevitably brings about the return of the repressed. As one of many possible examples, one might look at a recent series of still lifes by Irving Penn through which the domain of high art is self-consciously evoked by calling on the various emblemata of the *vanitas* picture or the *memento mori* — the skulls, the desiccated fruit, the broken objects that all function as reminders of the swift flight of time towards death.

But beyond this iconographic system that is copied from the world of Renaissance and baroque painting — and one has the right to ask if this is a true or a false copy — there is another aspect of the aesthetic system that Penn wishes to annex for photography, or at least for this photography. This is the combined aspect of rarity and uniqueness that a pictorial original is thought to possess in the first degree and a print made after the painting would possess only in a degraded second degree. Again one is confronted with the question of whether or not Penn's strategy for acquiring these qualities only produces a simulation of them. His strategy involves the production of opulent platinum images, contact-printed from huge negatives. The platinum, with its infinite fineness of detail, provides the sense of rarity; and the process of contact-printing, with its unmediated connection between plate and paper, gives the work a sense of uniqueness not unlike that possessed by the photogram, which then implies the further system of uniqueness of the arts of painting and drawing.

In order to obtain the size negative needed to produce these prints without the use of an enlarger, Penn turned to a particular kind of camera — an antiquated instrument called a banquet camera — which with its bellows and enor-





*Irving Penn. Still Life with Shoe. 1980.*

mous plates would allow him to enlarge the photographed object during the very process of making the negative. This camera, invented for the recording of groups of people — whether football teams or Elks Club dinners — was also the generator of the format we see in Penn's images: a horizontally splayed rectangle whose height/width ratio is very different from that of most cameras.

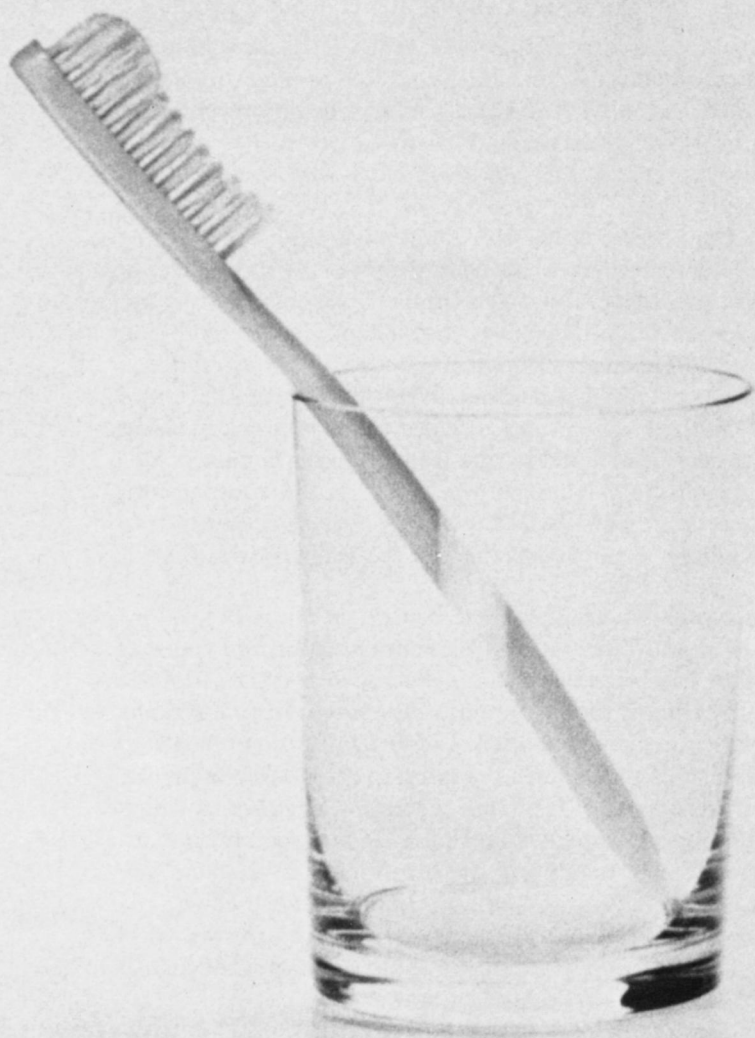
But what the format of these pictures is *not* different from is the peculiar shape of the double-page spread of the slick magazine: the most opulent of the typographic theaters of mass advertising, the most luxurious print screen of the Platonic cave of a modern consumer society. Now, the double-page spread, in sumptuous, seductive color photography, is something of which Penn is a master, and for the last several years he has produced a series of still lifes for this commercial context, a series that in format, disposition of objects, frontality of composition, and shallowness of space is identical to the *memento mori* images of his own aesthetically tagged platinum prints. The work Penn has done for Clinique cosmetics, which month after month has filled facing pages in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Town and Country* with elegant, shallow, luminous still lifes of bottles and jars — creating a kind of centerfold of cosmetic promise — is the visual twin of its conceptual counterpart, the platinum work that speaks not of perpetual youth, but of death.

Penn's Clinique ads are photographs that are thoroughly open to the analysis by Bourdieu that we entertained earlier. They are posing as pictures of reality, marked by a straightforwardness that proclaims the supposed objectivity of the image. But they are, instead, the reality that is being projected by an advertising company, by a given product's imperative to instill certain desires, certain notions of need, in the potential consumer. The very determination to fill both facing pages with a single image and to close the visual space of the magazine against any intrusion from outside this image/screen is part of this strategy to create the reality effect, to open up the world of the simulacrum, which here means to present advertising's false copy as though it were innocently transparent to an originary reality: the effect of the real substituting for the real itself.

And if one pursues this analysis one step further, one sees how Penn's image of art — in his *memento mori* still lifes — is itself dependent upon the space of that photographic project that preceded this series for some years: the Clinique ad and its staging of visual reality. There is here no *direct* relation to a specific subject — whether one thinks of that as the eroticism of death, or the presence of art, or whatever else one determines as Penn's meaning in the platinum prints. There is, instead, an elaborate system of feedback through a network in which reality is constituted by the photographic image — and in our society that increasingly means the image of advertising and consumption — so that the art-effect is wholly a function of the photographically produced reality-effect.

Penn has turned to art undoubtedly as a means of escaping the world of commercial photography. This has happened at the same moment that the art

Twice a day.



Twice a day.



world has turned to commercial photography as the description of the very limits of vision. Like many other photographers, Penn presumably believes that he can transcend those limits. But that belief is, clearly, tantamount to repressing the existence of the limits. And the burgeoning of Clinique's claims within Penn's "art" is the return of the repressed, one compromising the other within the system of the simulacrum.

Penn wishes to affirm photography as the proper object of criticism, which is to say, the photograph as a work of art. But, symptomatically we might say, Penn's "art photographs" are like screen-memories behind which lurk the forms and images of the primal scene: that moment—viewed with a shudder by Baudelaire in the 1850s—of art debauched by commerce.<sup>8</sup>

As distinct from Penn's, Sherman's work stands in an inverse relationship to critical discourse, having herself understood photography as the Other of art, the desire of art in our time. Thus her use of photography does not construct an object for art criticism but constitutes an act of such criticism. It constructs of photography itself a metalanguage with which to operate on the mythogrammatical field of art, exploring at one and the same time the myths of creativity and artistic vision, and the innocence, primacy, and autonomy of the "support" for the aesthetic image.

These two examples, we could say, operate at the two opposite poles of photography's relation to aesthetic discourse. But transecting the line that connects these two practices is the socio-discourse of the Varda experiment with which I began. *Une minute pour une image*, with its system of presenting the isolated photograph as an invitation for the viewer to project a fantasy narrative, and its abandonment of the notion of critical competence in favor of a kind of survey of popular opinion, occupies a position as far as possible from the rigors of serious criticism. But in taking that position it raises the possibility of the utter irrelevance of such criticism to the field of photography.

The specter of this possibility hangs over every writer who now wishes to consider the field of photographic production, photographic history, photographic meaning. And it casts its shadow most deeply over the critical project that has been engaged by a growing number of writers on photography as they try to find a language with which to analyze the photograph in isolation, whether on the wall of a museum, a gallery, or a lecture hall. For, they must ask themselves, in what sense can this discourse be properly sustained, in what sense can it, as critical reflection, be prolonged beyond the simple inanity of "a minute for an image"?

8. Baudelaire expresses his horror in terms that sound very familiar to contemporary critical thought; he invokes the supplement: "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally" (*The Salon of 1859*, Section II, "The Modern Public and Photography," in *Baudelaire, Art in Paris*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, London, Phaidon, 1965, p. 154).