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Another History

MATTHEW WITKOVSKY on photography and abstraction

Opposite page: **El Lissitzky, *Runner in the City*, ca. 1926**, black-and-white photograph, 5 3/16 x 5 3/16". © 2010 Estate of El Lissitzky/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst.
This page: **Liz Deschenes, *Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)*, 2009**, six unique silver-toned photographs, overall 11' 4" x 16' x 4' 10". Installation view, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

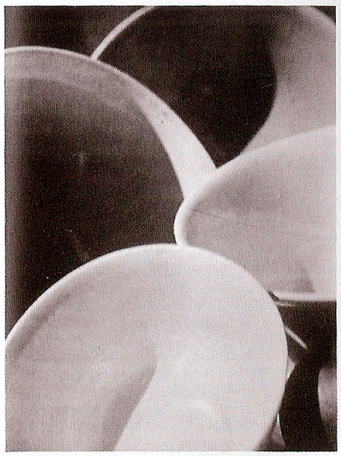
This page, above: **Liz Deschenes, *Horizontal/Vertical Photograph #5*, 2009**, silver-toned black-and-white photograph mounted on Dibond, framed, 56¼ x 36¼". Below: **View of "Back Grounds," 2002, Galerie Nelson, Paris.** From left: Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #1*, 2001; Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #3*, 2001; Liz Deschenes, *Green Screen #4*, 2001. Opposite page, from left: **Paul Strand, *Bowls*, 1916**, black-and-white photograph, 13⅛ x 9¾". **Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Bez tytułu (Autoportret)* (Untitled [Self-Portrait]), ca. 1910**, black-and-white photograph, 5 x 3½". **Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Bez tytułu (Autoportret, Zakopane)* (Untitled [Self-Portrait, Zakopane]), ca. 1910**, black-and-white photograph, 7 x 5".

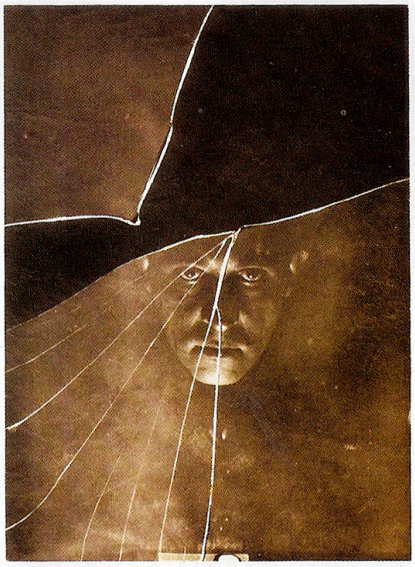
THERE IS NO ONE THING CALLED PHOTOGRAPHY. Photographs are images, but they are also things, and their meanings change with each material iteration: negative, digital file, exhibition print, magazine page, Web posting (not to mention the variations within each of these and other presentation forms). As Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1999—with pointed reference to Walter Benjamin's essays on the discipline—we must acknowledge "the self-differential condition of mediums themselves" and "the necessary *plurality* of the arts . . . a plural condition that stands apart from any philosophically unified idea of Art."[1] Nevertheless, the drive persists today to reestablish medium specificity, to find elements of aesthetic coherence that would draw disparate photographs together and unite them as Art, in a way distinct from other creative domains.

Defeated on the plane of the overtly figurative or documentary, this campaign for totalization has lately gathered its forces on the field of the apparently abstract. In fact, a spate of American-made exhibitions and publications has recently presented abstraction as the hidden telos of photography—now revealed as the world moves into a supposedly postphotographic future, where the indexical imprint of the real is replaced by the total manipulability of the digital. In this new visual regime, allegedly, abstraction at once eulogizes "a twilight art" and "rises" at the vanguard "edge of vision."[2] (More than a century after the artist Maurice Denis proposed that a painting is first and foremost a formal arrangement on a surface—and only secondarily a representation of the world—we are given an inverted variant of his judgment, with renewed eagerness: "All photographs are a translation of reality," we are told, and therefore the "abstraction of reality is always present in photography."[3]) A subset of mostly Austro-German proselytizers, meanwhile, led by curator- and artist-historians such as Ruth Horak, Gottfried Jäger, and Floris Neusüss, continues to promulgate the long-standing argument that the removal of depictive elements is the one sure way to guarantee photography as a "generative" rather than an "imitative" art form.[4]

Abstraction, however, is not photography's secret common denominator, nor is it the antidote to "traditional" photography—if photography has conventions local or long lasting enough to be thought of in that way. And it seems equally mistaken to suggest that abstraction is more relevant today because it offers awareness of photography's passing (and therefore of our own passage into a new historical age). Against present talk of extinction, we should remember that photography has since its first days always been "ending," its technological bases continually displaced through the action of (truly abstract) economic and historical forces, coupled with shifts in popular habits of consumption and social interaction. No matter how refined or forward-looking in its individual instances, photography as a class of imagemaking is profoundly marked by the enforced obsolescence characteristic of the industrial and postindustrial eras.

THIS RECOGNITION DEMANDS that we change our historical perspective on photography. To see what such an alternative view might look like, consider the work of Liz Deschenes, who since the early 1990s has engaged precisely photography's ongoing (rather than epochal) obsolescence—its inherently plural, mutable aspect. More specifically, the artist concentrates on forms of abstraction suppressed in conventional imaging systems: unwanted moiré patterns, disappearing "green screens" used in television or cinema superimposition, the color key employed to mark topographic altitude levels. In the first years of this decade and again in 2009, the artist fabricated a series of photograms under moonlight that she fixed with silver toning, flowed over the surface of the prints. The more recent works approximate the look and proportions of a set of mirrors. These are mounted on aluminum and floated without mats in the frame, so that they stand out as things; their monochrome surfaces offer recognizable if indistinct reflections of the setting before them. To observe them in person, then, is to give them their imagery while at the same time discovering a primi-





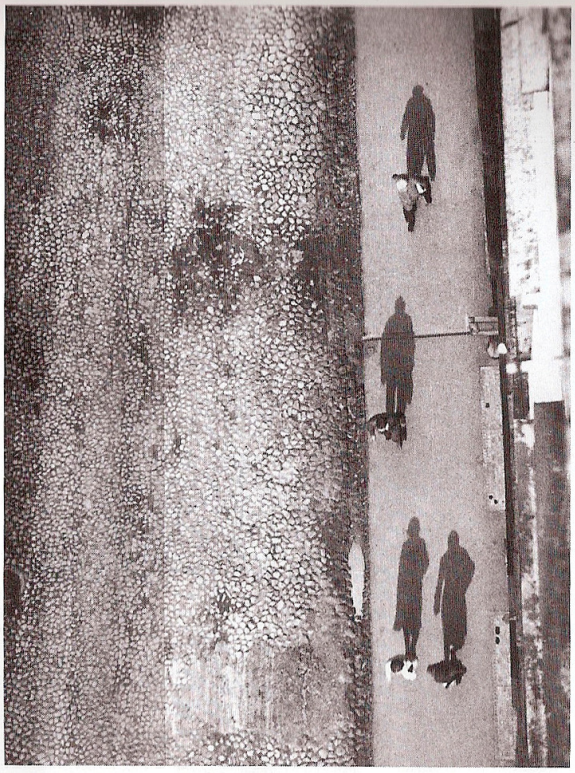
tive reflection of oneself. Gazing at this blurred self-representation, one might surmise that an anterior image has been swallowed through progressive silverizing of the surface, or that one's own image is likewise being consumed by a cancer of silver salts.

Underscoring the point was a recent installation at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York, which featured six such "mirrors" arranged in an oculus-like portal, reflecting each viewer in multiple, fragmented sections. The work, *Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)*, 2009, drew inspiration from a 1935 display design by Herbert Bayer that would permit the omniscient viewing of pictures in a 360-degree radius. But Deschenes's work, since it inserts mirrors where Bayer's original proposal called for images, presents us not with any kind of panopticon but rather with an intermittent circle of image-resistant objects. It scatters and deflects subjectivity while providing an inimitable encounter for the viewing self. And so *Tilt/Swing* investigates Bayer's historical model of opticality but with critical distance: Deschenes's photographic abstraction pointedly refuses to aspire to the status of the modernist monochrome in painting. Part of the artist's critique, in fact, rests on the dialectic between image (Bayer's absent pictures, say) and object (the thin, fragile rectangles lining walls, floor, and ceiling). And here is the crucial point for today: Deschenes's work offers a corrective to the current discourse around photographic abstraction, which too often celebrates work that is concerned "exclusively with looking at its own circumstances" (a favorite phrase of Jäger's) in an imagined bliss of medium-specific self-presence.[5]

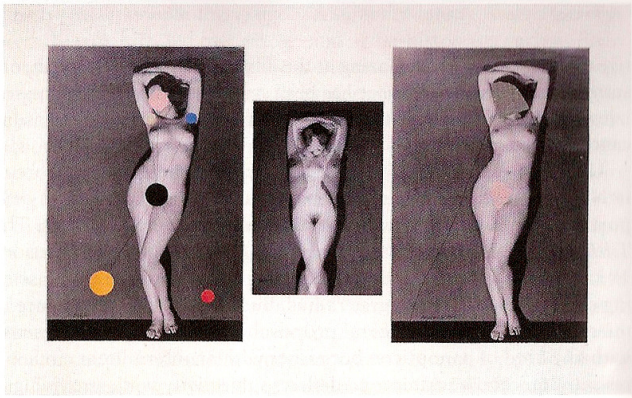
This problem is not at all new, of course. At the start of his seminal 1931 essay "Short History of Photography," Benjamin decried the ceaseless assessment of photographs according to a "fetishistic and fundamentally antitechnological concept of art," remarking that the confusion of technics and aesthetics in photography criticism could only "legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he [is] in the process of overturning."[6] Still, given our changed historical context nearly eighty years later, Benjamin's text must be taken not as orthodoxy but rather as precedent. In that spirit, then, I propose to sketch a "short history" of abstract photographs that—like Deschenes's—forms a counterpoint to the reigning emphasis on "pure photoreality" and "photography of photography." The works in this history (culled, as Benjamin's was, largely from recent exhibitions and literature) pay emphatic attention to the body of the photographer and that of the viewer, each of which is animated by language, humors, and desires. At stake is the photograph's existence as image and as object: qualities that artists across the past century have deployed in complementarity or in productive dissonance with one another.

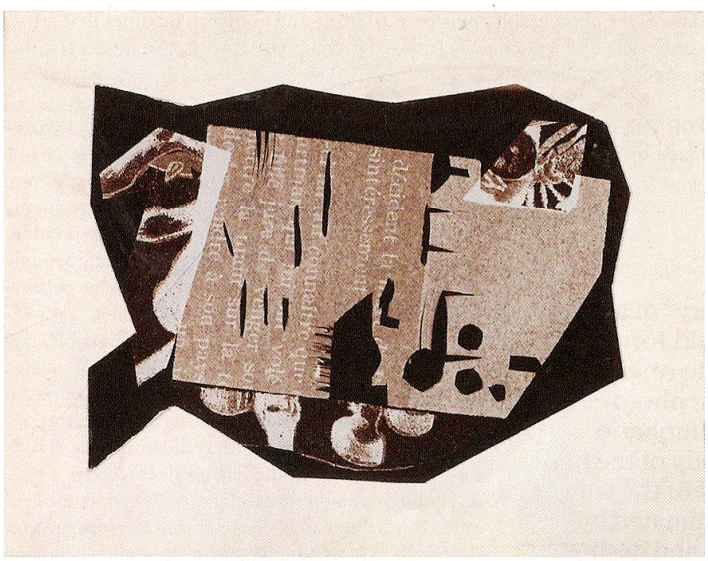
FOR THESE REASONS, my history does not begin with the canonical works made by Paul Strand in 1916 (such as *Bowls* and *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut)*, which Jäger has dubbed the first photographs to be titled as abstractions.[7] The producing body—and the dependence of photography on other technical and material supports—was rigorously excluded from this masterful study in graphic patterning. Instead, I'll begin a few years earlier, with the radically damaged self-portraits of the Polish writer and artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. One picture, dated circa 1910 and apparently among the earliest he made, shows the author in a mock swoon of despair, trapped between two swaths of cloudy, yellowish light. A rude strip of brightness at the left border suggests a blistered mirror, its bubbled silver no longer capable of reflecting the human likeness; flaring up from the bottom right, a matching wedge in the same jaundiced

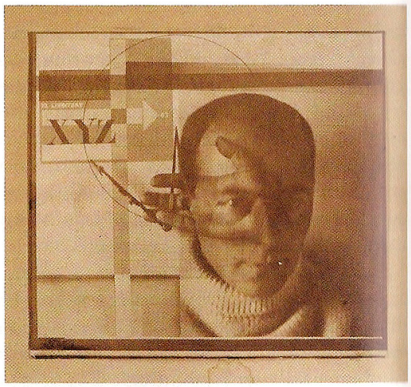
A new "short history" of abstract photographs should form a counterpoint to the reigning emphasis on "pure photoreality"—paying emphatic attention to the body of the photographer and that of the viewer, each of which is animated by language, humors, and desires.



This page, clockwise from top left: **Aleksandr Rodchenko, *On the Pavement*, 1928,** black-and-white photograph. © 2010 Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/Licensed by VAGA, New York. **Miroslav Hák, *Strukáž* (Structage), 1937,** black-and-white photograph, 12 x 9½". **Man Ray, *Hier (Kiki de Montparnasse)*, 1931; *Demain (Kiki de Montparnasse)*, 1930/1965; *Aujourd'hui (Kiki de Montparnasse)*, 1932,** black-and-white photographs and collage, overall 15⅛ x 10¼". © 2010 Man Ray Trust/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris. **El Lissitzky, *The Constructor*, 1924,** black-and-white photograph, 3 x 3½". © 2010 Estate of El Lissitzky/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst. **Christian Schad, *Schadograph*, 1918,** black-and-white photograph, 2¼ x 3¼". Opposite page: **Vane Bor, *Photogram 7*, 1928,** black-and-white photograph, 7 x 9½".

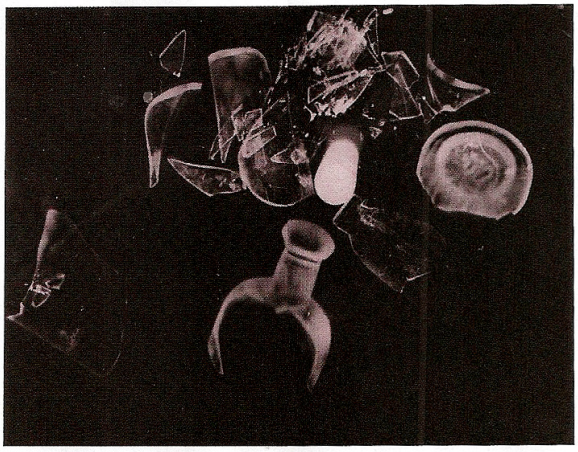






tone threatens to immolate Witkiewicz's sinking visage, as if in proof of the contention that cameras consume the essence of those they portray. A spectral window ripples in the background, dissolving in this metaphoric furnace. To make another, better-known self-portrait, Witkiewicz struck the glass negative with a hammer and nail after exposure, then removed several fragments before printing, to yield a head rent asunder by the void.

Witkiewicz's prewar portraits were perhaps the first photographs to present the self as vitally threatened by the representational apparatus—yet also inhabiting that apparatus, to the peril of both the body and the system in which it is enmeshed. It is as if the material self lived, corroded, on the print or pressed within the fragile thickness of the plateglass negative. These images (like the one by Strand) are not truly abstract; rather, they call on abstraction to visualize the fraught encounter between subject and machine. Such a model of partial yet trenchant abstraction was taken up in various ways during the era of experimentation between the world wars. Among other examples, there are the photograms made in 1922 and after by László Moholy-Nagy, explicitly conceived, as curator Leah Dickerman has recently reminded us, to assert the primacy of the haptic within the optical domain.[8] There are the multiple-exposure prints of El Lissitzky, the most famous of which, *The Constructor*, 1924, likewise equates hand and eye as body parts seemingly embedded in the constructive field.[9] Then, too, there are the dizzying, stomach-churning plunges from towers and balconies conjured by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Moholy-Nagy, and their legion of followers, who briskly reversed centuries of perspectival habit whereby staircases and other swiftly rising structures were depicted reassuringly from below. Abstraction is thus equated with disorientation: a visceral experience of dislocation that puts the viewer "on the spot."



Such perpetual unrest is echoed in more fully abstract photographs of the interwar decades, which open onto multiple media and emphasize material or physical instability. The photograms of Christian Schad, produced (along with a series of closely related relief sculptures) between 1918 and 1920, are marked at their edges by nicks and scissor cuts and across their surfaces by the deposits of unlikely treasures gleaned from the trash can. Here, the photograph becomes at once a picture of recycled castoffs and a piece of flotsam itself; it transforms mud into gold while paradoxically insisting on an indelible grit. And these diminutive bits of paper evince a Dada fascination with "scrappy abstraction" that continued in some instances into the Surrealist years. Photograms made by Serbian Surrealist Vane Bor in 1928, for instance, have as their props smashed glass and sundry items that, in some cases, form disquieting patterns of undifferentiated matter. A second Serbian example, equally obscure and just as fascinating, comes from the Belgrade journal *Surrealism Here and Now*, whose 1932 editorial "In Front of a Wall. Simulation of the Paranoiac Delirium of Interpretation. Survey" consists of six written interpretations of a single frontal view (itself repeated six times) of a decaying plaster surface: The etiolated image would be impossible to identify without the texts and the Daliesque title. (To name that image, however, is to literalize its opacity and impenetrability. The authors' descriptions only further the picture's odd, evocative combination of obdurate resistance and soft rot.)

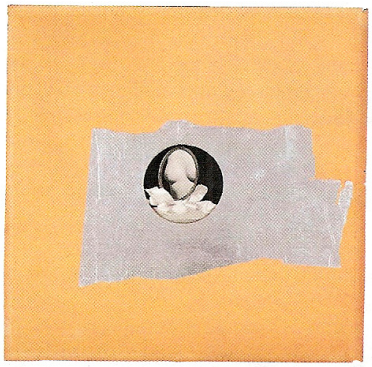
To show just how far photography can stray from the image, from pictorial composition, I might mention a subgenre of photographic abstraction from the same year, that involved poured or spattered emulsion. Roger Parry, Maurice Tabard, and Miroslav Hák each tested the procedure (in 1929, 1935, and 1935–37, respectively), examples of which (minus Hák's) are included in the currently traveling French exhibition "The Subversion of Images: Surrealism, Photography, Film."[10] Such works demonstrate that a photographer can create indisputably nonobjective compositions, images of *no thing*, and as such are radical by definition. However, they may also be seen simply to substitute emulsion for pigment, in a move that does not invade the realm of painting so much as become domesticated within it.[11]

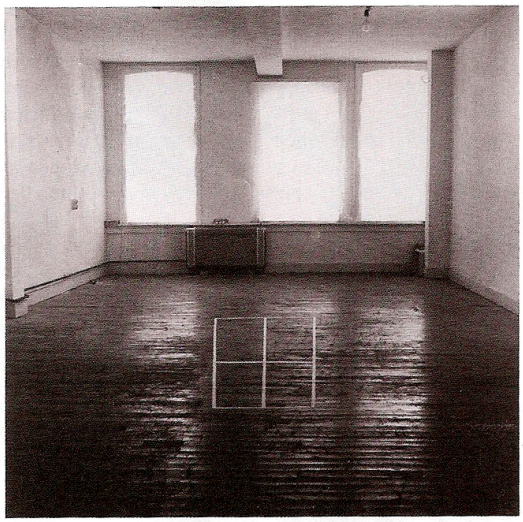
Man Ray, by contrast, has been justly celebrated for a wide range of abstractions grounded in the sensate body—and in this context, we might look anew at such highly familiar works, seeing them not as domestications of but as operations *on* the physical subject: streetlights registered by a pinhole camera as a heaving, drunken fog; Lee Miller's neck modeled through soft-focus close-up in the image of a Brancusian swan; Meret Oppenheim's recumbent body dissolved through solarization into an erotic puddle; Kiki de Montparnasse, arms crossed above her head, transformed in a series of increasingly nebulous prints into a hovering phantom of desire. Benjamin's pronouncement on photography of the 1840s, guided by the work of David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, seems curiously applicable here as well: "The procedure itself caused the subjects to live their way into, rather than out of, the moment; during the long duration of the exposure, they grew into the picture." The fusion of subject and object in Man Ray's work seems just as complete, grounded as it is in technical choices that make bodies or places appear both in and out of historical time.

In the years immediately following World War II, Man Ray's close friend Marcel Duchamp took the relation of erotics and abstraction onto a new and exemplary terrain. Abstraction hides everywhere in his culminating masterpiece, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage . . .*, 1946–66—starting with its threshold element, a deracinated side of battered wood that Duchamp pictured in an early photograph as if it were a remnant from a Kurt Schwitters *Merzbau*. The work's principal "attraction" is, of course, the misshapen body that lies beyond the door. Peeping at that nude, one cannot fail to be aware of the barrier portal. Having done this once, the reverse holds equally true: The figurative body and the abstract door can never be apprehended simultaneously, but they are always grasped together in the mind.

In the era of experimentation between the world wars, certain works equated abstraction with disorientation: a visceral experience of dislocation that put the viewer "on the spot."

Photography is not abstract in *Étant donnés*, but it is wedded to abstraction. As the remarkable exhibition held last summer at the Philadelphia Museum of Art made clear, the background landscape is essentially an abstract pattern generated by cutting and combining





Opposite page: **Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape), 1946,** seminal fluid on Astralon and black satin, 8¼ x 6½". Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan. © 2010 Estate of Marcel Duchamp/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. This page, from left: **Marcel Duchamp, *In the Manner of Delvaux*, 1942,** tinfoil and photograph collage on cardboard, 13⅜ x 13⅜". © 2010 Estate of Marcel Duchamp/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. **Mel Bochner, *Surface Dis/Tension*, 1968,** silhouetted composite black-and-white photograph mounted on board, 72 x 68". **Jan Dibbets, *Perspective Correction—My Studio II, 3: Square with Cross on Floor*, 1969,** black-and-white photograph on photographic canvas, 43⅜ x 43⅜".

elements from souvenir snapshots Duchamp had taken at a Swiss mountainside resort.[12] This procedure developed organically from the earliest studies for the piece, first a collage titled *In the Manner of Delvaux*, 1942, and then *Twin-Touch-Test*, 1943, designed with Frederick Kiesler for an issue that year of the Surrealist magazine *VVV*. In each of these works, an erotically charged photograph is surrounded by abstractions of ungainly or banal construction: a bit of cracked and pleated tinfoil on a blank sheet, or a grille of chicken wire. The lexicon of midcentury abstraction (gestural cutout, monochrome, grid) surrounds images better suited to girlie magazines. This conjunction of conventionally opposed visual codes infects abstraction with voyeuristic desire. It also frustrates desire through ersatz materiality: It is not the bodies but the folds of shiny tinfoil and the actual metal grille that are asking to be stroked.

In a subsequent preparatory study, Duchamp molded his distended nude figure in wax and set it like a giantess astride the Swiss waterfall, flanked by a jigsaw of landscape photographs. This photocollage with wax relief, dated circa 1946, is inseparable from the notorious *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape), which Duchamp created in the same year by masturbating onto a sheet of Astralon. Absent its title, *Paysage fautif* is a fully abstract composition. Yet, like a photograph, its meaning is fundamentally determined (or overdetermined) by the question "What is it of?" The answer refers back to the Swiss scene, whose Amazonian inhabitant was Duchamp's lover and model at the time. Looking and desiring are here the very bases of abstraction. Like the door and the view, the Swiss and the "faulty" landscapes simply *need* each other. That visceral dependence remains, barely sublimated, in the final work, where one's eyes dart incessantly between the nearly flattened sculptural figure and the unreal photographic backdrop.

IT'S INTRIGUING TO CONSIDER that in 1966, the same year Duchamp began readying *Étant donnés* for transport to Philadelphia, Mel Bochner launched a series of investigations into perspective and scale in photography. These quickly moved from the rendering of recognizable objects to the manipulation of the photographic system such as it was in Bochner's day: camera, photosensitive paper and photo tape, and Masonite support. In *Surface Dis/Tension*, 1968, the greatest of a group of works in this vein, Bochner transformed an orthogonally gridded tabletop into an irregularly shaped, vertically oriented, oblique image of wavy lines and shaded inflections, a deformation achieved by stretching, soaking, delaminating, remounting, overprinting, and sawing away at a progressively crumpled sheet of photographic paper. The signs of handling are unmistakable, even if the resulting composition resists decoding. Bochner also foregrounded the color variance between filtered light and chemical pigments in a number of related works titled *Crumple*, driving home the point about materiality and manipulation—and thus calling to mind the corporeal maneuvers of Duchamp's project. This is less "photography on photography" than photography "on" the status of representation—and its objectification in, or as, a work of art.

A wave of new work in the years around 1970 continued this mode of abstraction, interrogating photography as an analogue for perceptual experience. Jan Dibbets's classic "Perspective Corrections," 1967–69, to cite just one example, present geometric forms that appear rectangular (and parallel to, or even with, the surface of the picture plane) but are in reality trapezoids receding in space. Such work tested the indexical fidelity of the photograph even before indexicality had become a dominant theory of photography. The status of photography as an imprint of the real is not so much the issue here; rather, in a kind of counter to trompe l'oeil, it is the relation of the picture to its objecthood that matters: what we look into versus what we are looking at.

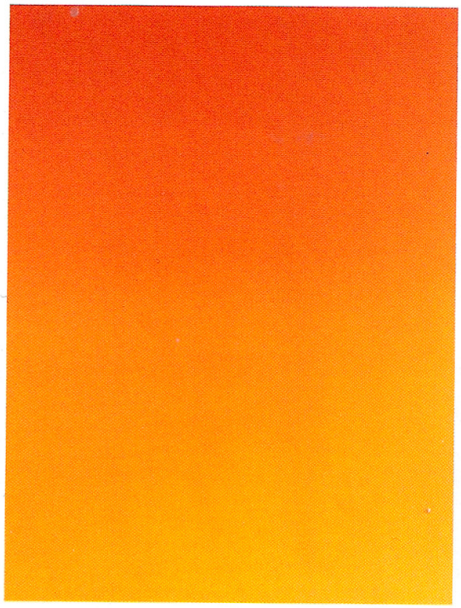
Ignoring such discoveries, the abstract photography that proliferated in the '70s and '80s largely contented itself with bigger and better-produced images. For more than thirty years now, abstraction has been an encrusted subspecialty of artistic academe. Amid such calcification, the artist James Welling has forged a career of great intelligence that progresses continually in and out of abstraction; his recent *boîte-en-valise* retrospective at Donald Young Gallery in Chicago

In Duchamp's *Paysage fautif* (Wayward or Faulty Landscape) looking and desiring are the very bases of abstraction.

suggested him, indeed, as an interlocutor to the photophilic Gerhard Richter. To see the rainbow hues of one of Welling's "Degradés," 1986–2004, in proximity to his chromatically filtered view of the Farnsworth House, to compare his photograms of bluish water with the blue winter light of a New York cityscape, or to watch his move in the '70s from proto–Richard Prince advertising appropriation to his long preoccupation with drapery, is to comprehend the degree to which he has substantively investigated the spectrum of abstract to figurative—and not any presumed break or opposition between the two.

THE HISTORY I HAVE BEEN SKETCHING does not fit neatly into contemporary conversations. Indeed, the broad and sudden surge in attention to photographic abstraction may well mark a shift in critical discourse rather than in artistic practice. One suspects that underlying the dominant new talk (and its fixation on the digital) is a distinctly old-fashioned conception of creativity. Manipulating pixels can seem a close cousin to applying touches of paint—closer, at any rate, than releasing a camera shutter. This logic also recalls abstract painting, the pinnacle of modernist achievement according to that same notion of creativity. If Benjamin objected to evaluations of photography that used a retrograde pictorial equivalent of the ancien régime, his protest gains new force when one considers how closely today's admiration for abstract photography recalls the mid-twentieth-century obsession with "opticality" in painting.

In and of itself, photography that is generated or aided by computers will not likely change this trajectory of photographic convention, which delights in marrying shopworn aesthetic criteria to newfound technological possibilities. Historical forces outside of art might accomplish the task. The structures of capital have undeniably grown more abstract in our time, as George Baker has elaborated in a series of lucid essays. So, too, have social relations and avenues for political representation.[13] As Baker has emphasized, however, outwardly abstract photographs are not necessarily those that best reveal the terms of these historical shifts. Indeed, such pictures more than likely analogize the failure that Bertolt Brecht, as cited in Benjamin's "Short History," saw in the Krupp-factory photographs of the 1920s: surface recordings that reveal nothing of the functional conditions of our present situation.[14]



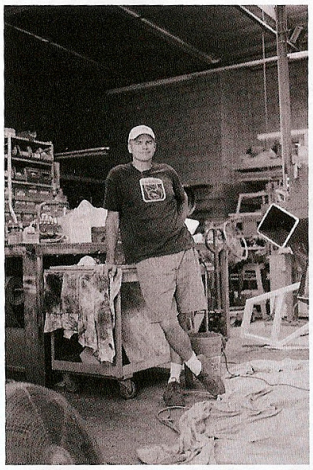
This is not to say, as Baker does, that photography as a class of visual production has been transformed willy-nilly into abstractions of abstractions—no more so, first of all, than other kinds of art, which since the industrial era have all been commodities grounded in technologies of the readymade. Nor is it to say that actual, visible abstraction in photography is an unworthy subject of inquiry. Rather than being dragged along in a helpless echo of shifting forms of economic exchange, photography as used in art can still be put to work in ever-changing ways on the relation of images to things—and, by extension, of images to people.

This kind of endeavor would begin with the relation of the photograph to itself—of its image to its object, a link that has been central to the provocative and critical abstractions of our short history. Outstanding examples in recent photography have staged this relation in a revelatory way. Moyra Davey's *Copperhead Grid*, 1990, resurrected in 2008 for exhibition at Harvard University's Fogg Museum and then brought to Murray Guy gallery in New York, zeroes in on insignificant objects of exchange—a dollar's worth of common pennies—to concentrate our attention on their intimate handling and the resultant scarring or obliteration of the "little Lincolns" on their face. A densely hung, even-sided grid of ten-by-eight-inch photographs shows each circular coin cropped tightly in a rectangle around the presidential profile. This is the anti-Rushmore and, as has been noted, the anti-Ruff: a vernacular portrait type presented not in a monumentally sized print, face-mounted to Plexiglas, but flattened behind one hundred awkward little rectangles of the same material and held to the wall with brads.[15] Face-mounting to Plexi was, it appears in retrospect, the art world's answer to the rise of the computer screen as a vehicle for luminous, untouchable images. In contrast, Davey's photographs uphold the value of desultory things, casually posed yet dignified objects worn down by touch.

The move is conceptually brilliant: linking nominally worthless paper and metal objects while contrasting their mode of circulation to that of paperless capital flow. *Copperhead Grid* may thematize the twinning of abstraction and atavism praised by Baker as the productive future of "photography after photography," in an age governed by finance capital and its attendant crises—the penny is likely headed the way of the analog camera.[16] (Again, there are parallels to the past: In an oft-cited passage of his "Short History," written after the 1929 crash, Benjamin opined that "it would not be surprising if the photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the preindustrial heyday of photography had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry.") Or, prophetic qualities aside, the piece may be most relevant for the ways in which it models an interchange between individuals and systems that persists across shifts in our technologized world. Not a grand demonstration, but one hundred acts of minor or insignificant resistance accomplished through near passivity. The move from figuration to abstraction, emblematized in the variously disfigured faces, occurs through absentminded or accidental personalization of random bits from the larger currency pool, rather than any conscious effort. Even their eventual withdrawal from circulation—the ultimate level of abstraction—happens obliviously; pennies are not misplaced, they simply go missing. But the material retains its bite, to follow Davey's punning title, at least as long as it stays in the system. A sympathetic viewer could see in these scarred surfaces a gathering of dispossessed, nominally identical ciphers who are in reality highly individuated.

One of the stars of the current abstract scene, Walead Beshty, likewise makes explicit the relations of labor between images and people. Beshty produces his "Multi-Sided Pictures," 2006–, by folding lengths of chromogenic photographic paper, cut to the measure of his body (for example, his outstretched arms), into three-dimensional geometric forms. He then successively exposes the sides to localized light sources that are sequenced according to the spectrum of primary emitted (red, green, blue) or reflective (cyan, magenta, yellow) colors. (Beshty

Opposite page: **James Welling**, *Zepni*, **1986**, color photograph, 9¼ x 7¼". This page, from left: **Moyra Davey**, *Copperhead #1*, **1990**, color photograph, 24 x 18". **Walead Beshty**, *Fabricator (JD), Los Angeles, California, July 9th 2008*, black-and-white photograph, 30 x 20". **Walead Beshty**, *4 Sided Picture (RBGY), January 4th 2007, Los Angeles, California*, color photograph, 78½ x 50".



and Bochner had regular discussions when Beshty was Bochner's student at Yale, and these pieces bear an evident debt to the latter's *Crumples* and other early works.) The "Multi-Sided Pictures" emphasize light and paper, but also photographic materials and procedures, as specific elements to be borne in mind by the viewer. This information is conveyed in lengthy descriptive titles, in the manner initiated by Beshty's older Los Angeles colleague Christopher Williams. On reading in these titles such precise descriptions—of the paper used, the colors, the number of sides, the date and location of exposure—one becomes intensely aware of the object as something incommensurable with its representation, whether in language or as an image.

Beshty insists on the manifest physicality of photographs: Any "division between the 'picture' and the 'material' is unnecessary and fundamentally specious," he has written. It is also dangerous, for an exclusive emphasis on transmissible pictures cannot but reinforce the hegemony of today's image world as an unassailable screen of pixelated units.[17] The exhibition of these pieces is intended to be specific as well—an aspect of production made manifest in what Beshty calls "industrial portraits," nearly life-size color photographs of those involved in framing, installing, or curating the various showings of the work. The portrait photographs have, however, been kept out of sight at some exhibitions, masking the artist's (perhaps too evident) point that it is impossible to "generate" an image without labor. Beshty sets up a dialectical encounter between sentient bodies and an unthinking, "massifying" mechanical apparatus, to invoke the terms of Vilém Flusser—a thought-provoking endeavor even after decades of avant-garde investment in that dialectic.[18] (A recent exchange between Beshty and Baker, each concerned with defining an interventionist mode for photography that is not bounded by a conventional divide between "abstraction" and "illusion," bears the stamp of Flusser's ideas and marks a high point in recent writing on abstraction.[19])

"There is no photograph that is inherently more photographic than another": so Beshty wrote last year in explaining his ideas.[20] The works by Davey, Beshty, and Deschenes—to keep to the present-day examples in this short history—are each singular, and they elude categorical pronouncements about "the medium." None of them claims to define photography, abstract or otherwise. As one measure of that singularity, each of these works is exceedingly difficult to reproduce, for different reasons. Davey's is too large to fit legibly in a book, Beshty's is too subtle in its folds and creases, and Deschenes's "mirrors" are simply impossible to capture, in any light. Their lovely surface irregularities and handling marks disappear in print, leaving the impression of lackluster monochromes divested of any reproductive, mirroric function. Yet perhaps what is unrepresentable is not so much the images as the labor invested in their making: One can only appreciate this labor when viewing the works in person. This kind of contact between image and body is remarkable. Can one speak of things that are antiauratic yet wholly defined by ritual encounter and an originary presence? Such cases seem to pose a conundrum in the history of photography inherited from Benjamin. □

The link between the image and its object has been central to the provocative abstractions in this short history, and outstanding examples in recent photography have staged this relation in a revelatory way.

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