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OCTOBER AND SEMIOTICS

**AZ *OCTOBER* MŰVÉSZETELMÉLETI FOLYÓIRAT
ÉS A SZEMIOTIKA**

PHD DISSZERTÁCIÓ

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INTRODUCTION

In December 1973, in a unique and unprecedented manner, the cover of the monthly issue of *Artforum*, one of the leading American art magazines of the time, did not depict a famous artwork or its detail,¹ but the employees of the New York Museum of Modern Art striking in front of the building in the autumn of 1973, and joined by the Art Workers Coalition.² Inside the magazine, the then editor John Coplans published an interview with the strikers, whose cause went against his convictions because, as he recalls it, ‘you [the strikers] raise strike issues that I’m not in the least sympathetic with and people will not be sympathetic with. It’s not up to a junior staff of the museum to run the museum as a commune. Someone has to take responsibility for the decisions at an executive level and a curatorial level. And you are not going to change museums into democracies. And you are not going to elicit any sympathy. And to put this down as one of your objectives or complaints makes the strike somewhat absurd. I mean surely the strike is a strike about working conditions, pay, and unionization. And unions don’t tell the corporations how to run the corporations.’³ In the face of the contemporary understandings of the function of the museum in conjunction with democracy, Coplans’ statement sounds not only ultra conservative but anachronistically neo-

¹ The cover of *Artforum* had typically depicted a work of art until the arrival of John Coplans as editor-in-chief in autumn 1971 (although according to the colophon he was only officially marked as such from the beginning of 1972). Coplans changed this policy, finding the previous practice a source of conflicts of interest and unethical decisions; he thus never published the full image of a work, only details, even in the case of non contemporary artists. See: Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974*, Soho Press, New York, 2000, pp. 380–381.

² This image is reproduced in Gregory Sholette, ‘Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere’, http://www.gregorysholette.com/writings/writingpdfs/05_darkmattertwo.pdf, accessed 2 March 2010.

According to Barbara Rose, by dealing with the strike, ‘*Artforum* began criticizing not art but museums’ (Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 375). For more on the strike see Newman, op. cit., p. 376.

³ Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 376. As Westwater sees it retrospectively, ‘the magazine by this point reflected what already existed. Also, probably, the Art Workers Coalition in itself activated a lot of people, a lot of artists not within the academy of *Artforum*, who then asserted themselves, not only as a political group for better or for worse, but also in terms of their own art. At that point, let’s say ’72 to ’73, I think we see the Art Workers Coalition disintegrating’ (Newman, op. cit., p. 370).

liberal.

The reason, however, why I begin with this historical moment is that I would like to use it as a starting point and as a metaphor to introduce a text about the American art journal *October*, which began to be published from 1976 as a quarterly. At the time of the strike in front of MoMA, the later to be founding editors of *October*, Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss, worked for *Artforum* as increasingly discontented associate editors, and subsequently they left the magazine in order to create a new journal which ended up being 'arguably the most prominent journal of contemporary theory in art history in the United States,' as Donald Preziosi put it.⁴

Some of the historical events in the art world and in intellectual history may serve here not just as a metaphor but also, to a certain degree, as an explanation of the creation of *October*. The complexities of these times cannot be adequately addressed here, but the legacy of Clement Greenberg, one of the earliest and certainly the most famous examples for art critics and the power they exert in the 20th century, should be mentioned. What is important to note here is that Greenberg's legacy is not exclusively intellectual, but it is underwritten with a subtext of personal relationships, and consequently with a set of emotional responses and preferences. Interestingly, all this is repeated in the course of *October's* thirty-four-year-long history. On the eve of *October's* foundation, 'by the end of the 1960s [...] formalism and the Greenberg legacy were unquestionably perceived as power, but now it became inescapable that there were far more potent powers at work.'⁵

This thesis and this introduction, however, do not aim to map the intricate network of human relations, even if, to a certain extent, they influence the intellectual trajectory of such an endeavour as a theoretical journal. There are several reasons that inform this decision.

⁴ Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven and London, 1989, p. 112.

⁵ Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 328.

Firstly, access to such information is difficult, scarce and random. Secondly, focusing on such information would be part of an art historical project aiming at the reconstruction of the historical context of *October*, while my text has a different agenda.⁶ Thirdly, personal witnesses of and participants in the events may have inaccurate recollections of what happened, or may even lie about the past and their own involvement in it.

There is another possible avenue that this thesis does not directly follow, namely the analysis of *October* as an important institution within the American – and to a lesser extent the Western – art world and art history. Yet, in an oblique way, the question of institutionalization has to be addressed, since *October's* influence on contemporary art theory is unquestionably great, or to put it another way, *October* profoundly shaped the discourse of art theory in the 1970s and 1980s, so much so that today this is a point of reference for those working in the field.

To come back to *Artforum* as a platform whose existence to a certain degree, and indirectly, shaped the intellectual stance of *October*, *Artforum* itself was a magazine full of personal clashes that sometimes took the shape of intellectual and theoretical disagreements.⁷ An interesting and at the same time telling example of this is Krauss' recollection of what brought her together as an ally and friend with Annette Michelson: 'Annette and I didn't get to be really close friends until after I had written "A View of Modernism" [September 1972]. We consolidated our friendship around our mutual loathing of Lawrence Alloway and the pull he exerted on John Coplans.'⁸

⁶ In this sense I agree with Norman Bryson's theoretical position, which questions the very possibility of reconstructing a 'true' context since, according to traditional art history, the only true context is the context that existed at the birth of an artwork (or of an intellectual project for that matter). Bryson, 'Art in Context', in Ralph Cohen (ed.), *Studies in Historical Change*, Univ. of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1992, pp. 18–42.

⁷ On Lawrence Alloway's clashes with Michelson, see Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 341. On Coplans' clashes with Krauss and Michelson, see Newman, op. cit., p. 342.

⁸ Amy Newman, op. cit., p.344.

These rival factions within the editorial board of *Artforum* clashed along methodological lines, which are very often described by the participants with a military – albeit metaphorical – vocabulary. What seem to be quite contradictory, however, are the reasons for the disagreement between the factions. According to Krauss, ‘by the early ’70s Lawrence [Alloway] and Max [Kozloff] were really interested in getting rid of Annette and me because we were not going in the direction they wanted for the magazine—which was more and more explicit about the importance of social context. Lawrence was totally engaged in the idea of Pop Art and in thinking about how art reflects social experience. Max was much more involved in how art manifests the state of capital [...] Annette and I believed that it was important to deal with the structure of works of art. For instance, she was very happy with the piece on Eisenstein, which she commissioned from me.’⁹ And so we began to realize that we had common cause against them.’¹⁰ All this probably coincided with Michelson’s aims; according to her own formulation, she ‘had a *project* at the magazine. It had to do with instituting a place for critical and theoretical work on performance and film.’¹¹

Michelson seems to have been able to realise her project later as one of the founding editors of *October*, where there was a strong emphasis on film and performance in the 1970s and 1980s, but which has since diminished. Yet at the time of *October*’s launch, well before the emergence of visual culture as a discipline and methodology, film theory was the ‘new field’ where interdisciplinary approaches, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, first appeared before becoming part of the standard interpretation. Meanwhile, according to Michelson, ‘art criticism, art theory, was getting quite tired’¹²; the new impetus that changed the current paradigm of art history was yet to arrive, and *October* was not only part of this transformation in the discourse, but one of its initiators.

⁹ Krauss, ‘Montage “October”: Dialectic of the Shot’, *Artforum* (January 1973).

¹⁰ Amy Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343 (original italics).

¹² *Ibid.*

Yet, in the context of the Editorial Introduction to the first issue of *October*, in conjunction with the choice of the journal's title, Krauss' recollections of the clashes are in fact contradictory. As the 'Introduction' explains, *October* was created in a specific historical context in which, according to the founding editors, art practice and critical theory became connected to the project of social construction in a similar way to what happened in the 1910s and 1920s.¹³ The choice of the journal's name was by no means a coincidence; it was a direct reference to the film Sergei Eisenstein made to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October revolution. Yet neither the choice of the title, nor the reference to this particular historical and artistic period contain any 'nostalgic gestures' on the part of the founding editors, since the most important considerations of that period, which appear in the strapline of the journal (art | theory | criticism | politics), seem to be equally relevant in the 1970s. The matrix, delineated by these four notions (art, theory, criticism, politics), defines the framework in which the paradigm shift of the 1970s, i.e. the questioning of the basic premises, assumptions, and methods of the modernist canon, and the incipience of postmodernism can be interpreted. In this context it is very difficult, if not impossible, to explain the reservations Krauss and Michelson had had at *Artforum* against Kozloff's and Alloway's seemingly Leftist and/or Marxist theoretical positions.

It is at this point, and in relation to Marxism, that Clement Greenberg has to be mentioned. Not only did he play an important, albeit indirect, role in this trajectory of *Artforum* but also in that of *October*. As Robert Storr notes, Greenberg has been a father figure to a few generations of art critics not only in the intellectual but also in a psychological sense of the term, thus with a dual 'heritage' to either adopt or fight against.¹⁴ He rose to such fame and became a point of reference in such a way that many artists, art historians, and critics felt the

¹³ This is formulated by the editors in the Introduction to the book that was published on the tenth anniversary of the journal. See Annette Michelson et al. (eds.), *October: The First Decade*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1987, pp. ix-xii.

¹⁴ Robert Storr, 'No Joy in Mudville: Greenberg's Modernism Then and Now', in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (eds.), *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low*, The Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1990, pp. 160–190.

need to define themselves in relation to Greenberg's ideas, statements, behaviour and personality. His 'theories' can be characterised by a political and intellectual eclecticism ranging from an adherence to Spengler to constant references to Marxist terminology, and from an admiration of T.S. Eliot's conservative formalism to heralding American avant-garde art. Yet even if Greenberg's legacy and its ramifications are highly complex and widespread, and seem to be directly or indirectly related to almost anything in American art history and theory of the past 70 years, it would be impossible to discuss this within the framework of this thesis. Moreover, it has very little to do with *October's* theoretical approach to semiotics and semiotically informed analytical tools.

Coming back to the events of the early 1970s, the cracks among the editors of *Artforum* started to become visible around 1972 when the tenth anniversary issue came out. This was also the result of the complex historical and social period; as Barbara Rose comments, 'It seemed that the social implications of art were taking precedence over formal questions. Partly because they were so overwhelming—once you have the Vietnam War, and you have a lot of labor disputes, and you have an economy that has been so affluent that they've had so much surplus that nobody wants to be responsible for anything. The minute that happened, the magazines changed their relationship to their audience [...]. The social pressure was very great. All the collectors read it. All the professors read it and all the artists read it. So therefore *Artforum* was gospel. People suddenly based their own perceptions and writings on what was in *Artforum*.'¹⁵

In 1972 John Coplans decided to dedicate the anniversary issue to his predecessor, Phillip Leider, and in this way he played a double-sided game. It was partly meant as a homage to Leider, but also partly as a break with the tradition Leider had built. This endeavour was implicitly reinforced by Krauss, for instance, who thought that, 'part of the magazine [...] was committed to color field painting for a long time, and as someone who was formerly part of

¹⁵ Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 366.

that wing I am perfectly happy to talk about my own defection from it.’¹⁶ In his turn, Phillip Leider did not take the issue as a heartfelt homage, but rather reacted to it with outrage, as he thought it was an insult to him.¹⁷ Or, as Mel Bochner remembers, ‘The best line that Phil [Leider] wrote, his most memorable line, was after he had quit and Coplans dedicated the Tenth Anniversary issue to him, Phil sent John a postcard saying, “Dedicating an issue like that to me is like dedicating the Aswam Dam to Golda Meir. There must be some mistake.”’¹⁸

As for Krauss, the anniversary issue gave her an opportunity to publish a text in which she could achieve several goals at the same time. Besides summing up her previous ten years’ activities at *Artforum*, the essay also served as ‘a declaration of farewell to [...] a kind of juvenile relation to authority figures’. Here Krauss obviously refers to Clement Greenberg and his most long-term and loyal follower, Michael Fried, who actually tried everything in his capacity to prevent John Coplans from putting Krauss’ name on the masthead despite the work she performed for the magazine. The text also allowed Krauss to start assuming her own voice and – as she put it – ‘maturing’ as a writer and leaving the ‘kind of dogmatic tone that I no longer wanted to associate myself with.’¹⁹

According to the reminiscences of *Artforum*’s editors, including Michelson and Krauss,²⁰ the source of their intellectual disagreement and eventual resignation was to be found in the editorial choice of topics to be covered on the one hand, and the level of discussing these themes on the other. This resentment was mutually visible and formulated by both sides. As Robert Pincus-Witten, a then associate editor at *Artforum* saw it: ‘Not that John [Coplans] was an angel, but he was a fine editor. He was a careful reader. And it was one of the reasons he was in constant conflict with Annette [Michelson] and Ros [Krauss], who often wrote very obtuse, dense, long-winded, impenetrable things. That had always been thrown

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 346.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 348.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 347.

¹⁹ Krauss, ‘A View of Modernism’, *Artforum* (September 1972). See Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 347.

²⁰ See Amy Newman, op. cit., pp. 365-390 (various passages).

up at us: our impenetrability and jargonizing—and *October* was still to come. And John tried to do something about it. So did Lawrence Alloway. Lawrence wanted to get rid of all of that extremely alienating, patrician obfuscation. And of course everybody got so fucking defensive about it.²¹ As Hal Foster formulates it, ‘associate editors Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson left at the time when the notorious advertisement of Lynda Benglis was published, causing the “cracking apart of an already tense editorial board”.’²² As opposed to Foster’s claim that appears in an essay about *Artforum*, and Newman’s book more particularly, Michelson herself states that ‘it was over a performance issue that I left *Artforum*, too—one that didn’t happen.’²³

Foster, who is a current member of *October*’s editorial board, even calls the events of 1974 around *Artforum* an ‘editorial meltdown’.²⁴ Michelson would have liked to see more articles on cinema and, together with Krauss, was keen to have more scholarly texts, which the editor-in-chief believed would be hard to read for a larger audience and so opted for a style of belle-lettrists. Interestingly enough and quite exceptionally, though, feminism was not among the issues Michelson and Krauss found missing from *Artforum*, even if the numbers of articles on feminism and women artists visibly rose after 1971.²⁵ As John Coplans remembers, ‘I got interested in feminism. I remember putting Louise Bourgeois on the cover [March 1975] and I remember the fury of Krauss and Michelson about it—that she wasn’t worthy a cover.’²⁶ All this is partly apparent and partly discontinuous and contradictory in the face of *October*’s subsequent editorial policy and commitment.

At this point I would like to make a methodological digression on the temporal limits of the materials used in my thesis. Since *October* is still published in the same quarterly structure

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

²² Hal Foster, ‘Art Critics in Extremis’, p. 105, in Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, pp. 104–122

²³ Amy Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

²⁴ Hal Foster, ‘Art Critics in Extremis’, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

²⁵ See Amy Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

²⁶ Amy Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

as when it was started (with occasional special issues and, since 1988, the so-called *October* books), to define the temporal borders is relevant. Within the confines of this thesis I draw on materials from *October* between its beginning in 1976 until 1996, when, in issue 77, the in/famous 'Questionnaire on Visual Culture' was published.²⁷ Bearing my theoretical approach and standpoint in mind, this questionnaire on the one hand retrospectively repositions *October's* relationship to semiotics and interdisciplinarity, and on the other positions the journal *vis-à-vis* the discipline of visual culture.²⁸ In the questionnaire the editors formulate four questions in an impersonal, authoritative language, and ascribe highly problematic arguments to anonymous subjects.²⁹ In my view it is with the publication of these editorial questions that *October's* relationship to interdisciplinarity and to a semiotically informed poststructuralist thinking is revealed as one determined by the modernist theoretical paradigm.

October's relationship to semiotics dates back to its beginning, explicitly to issues 3 and 4 (1977) in which Rosalind Krauss published her 'Notes on the Index' essay in two parts. This text is one of the most important breakthroughs of semiotics as an interpretive tool in the discussions of contemporary art.³⁰ Although this was far from the first instance of the 'linguistic metaphor's' appearance in the interpretation of the visual arts and the analysis of the nature of visual representation, later on it in fact played a fundamental role in art theory's

²⁷ 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 25–70.

²⁸ See e.g. Irit Rogoff, 'Studying Visual Culture', in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 14–26. In Rogoff's terminology, visual culture is not even a discipline but a 'project' and a 'strategy'.

²⁹ The problematic aspects of the questionnaire is analysed and Krauss's relationship to visual culture is assessed by Keith Moxey, 'Nostalgia for the Real: The Troubled Relation of Art History to Visual Studies', in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 2001, pp. 103–123.

See also W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005.

³⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 1', *October* 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 68–81, 'Part 2', *October* 4 (Fall 1977), pp. 58–67.

Further reproductions of this essay are in *October: The First Decade*, op. cit., pp. 2–15 (only the first part); and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1986, pp. 196–219 (full version).

paradigm shift from the so far dominant mimetic tradition.³¹ By the 1970s this detachment seemed to be indispensable in the face of contemporary artistic practices on the one hand, and contemporary theories on the other. The emergence of postmodernism and – mostly semiotically-informed – poststructuralism in other disciplines (mostly in literary theory³²) produced invaluable analytical tools in the discussions of such questions as representation, the dichotomy of high and low, ideology, performativity, subjectivity, agency, etc.

For Krauss, 'index' was a new term, which worked against such well-known and established categories of art history as 'medium' and 'style' that are not just dubious but also irrelevant and useless for contemporary art. 'Index' was invaluable in the establishment of a new critical discourse that enabled the discussion of the *photographic*. By the photographic Krauss does not mean photography as a medium, but a special signifying and representational system that deeply influenced the art practices of 1970s. It is interesting to note to what extent the activities and practices of contemporary artists using photography (e.g. Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Victor Burgin, Michael Snow, Jeff Wall, and in the 1980s Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, etc.) engendered, generated and induced this paradigm shift in art theory and criticism on their turn.³³

³¹ Other examples are: Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1976. By producing an analytical account of the linguistic metaphor, Goodman convincingly argues against mimetic claims.

It is this paradigm shift that Arthur C. Danto describes in his book *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1986, see chapter V, 'The End of Art', pp. 81–116.

³² As an important symbolic result of this paradigm shift, even the name of the discipline was changed from literary history to literary theory. In art history this shift has not happened yet and in my view the existence of the 'Questionnaire' proves that in its present state art history (as a discipline and not some of its individual practitioners) is incapable of integrating the consequences and the repercussions of the linguistic turn into this field.

³³ There is a recurring difference between the use of the term 'photographer' and 'artists using photography' which is independent from any geographical determination. Their theoretical and institutional reasons are discussed by John Tagg, 'A Means of Surveillance. The Photograph as Evidence in Law', in John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Macmillan, London, 1988, pp. 66–102. Also Christopher Philips, 'The Judgement Seat of Photography', *October* 22 (Fall 1982), pp. 27–63.

For these reasons, and similarly to *October's* trajectory, the discussion of photography and the photographic is in the focus of my thesis. One specific example for this is the snapshot, which also questions the currency of the traditional taxonomy of photographic images, based on a peculiar mix between technique and content. Possible counter theories of taxonomy (Tagg) raise issues of power: it seems that a certain branch of photography aspires to be discussed along aesthetic lines, thus being rescued from the autonomy of photography as art. Another group includes on the one hand those pictures that can be connected to modernity's institutions of knowledge production (and function as evidence in the hands of different scientific, technical, medical, legal and political apparatuses), and those images that derive from such non-autonomous realms as advertising and the family on the other.³⁴

Opposed to Tagg's taxonomy and analysis, and predicated on a critique of power, Thierry de Duve's categorisation, based exclusively on the differences of the emotional responses to photographs, distinguishes the 'snapshot' from the 'time exposure'.³⁵ He also defines four components of the photographic paradox that he places in a dual matrix of time and space. It seems that his analysis follows a traditional taxonomy based on the content of the images, while semiotics remains a recurring label in his essay, without foundation. Just like Hubert Damisch, his text helps to construct a phenomenology of photography rather than a semiotically informed critical investigation.

Interestingly enough, Krauss herself raises the problematic approach of the photographic discourse in an essay from 1984. She claims that the popularity of photography and the basis for its critical discourse lies in its social function.³⁶ For this reason, such traditional aesthetic categories as expression, originality, uniqueness, etc. are incompatible with a

³⁴ See e.g. John Tagg, 'A Means of Surveillance. The Photograph as Evidence in Law', op. cit., pp. 66–102.

³⁵ Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', *October* 5 (Summer 1978), pp. 113–25. A similarly formalistic approach is employed by Hubert Damisch, 'Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image', *October* 5 (Summer 1978), pp. 70–72. Both essays are published in a special issue on photography.

³⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral', *October* 31 (Winter 1984), pp. 49–68.

critical discourse of photography. When photography deconstructs the distinction between original and copy, it achieves this by means of stereotypes, such as in the work of Cindy Sherman,³⁷ whose images are already 'reproductions' of 'reproductions'.³⁸ Moreover, there is a more important and fundamental aspect of Sherman's work. When she uses herself as the model for stereotypical roles, she disrupts the understanding of 'the artist as the source of creativity' (*vis-à-vis* 'his' model), a basic premise in Western artistic tradition.³⁹

When Krauss introduces the notion of the simulacrum into her analysis, she does that to designate the complete loss of the distinction between reality and fantasy, and between the real and the simulated.⁴⁰ The photographically produced images are by no means copies of reality, but 'products of "reality effects"' (Barthes) created by simulation and signs, which by exactly having this effect are able to deconstruct '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.'⁴¹ It is on these premises that Krauss revises Bourdieu's claim that there is no proper discourse to photography. According to Krauss, 'there *is* a discourse proper to photography, only, we would have to add, it is not an aesthetic discourse.'⁴² Sherman's '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 [...].'⁴³

Thus the semiotic paradox of photography lies not in what de Duve claims, namely in the signified comprising part of the sign referring to it. The paradox is produced by the fact that

³⁷ A similar approach can be detected in György Péter, 'Sztereotípiák és individualitás', in György Péter, *Művészet és média találkozási pontjai a boncaszalonon*, Kulturtrade Kiadó, Budapest, 1995, pp. 56–93.

³⁸ This, of course, is true to a certain extent. The 'real' 'originals' of Sherman's pictures are not to be found in images of popular culture or high art, but in everyday 'reality'. For more on this see: Rosalind Krauss, 'Film Stills,' in *Cindy Sherman 1975–1993*, Rizzoli, New York, 1993, pp. 17–88.

³⁹ Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit., p. 59.

⁴⁰ With that understanding, she does not follow Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, see: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1983.

⁴¹ Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit., p. 63.

⁴² *Ibid.* (original italics).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

the semiotic approach to photography is based on the separation (i.e. the dichotomy) of the signified (reality) and the signifier (the photographic image), yet photography produces images that are connected to this reality in many ways exactly through the 'reality effects'.

In its turn, the poststructuralist approach to semiotics (and theories based on this approach) opposes this dichotomy of reality and its signs (i.e. fiction), yet none or very little of this appears in *October*. For example Slavoj Žižek, whose work is based on Lacanian theory and opposed to Freud's claims, maintains that "reality" is not something given in advance but something the ontological status of which is in a way secondary.'⁴⁴

Reality taken in this sense is, of course, constituted by the subject. The German literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser introduces the 'trichotomy' of the real, the fictive and the imaginary. He endeavours to displace the Cartesian dichotomy of reality and fiction by seeking to answer the following question: 'Hogyan létezhet olyasvalami, ami, bár tényleges és jelenvaló, mégsem hordozza magán a valóság jegyeit?'⁴⁵ Through this, Iser approaches the way psychoanalytic theory treats the various forms of activities (dreams, fantasies, memories, etc.) of human consciousness as part of the reality (and analytic work) constituted by human subjects on the same level as the subject's interactions with the 'external' world. To a certain extent, W.J.T. Mitchell uses the same idea in his 'picture theory' by which he does not intend to 'eliminate all differences between mental and physical images, but it [this theory] may help to demystify the metaphysical or occult quality of this difference, and to allay our suspicion that mental images are somehow improper or illegitimately modelled on the "real thing".'⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992, pp. 49–50. The 'constitution of the subject' is understood by Žižek according to the tradition of German idealism.

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *A fiktív és az imaginárius*, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2001, p. 22. ['How is it possible for something to exist which, although real and having a presence, does not bear the signs of reality?' – my translation]

⁴⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What Is an Image?', p. 18, in W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, pp. 7–46.

The relationship between original and copy in the face of photography bears another point of relevance in *October's* case since the journal played a decisive role in Walter Benjamin's American reception in 1970s, especially in the ways in which Benjamin's ideas on reproducibility were applied in the field of the theory of photography (mostly by Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp). It is due to *October's* commitment to historical references and their revival that Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay has made such a 'career' and became an ineluctable source, inspiration and point of reference in contemporary theory.⁴⁷ The essay is based on the dichotomy Benjamin perceived between photography as the paradigm of a new kind of artistic production on the one hand, and the unique (auratic) work of art, the product of an era to be surpassed on the other. Benjamin's essay has not been published in *October* itself, but it is one of the most frequently quoted and referred to texts in the journal, which has become an auratic text of art history on its turn, playing an important role in the dissemination of Benjamin's 'schismatic' viewpoints. The 'Work of Art' essay is still considered a reliable and historically accurate source material for the history and theory of artistic reproduction, but the special geo-political and historical circumstances of its inception are mostly dismissed. One of the few who attempted to provide a critical analysis of this text from a rigorous art historical point of view and based on research in the area was Jacquelynn Baas.⁴⁸

Baas' analysis is just one of the possible approaches to the reinterpretation and recontextualisation of Benjamin's text and the theoretical positions of *October's* editors and contributors. In my view, a close reading of the 'Work of Art' essay, and a reconsideration of the relationship between originality and copy as it is discussed in the journal from a semiotic position, could be very productive. This can be based on Julia Kristeva's and Gérard

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217–251. Interestingly enough, the essay was published in English in the same year as in Hungarian.

⁴⁸ Jacquelynn Baas, 'Reconsidering Walter Benjamin: "The Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Retrospect', in Gabriel P. Weisberg et al. (eds.), *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History*, Syracuse Univ. Press, 1987, pp. 337–347.

Genette's theories on intertextuality and on texts in the 'second degree'.⁴⁹ The fact that Krauss both as an editor and as a theorist dismisses Kristeva's ideas is partly explained in the roundtable discussion held as a preliminary to the *Informe* exhibition Krauss co-curated in the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1996.⁵⁰ As part of her contribution to the discussion, Krauss confronts Kristeva's theory of the abject with Bataille's notion of the *informe* and takes sides with the latter as being also the foundation and starting point for her exhibition. Yet Krauss fails to analyse Kristeva's usage of the abject, and repeatedly dismisses her not for intellectual but for personal reasons.

The method of close reading seems to be useful in further cases of emblematic texts such as that of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Christopher Philips and Allan Sekula, all of whom published influential essays in the journal.⁵¹ Methodologically speaking, this close reading is informed by a semiotic approach to narratology as it is laid out by Mieke Bal in a text in which she demonstrates a possible avenue for adopting this critical methodology of literary theory in the field of the visual arts. Her approach relies on Roland Barthes' narratological analysis of Balzac's *S/Z* and the application of the five codes Barthes identified as means of activating the reader.⁵²

⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Séméiotiké. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1969. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1984. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: La littérature au second degré*, Seuil, Paris, 1982.

⁵⁰ 'Round Table: The Politics of the Signifier (Part 2): A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject', *October* 67 (1994), pp. 3–21. The exhibition *L'informe, mode d'emploi* took place between 22 May and 26 August 1996 and was co-curated by Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

⁵¹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October* 30 (Fall 1984), pp. 82–119. Christopher Philips, 'The Judgement Seat of Photography', op. cit., pp. 27–63. Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3–64. All three essays have been republished and anthologised on several occasions, and they all appear together in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1989.

⁵² Mieke Bal, 'Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art', in Mark Cheetham et al. (eds.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998, pp. 74–93. Another seminal essay dealing with the semiotic approach in art history is Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), pp. 174–208.

Another possible way in which this approach can be expanded is the inclusion of film theory into the critical analysis of 'still images'. In the case of *October* this seems to be even evident, since the journal is also famous for publishing seminal essays in the area of film theory, very importantly from a feminist perspective. The major paradigm shift in film theory in the late 1960s and early '70s was due to such intellectual and political impetus as feminism and other social movements such as the Afro-American emancipation movement. Thus, besides a reconsideration of the spectator's role, the relationship between high art and popular cultural products⁵³ became a subject of heavy reassessment. Teresa de Lauretis and Kaja Silverman are two major figures working in the conjunction of the changing notions of spectatorship and popular culture.⁵⁴ However, there are two interesting instances of film theory in the history of *October* that have a relevance to photography and/or a semiotically informed critical analysis. One is part of the outstanding and overwhelming theoretical reception of a Hollywood production, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* in the 1980s and the fundamental role played by photography in the construction of identities within the film.⁵⁵ The other is related to another film by Ridley Scott (*Alien*), when James H. Kanavagh employs Greimas' semantic square to discern the various ideologies that inform the filmic narrative.⁵⁶

Another instance for the application of semiotic terms in the visual arts is when Krauss uses the notion of the 'shifter' to underline the context-based character of pictorial representations.⁵⁷ The 'shifter' is not an unknown term in the area of literary theory either.

Shortly before the publication of Krauss' 'Index' essay, Jonathan Culler's book *Structuralist*

⁵³ In her groundbreaking essay, Laura Mulvey calls this 'narrative cinema', by which she refers to Hollywood-style productions. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16/3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

⁵⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Macmillan, London, 1983. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York and Oxford, 1983. Most semiotically informed essays on film theory, including their authors, that have not been published in *October*, should be read against those published in the journal. One example is the film theorist Christian Metz, whose 'Photography and Fetish' (*October* 34, Fall 1985, pp. 81–90) was published in *October*, but strangely enough not his essays in the area of film theory.

⁵⁵ In *October* see Giuliana Bruno, 'Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*', *October* 41 (Summer 1987), pp. 61–74.

⁵⁶ James H. Kanavagh: "'Son of a Bitch': Feminism, Humanism, and Science in *Alien*", *October* 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 91–100.

⁵⁷ See Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', op. cit.

Poetics came out, in which he analyses deixis as a rhetorical means in the mobilisation of the reader in the reception of the artwork.⁵⁸

So far there has been very little research done into the subject of *October's* critical reception – either as an art institution or the individual activities of its editors – with the exception of a few essays that mention the journal to various degrees. One of the largest ones in terms of its size is David Carrier's book on Krauss' theoretical project as a philosopher of art.⁵⁹ Carrier compares her to the philosopher Arthur C. Danto, which is a strange and misconceived reference to Danto's periodisation, which he put forward in his *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*.⁶⁰ Danto establishes three models or phases for art in an almost Hegelian and teleological manner, claiming that although artworks will continue to be created and exist, the concept of art will vanish by turning into philosophy.⁶¹ Without making a concrete reference to Danto's periodisation, Carrier discusses Krauss' 'contribution to the *philosophical* study of visual art,'⁶² yet Carrier fails to provide any specific grounds for using this category rather than 'art history', 'art theory' or 'critical theory', which are far more current usages in this field.

To illustrate the level of discussion and arguments in Carrier's book, it is perhaps sufficient to quote the last paragraph, in which Carrier expands on Paul Barolsky's understanding of art history as belonging 'to the imaginative tradition of writing about art that [...] should be categorized under historical fiction.'⁶³ Carrier continues, 'Why then [...] should we be unwilling to read Rosalind Krauss in an equally charitable way? In admiring her fantasies, but refusing to take them literally, I am only adopting a consistent attitude toward all creative art

⁵⁸ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 1975.

⁵⁹ David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut 2002.

⁶⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1986.

⁶¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Hogyan semmizte ki a filozófia a művészetet?*, Atlantisz, Budapest, p. 90.

⁶² Carrier, op. cit., p. xi (emphasis added).

⁶³ Paul Barolsky, 'Art History as Fiction', *Artibus et historiae* 34 (1977), p. 17, quoted in Carrier, op. cit., p. 120.

writing. Whatever the ultimate judgement on her claims, her development over three decades from formalism to beyond postmodernism is a very remarkable intellectual journey. No one has moved as quickly, no one else has offered so many challenging arguments. That is why Krauss is our greatest philosophical art critic.⁶⁴ Not only do these arguments not sound intellectually and academically sustainable, they also avoid any serious analysis of Krauss' intellectual or 'philosophical' project. My thesis is, of course, not related to the latter, but partly touches upon Krauss' work as one of the editors and regular contributors of *October*. This is also why I refrain from discussing Carrier's arguments and opinions any further.

It is perhaps not a mere coincidence that another text was published in the same year (in 2002) in which Michael Kelly also compares Krauss with Danto, using their writings on Cindy Sherman as examples to demonstrate the problematic relationship of their views to contemporary art theory.⁶⁵ In relation to discussing Krauss' philosophical approach, Kelly uses as examples her analysis on Cindy Sherman, in which Krauss' central argument can be summed up as the 'fragmentation of meaning'.⁶⁶ When Krauss shifts the theoretical inquiry 'from the signified to the signifier',⁶⁷ she, by the same token, moves from analysing 'form' to the investigation of the 'informe', which, according to Kelly, requires a process of 'unveiling'. As Kelly formulates it, 'meaning is veiled or it does not exist, that is, it exists only as veiled (at least until it is unveiled—and thus rendered transparent—by the philosopher/critic).'⁶⁸ This idea of unmediated representation appears at Krauss already as early as in her Index-essay in 1977. The other problematic aspect of her theoretical standpoint – which cannot, by any means, be considered as poststructuralist – is related to the privileged position she attaches to the philosopher/critic in the process of interpretation, as having full access to meaning.

⁶⁴ Carrier, op. cit., p. 120.

⁶⁵ Michael Kelly, 'Danto and Krauss on Cindy Sherman', in Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., 2002, pp. 122–146.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-135.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

In his text Kelly mentions the problem of the historicity of art, and this is precisely the main topic of another essay, this time by Sande Cohen, in which he analyses *October* from the perspective of French theory's American reception and its influence on the journal.⁶⁹ Similarly to Mieke Bal's proposition of replacing Rembrandt with 'Rembrandt', French theory should probably be called 'French theory' given its level of institutionalisation and the multiplicity of often conflicting approaches the term designates.⁷⁰ Coming back to Cohen, in his text he compares the relationship to historicity of two influential American journals, *Critical Inquiry* and *October* in the face of what Cohen calls 'French theory'.

One of the disadvantages of Cohen's text is that he fails to provide an explanation for comparing exactly these two journals; certainly they have not been the only platforms for disseminating French theory in America. They were, indeed, founded around the same time (*Critical Inquiry* was launched in 1974, two years prior to *October*), they both had a relationship to historicity which can certainly be analysed along the lines of the Nietzsche's French reception, but Cohen's arguments are not convincing enough and this still remains mostly an oblique input in the – historical – analysis of these periodicals. At one point, however, Cohen presents an explanation of what he very precisely means by 'historicising' in the case of *October*, when he turns to discussing the editorial shift and its effects that took place in the journal at the beginning of the 1990s. According to Cohen, 'new episodes are offered where to historicize increasingly meant one must accept the loss and lack of modernist theory and ask as to what is recoverable from that "history".'⁷¹

According to Cohen's conclusion, 'as *edited*, which is to say *politicized*, by *Critical Inquiry*, "French theory" is tolerated only inasmuch as such theory does not interfere with the

⁶⁹ Sande Cohen, 'Critical Inquiry, October, and Historicizing French Theory', in Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (eds.), *French Theory in America*, Routledge, New York and London, 2001, pp. 191–215.

⁷⁰ See Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991.

⁷¹ Sande Cohen, op. cit., p. 207.

language and sense of history, deemed necessary for transition to the future, nothing other than the classical subject of liberalism, the good people of enlightenment. It takes a lot of editorial energy to preserve this.⁷² Later on, and in comparison to *October*, he summarizes, ‘*Critical Inquiry* and *October* all too often display the self-satisfaction of two kinds of connoisseurship, which is to say, a politics of language. On the one hand, *Critical Inquiry* places itself in charge of French theory along a spiritualized /idealized axis, characterized by the ethical charge of responsibility for other, which maintains a liberal *hegemon* on the subject: we “know” who the subject is, what it needs and lacks. On the other hand, *October*’s more explicit political slice into French theory radically historicizes the present in order to make contemporary art history “monumental,” by elevating historical consciousness as itself the stake of historical reflection.’⁷³ Cohen, however, fails to notice that his application of the term ‘French theory’ is highly reductive and simplified because on the one hand it assumes French theory as coherent and monolithic, and on the other referring only to historicity. Yet we all know that this is far from the case and neither of these journals can serve as case studies, but only as examples in this framework.

In the case of *October*, it is quite problematic that Cohen implicitly suggests that there is a coherent relationship of these journals to historicity, and this assumption of his is based on a few, carefully selected texts. These might indeed be symptomatic of the relationship Cohen attempts to demonstrate but they do not seem to provide him with a substantial enough basis to draw a plausible conclusion for the whole journal. It is equally disturbing that Cohen refers to a number of articles published in the journal with a recurring impersonal tone, i.e. naming the essays’ authors only in the footnotes. Astonishingly, this impersonal tone is exactly the same manner of addressing intellectual accusations as the one used by the editors of

⁷² Ibid., p. 204 (original italics).

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 211–212 (original italics).

October themselves in the infamous 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' a few years prior the publication of Cohen's essay.⁷⁴

The American reception of French theory is obviously a neglected area of research with interesting conclusions to be drawn, as in the case of *October's* preference for a number of writers and its dismissal of certain other theorists. The case of Julia Kristeva can be taken as a telling example to explain some of the reasons for the history of this uneven reception.⁷⁵ In a roundtable discussion of the theoretical affiliations of the exhibition *Informe*, Krauss expresses her preferences for Bataille's term at the expense of dismissing Kristeva's notion of the abject, yet she fails to provide accurate and adequate reasoning for her own choice.⁷⁶

When trying to produce a survey of the history of *October's* reception, we encounter sporadic texts that discuss specific elements of this historiography, mostly related to photography in conjunction with the reception of Walter Benjamin. Besides Jacquelynn Baas, the names of Diarmuid Costello,⁷⁷ Kelly Dennis,⁷⁸ Kaja Silverman⁷⁹ and Sarah James⁸⁰ can be mentioned. Since these texts don't discuss the journal as such, as an institution, and as an editorial collective with a monolithic, unified, and fully coherent editorial policy and conforming contributors, but some of its very concrete aspects and intellectual affiliations, I will come back to analysing them in the corresponding chapters.

⁷⁴ 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', op. cit.

⁷⁵ This is related to the reception of German theory and – as part of it – Benjamin's reception, as well, and later to the ways in which the new discipline of visual culture was treated and discussed by *October*. See the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire'.

⁷⁶ 'The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject', *October* 67 (Winter 1994), pp. 3–21.

⁷⁷ Diarmuid Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum, London and New York, 2005, pp. 164–183.

⁷⁸ Kelly Dennis, 'Benjamin, Atget and the "Readymade" Politics of Postmodern Photography Studies', in J.J. Long et al. (eds.), *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, pp. 112–124.

⁷⁹ Kaja Silverman, 'The Screen', in Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, pp. 195–227.

⁸⁰ Sarah James, 'What Can We Do with Photography?', *Art Monthly*, Dec–Jan, 2007–2008, pp. 1–4.

It is difficult to locate the temporal beginning proper of my investigations since the history of *Artforum* could serve as either a comparison or a genealogical explanation for some of the aspects discussed here. Yet my current aim is neither the construction of a narrative from an art historical perspective nor a mechanical comparative analysis of two periodicals. In this sense, *Artforum* cannot by any means be considered the most adequate comparison, rather partly as an historical predecessor to surpass, and partly as source for some re-enacted behaviour. Despite this mostly historical and slightly anecdotal introduction which serves both as a backdrop and a historiographic survey for the assessment of the journal, my aim is not to create a narrative or an account of *October's* historical activities, but to produce a critical analysis of the journal's theoretical approach to photography, and as part of this, its relation to semiotics and semiotically informed interpretive methodologies.⁸¹ And it is for this reason that I use the case of the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' from 1996 as a temporal limit for my analysis, since it is exactly the emergence of this new field that *October* not only failed to handle intellectually but also to integrate into its – implicit – editorial policy.

Since the theorists and theories – including my own position – against which I read *October* can be labelled poststructuralist, the historiographically relevant question can be raised. Has there ever been a truly structuralist period in art history? What is the relationship between poststructuralism in art history and the visual turn (i.e. the appearance and emergence of visual studies)? Has the linguistic turn already taken place in art history? Who would be considered the structuralist art historians? In his book *Cultural Theory*, Philip Smith situates the beginning of structuralism in the 1950s.⁸² In the arts and in art history that was the peak of modernist criticism and Greenberg's exclusive influence and 'reign'. Can Krauss – or any of *October's* contributors for that matter – be labelled as structuralist and in what sense of the

⁸¹ The founding editors are Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson. Members of the editorial board have changed, although one of the most important and influential editors was Douglas Crimp who, following a controversy between himself and the founding editors, left the journal in 1990. This moment can also be seen as the end of an era in the history of the journal. After Crimp had left, a new and larger editorial board came into being, which has been functioning with more or less the same members ever since.

⁸² Philip Smith, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 97.

term?⁸³ And if yes, then besides her, whom else in art history and theory can we see as structuralist? These are the questions that I intend to answer – either explicitly or in some cases implicitly – in this dissertation.

⁸³ I will argue that she is, or at least was in the 1970s, a structuralist in the sense of Lévi-Strauss and structural anthropology.

THE INFLUENCE AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF SEMIOTICS IN ART HISTORY AND THEORY

One of the most powerful and lasting anecdotes or topoi of art history goes back to Antiquity when Pliny recorded the story of the rival painters in the *Historia Naturalis*. The most prominent painter of the time, Zeuxis, enters into a competition with a fellow painter Parrhasius, to decide which one of them is the most outstanding of all. Zeuxis depicts grapes so realistically that birds try to pluck them from the image. When, in his turn, Parrhasius invites him to look at what he has produced, Zeuxis asks him to pull off the curtain and reveal the picture. It turns out that the curtain is itself Parrhasius' painting—thus Parrhasius ends up being the better painter, for while Zeuxis managed to deceive animals, his fellow artist succeeded in deceiving humans.¹

In relation to this topos, Norman Bryson notes that interestingly enough this anecdote has not lost its relevance since, and in my view this is not only true for 1983 when his book *Vision and Painting* was published, but to a certain extent still today. According to Bryson, until art history finds a way to change itself as a discipline, this topos will sum up its basic principles, which remain unquestionable. Within the framework of the traditional understanding, representation is not only transparent but also realistic, thus the dichotomy between an 'external' reality and the representation referring to this reality is one of its main characteristics. It is exactly along this line that the linguistic metaphor and a semiotic analysis can enter into the field of art history and change its basic premises.

¹ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1983, p. 1.

Art history at the time of its disciplinary foundation at the end of the 19th century was not only a European, but more precisely a Central European field. Its founders and most outstanding practitioners were members of the Vienna School, such as Alois Riegl, Max Dvorák, Julius von Schlosser, Franz Wickhoff, Otto Pächt, Hans Sedlmayr, and later Ernst Gombrich himself.² At this time the most important problem in art history was the definition of style, both as that of an individual artist and as the prevalent style of a period. In conjunction with the question of style, other issues, which were derived from the figure of the connoisseur, became equally foundational in the discipline, e.g. originality, authorship, beauty, etc.

A major turn in art history occurred in the late 1920s and early 1930s when Erwin Panofsky developed a new scientific methodology for the analysis of mostly historical works of art, which he called iconology.³ Due to Panofsky's followers and to several generations of post-Panofskyan scholars, this is still a method practiced by many and not only academic art historians, which aims at the most detailed, precise and accurate reconstruction of the 'original' context and interpretation of the given artwork.

Object of Interpretation	Equipment for Interpretation	Controlling Principle of Interpretation
1. Primary or natural subject matter – a/ factual, b/ expressionist, constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
2. Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes and concepts were expressed by objects and events).

² Between approximately 1850 and 1950. The relationship with the Warburg Institute is embodied in Gombrich, who studied in Vienna but moved to London in 1930s and worked at the Warburg Institute, where other members included Panofsky, Wittkower and Edgar Wind, among others.

³ Erwin Panofsky, 'A képzőművészeti alkotások leírásának és tartalomelemzésének problémájához', in Erwin Panofsky, *A jelentés a vizuális művészetekben*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1984, pp. 249–261.

3. Intrinsic meaning⁴ or content, constituting the world of 'symbolic' values.

Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind, conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung').

History of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).⁵

It is not only interesting, but almost ironic, that Panofsky himself constantly warned his followers of the traps and problematic aspects of his own method, although many seem to dismiss the 'master's advice'. Moreover, his method raises a number of questions that neither he nor his followers endeavoured to pose, let alone answer. One is related to description, the first step in Panofsky's system, which is already a kind of interpretation, as the postmodernist approach to history and the poststructuralist approach to narratology have convincingly proved.⁶ Another problematic aspect is that within this system, the separation of the three layers of interpretation implicitly suggests a temporality that in practice can be counterproductive. It is Panofsky himself who provides us with an apt example for that when he mentions the case of the hovering figure, which may elicit different descriptions depending on whether we look at it from the point of view of modern naturalism or of medieval spiritualism. Thus categorisation by style should precede description because the latter is dependent on the former.⁷ Or to put it another way, they are mutually interdependent and temporally parallel.

⁴ Panofsky borrows this term from Karl Mannheim, see Panofsky, op. cit., p. 257.

⁵ In practice, these layers never appear independently from one another, see Panofsky, op. cit., p. 259. 'A formaalakítás története azokról a módozatokról tájékoztat, amelyek szerint a történeti fejlődés során a tiszta forma meghatározott tárgyszintű és kifejezésszintű jelentésekkel kapcsolódott egybe; a típus-történet azokról a módozatokról tájékoztat, amelyek szerint a történeti fejlődés során a tárgyi értelmek és kifejezésértelmek meghatározott jelentésértelmekkel kapcsolódnak egybe; végül az általános szellem-történet azokról a módozatokról tájékoztat, amelyek szerint a jelentésértelmek (tehát a nyelv fogalmai vagy a zene melizmái is) bizonyos világnézeti tartalmakkal megteltek.' Panofsky, op. cit., pp. 258–259.

⁶ Panofsky, op. cit., p. 253. See also the work of Hayden White and Mieke Bal, among others.

⁷ Panofsky, op. cit., p. 253.

There is another, epistemological question about reconstructing the original contexts of artworks. Not only does this approach give a priority to the 'original' context⁸ (a preference that cannot be justified by plausible arguments), but it is also based on another not less implausible claim according to which it is possible to collect all the textual documents (philosophical, historical, clerical, etc.) for the 'proper' reconstruction of the primary context of the artwork's birth. For Panofsky, this is not a question of hermeneutics. Yet even if it were possible and intellectually tenable to produce such a reconstruction, the question of how to do this still remains the same. In the case of a 14th-century painting, should we aim at the – approximate – reconstruction of a clergyman, a merchant, a peasant, never mind a woman, etc. As Norman Bryson pointed out, there have been social groups whose reception was never recorded, so the recorded evidence that we can use is already heavily biased, even if it pretends to be ideologically neutral on behalf of the 'natural' argument.

It is perhaps the result of Panofsky's unformulated insight that the periods and the works of art he discusses as relevant for the methodology of iconology are all from before the 18th century, and there is no mention of contemporary art in his work.⁹ He himself mentions the example of Renoir's *Peaches*, a case for which to search for the relevant literary and philosophical texts would be fruitless since such texts do not exist and therefore cannot take part in the interpretation of the painting.¹⁰

Another problematic aspect of Panofsky's method is its blind spot to the specificities of artworks, namely that they are the products of different historical periods and yet, in a paradoxical way, they are all contemporaries, since they live with us and we encounter them in the present via our own subjectivity. According to Panofsky it is the history of tradition which somehow 'channels' or limits the 'over-burgeoning' subjectivities of interpretation

⁸ See Norman Bryson, 'Art in Context', in Ralph Cohen (ed.), *Studies in Historical Change*, Univ. of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1992, pp. 18–42.

⁹ By contemporary I mean early and mid 20th-century art, contemporaries to Panofsky himself.

¹⁰ Panofsky, op. cit., p. 255.

because it is exactly the historical knowledge of tradition which is capable of showing what artworks would not have been able to say, given their temporal and spatial specificities; certain things were unrepresentable, unthinkable or even unimaginable.¹¹ This approach, however, ignores – or let us say takes for granted – the changing function of interpretation, the variety of viewers taking part in the process of interpretation, the dynamics and the temporal character of interpretation, among other aspects. It takes the idealized reading of the scholar, devoid of social, ideological, geographical background, and determination, as universal and superior to any other interpretation, although readings of works of art are in fact much more varied and complex than what Panofsky's system posits.¹²

The idea of limiting interpretation to 'what was possible' at the time of the birth of the artwork leads us back to the well-recycled anecdote of Pliny and to one of the oldest art historical topoi of the innocent eye. It is a recurrent nostalgic wish that one encounters too often even today. Arthur Danto cites Mark Tansey's painting, *The Innocent Eye Test* (1981) as a 'wry and witty'¹³ commentary on this matter. However, I do not agree with Danto's assumption that animals respond to 'pictorial content', and thus with the deduction that 'pictorial competence, like perceptual competence, is something of which the theoretically and culturally innocent eye is capable.'¹⁴ What animals are not capable of, is responding to those 'features of pictures' which 'fall outside of pictorial competence of which they *are* capable.'¹⁵ It is not so much the first part of Danto's opinion with which I disagree (even if I think it is very problematic to collect verifiable data of visual response from animals), but rather the theoretical sustainability of the ways in which pictorial competence enters the field of art. To

¹¹ 'Megmutatja, hogy mi az, amit a dolgok nem is mondhattak volna ki, mivel tekintettel a korra és a helyre, az illető valami vagy ábrázolhatatlan, vagy elgondolhatatlan volt.' See Panofsky, op. cit., p. 257. Other subjective elements of interpretation are in greater need of some kind of a corrective force and that is the general history of thought (Geistesgeschichte). See Panofsky, op. cit., p. 258.

¹² Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1996. Also: Michael Ann Holly, 'Past Looking', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Winter 1990), pp. 371–396.

¹³ Arthur Danto, 'Animals as Art Historians: Reflections on the Innocent Eye', in Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1992, pp. 15–31.

¹⁴ Arthur Danto, 'Animals', op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21 (original italics).

a certain extent, it is also amusing to see that in Tansey's painting it is a cow who is expected to respond to a painting of a bull, not only for the sexually charged connotation of this response,¹⁶ but also for the allusion to another, by today's standard's old-fashioned, slang word 'cow' to designate a woman. It is equally quite telling that this topos takes vision and the acquisition of knowledge via visuality as corruption, as something negative that we have to accept, live with, but not necessarily like.

In Panofsky's case there is obviously no wish to return to the innocent eye in the original sense of the term, but a wish to select among possible and available knowledge, and choose only the desirable, the useful, and the appropriate for scholarly purposes, and by that token, staying uncorrupted by 'useless', academically invalid, and uncanonical information. Yet there is no way back; 'innocence', either literally or visually taken, can be lost only once as Tania Modleski pointed out in an essay in which she made use of the theoretical function of the prostitute to illustrate her point with a powerful and provocative metaphor.

According to Modleski, many theorists aim at explaining the cultural or interpretive conventions of various interpretive communities (including women), and how literary competency is acquired via experience. In the process of the acquisition of competence, 'as in other experiences, one is a virgin but once'.¹⁷ This means that we can never enter the process of interpretation as innocent virgins, as our subjectivities are being 'corrupted' from the moment of our birth. As Modleski notes, this can even be considered as 'a naïve account in a post-Althusserian, post-Derridian literary world; for, as the continental thinkers have taught us, often using similarly unfortunate metaphorical language, in readings as in writing one is always already fucked. Never a virgin, but always a whore.'¹⁸

¹⁶ Do we know if the cow's disinterest is addressed to the painting or to the bull in the painting?

¹⁷ Tania Modleski, 'Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or The Scandal of the Mute Body', p. 10, *October* 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–24.

¹⁸ Tania Modleski, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Coming back to Panofsky and his methodology of iconography, there is an interesting metaphor which can be applied in its case and which can lead us directly not only to semiotics, but also to the critique of the ways in which the use of semiotics in the visual arts have been understood and carried out. This metaphor of the detective was suggested by two theorists in parallel with each other in 1980; one is the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg,¹⁹ and the other one is the Hungarian-born American semiotician Thomas Sebeok.²⁰ Ginzburg draws a parallel between the investigative methods of Freud, Morelli and Sherlock Holmes, claiming that they all based their deductions on small, fragmentary signs, i.e. symptoms, that most people ignore or consider unimportant, yet these signs lead the 'trained eye' to the right interpretation of the overall scheme, thus to the ultimate meaning of a psychic event, the veritable author of a work of art, or the cold-blooded criminal for that matter.

There is, however, one crucial element in which a crime investigation is different from the interpretation of artworks, namely that in the first case there can be only one possible offender, while in the case of the latter, the meaning of a work may differ considerably, according to the variety of actual spectators. In fact iconographical meaning is mostly fixed and rarely contextual, but iconography is not the same as interpretation either, so to reduce the possibilities of a semiotic analysis in such a way would be a misunderstanding of both semiotics and iconography. Iconography in this sense can be compared to a dictionary that reduces meaning to the most common, most obvious and relatively stable usages. One counter-example could be taken from Panofsky himself, when he mentions a representation of Judith, in which Holofernes' head lies on a plate which, in its turn, is an iconographical

¹⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980), pp. 5–36.

²⁰ T. A. Sebeok and J. U. Sebeok, "'You Know My Method': A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes", The University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1980. In Hungarian, *Ismeri a módszeremet? avagy a mesterdetektív logikája*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1990.

attribute to the representation of Salome. At the end, as Panofsky notes, it is the sword that pushes meaning towards the representation of Judith, as a logically stronger sign.²¹

At this point, and staying within this system, the question becomes twofold. If art is getting further and further in improving the production of 'perceptual equivalences' (Danto²²), how far can it go on this path? Or what can this theory do with works of art that obviously do not aim at this improvement. And can the production of perceptual equivalences be considered to be art's main preoccupation? This is exactly the starting point of Nelson Goodman's seminal book *Languages of Art*.²³

According to Goodman, denotation is a specific category of representation in the sense that resemblance between the signifier and the signified is not a precondition of representation. In this sense representation can never be symmetrical. Goodman's example is the Duke of Wellington and his portrait; while the painting may represent the Duke, the Duke can never represent the portrait (even if it is his). Goodman annotates and complements this statement with another one; Constable's painting of Marlborough Castle resembles other paintings more than other mansions, yet it represents the Castle and not other pictures. When talking about the relationship between the original and its representation or copies, Rosalind Krauss uses the example of late 18th–early 19th-century landscape painting and its prerequisite for the 'picturesque'. Krauss claims that the original always goes hand in hand with the copy,

²¹ 'Az abdukció a tényekből indul ki anélkül, hogy a kiinduláskor bármilyen elmélet felmerülne, jóllehet az az érzés motiválja, hogy egy elméletre van szükség a meglepő tények magyarázatához. A indukció egy szinte magától értetődő hipotézisből indul ki, amely kiinduláskor nem meghatározott tényeket tart szem előtt, bár érződik az, hogy szükség van elméletet alátámasztó tényekre. Az abdukció az elméletre törekszik, az indukció a tényekre. Az abdukció során a tények átgondolása adja a hipotézis ötletét, az indukció során a hipotézisben mélyedünk el, ebből származnak a kísérletekre vonatkozó ötletek, s így kerülnek napvilágra azok a tények, amelyekre a hipotézis irányította a figyelmünket.' (Peirce quoted by Sebeok, op. cit., pp. 45–46.)

²² Arthur C. Danto, 'A művészet vége', in *Hogyan semmizte ki a filozófia a művészetet?*, Atlantisz Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, pp. 95–129. In English: Arthur C. Danto, 'The End of Art', *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of the Art*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1986, pp. 81–116.

²³ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1976. Goodman also dealt with the question of induction. /Excerpts in Hungarian: Nelson Goodman, 'Két fejezet a Művészet nyelveiből', in Horányi Özséb (ed.), *A sokarcú kép*, Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont, Budapest, 1982, pp. 26–68, pp. 261–273./

which in its turn presupposes the original. Thus the originality of a landscape does not stem for the uniqueness of the given topographic location, but from the way in which the given landscape is able to influence the beholder's imagination, exactly on the basis of previously-seen picturesque representations.²⁴

For W.J.T. Mitchell, Goodman is an extreme conventionalist who endeavours to produce a theory of representation devoid of any value.²⁵ In his book there is no reference whatsoever to his personal aesthetic, moral or political preferences. Goodman takes realism as a convention or a certain kind of representational standard, and it is exactly for this reason, Mitchell claims, that he has a blind spot for the theorisation of such non-realistic tendencies as Cubism or Surrealism. No matter how these two seem to be familiar and conventional, we could never designate them as 'realist', since the values they inform them are inverse to those of realism.²⁶

Based on his value-free approach, Goodman takes a radical stance in the relationship between original and fake in the case of the copying or forging an existing work of art, even if he differentiates between allographic and autographic types of works in the face of authenticity. In my view this is probably the reason why his theory served as an impulse but not a direct reference for those who aimed to renew the discipline of art history in 1970s, mostly on semiotic grounds. Art seems to be a complex system these days, not only an academic field but also an industry with substantial financial and even political interests involved which cannot allow such fictions as that of an author to be destroyed, even if it is the heritage of the 19th century. The author has not only a rhetorical function, but also a function in the market, and their disappearance would cause the collapse of the entire system of art.

²⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition', p. 164, *October* 18 (Fall 1981), pp. 47–66. Victor Burgin formulates the same idea in relation to picturesque representations, in Victor Burgin, 'Photographic Practice and Art Theory', p. 47, in Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, Macmillan, London, 1982, pp. 37–83.

²⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

It is at this point and exactly in relation to Goodman that the question of how semiotics entered the field of art history and theory can be raised. First of all, semiotics is generally considered to be an anti-realist hypothesis of signs, and this provided theory with the right means to deconstruct traditional theories of representation based on mimesis. Secondly, by the 1970s such art historical categories as style, originality and authorship, and the endeavour to reconstruct the historical past, no longer seemed to be adequate and useful in the discussions not only of contemporary, but also historical art, as well. Semiotics proved to be a useful and productive theoretical tool in the deconstruction of these categories on the one hand, and also in providing a new theoretical methodology on the other.

On top of this, semiotics is able to entice a paradigm shift in art history in which even the name explicitly and implicitly suggests a dominant, 19th-century style chronological approach, which functions as an all encompassing 'grand narrative', in which one has to fit extremely disparate objects and artworks with a large variety of geographical and temporal origins. Compared to this narrative, all other possible narratives either cannot appear or become only a 'sub-narrative' within this framework. As a result of the linguistic turn in the discipline of history, the construction of historical narrative and temporality have been critically reshaped, but this has not fully been embraced by art history yet.

It is interesting to note in this context (and as a comparison) that around the mid 1970s the field of literary studies was able to leave behind the so far ruling principle of the historical-chronological paradigm in its own designation, and switch from literary history to literary studies. This was mostly due to the introduction of semiotics and of an interdisciplinary approach based on semiotics (such as narratology, rhetorics, etc.) into that field.²⁷ As the Dutch literary theorist Ernst van Alphen noted, this sticking to the old notion of history also

²⁷ See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 1975.

results in a kind of an obligatory analysis when it comes to the discussion of the visual arts, namely that there is always an assumption that the work of an artist 'responds to artists of the earlier generations.'²⁸ Yet this is, of course, not to the only thing artists respond to. 'Perhaps an artist responds more to literature, to television or to film, or other aspects of culture [...] But as soon as you do art history, you have to relate an artist to an other artist which is extremely modernist; the present situation of art history is extremely modernist.'²⁹

The notion of the 'linguistic turn' was first used by Richard Rorty in the book he edited with the same title.³⁰ In the editorial introduction he proposes that instead of asking the rhetorical question, 'Should we philosophize?' we should rather ask ourselves, 'How should we philosophize?'.³¹ Thus in terms of the methodological, i.e. semiotic, turn in art history in 1970s, we should also make the same inquiry about the actual content of this turn, and investigate which semiotic theories started to be applied in the discipline of art history. At the time it mostly meant that art historians tried to read the writings of Saussure, and to a lesser extent those of Peirce, against visual production. It is important to note, however, that this reading very often meant a simplified usage of their basic principles on meaning making, which after a while ended up becoming commonplaces, similar to such phrases as 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (Walter Benjamin) or 'the society of the spectacle' (Guy Debord). Besides Saussure and Peirce, the semiotic approach of the time was complemented by the theoretical work of Roland Barthes, also reduced almost to the level of slogans, just like the work of Saussure and Peirce. For many, this situation is still prevalent today—with psychoanalysis relying solely on Freud and Jung more than a hundred years after the foundation of the discipline. In the case of Peirce and his highly complex, triadic typology of signs, only one of the triads entered the field of art history and that is when

²⁸ See my 'You Can Never Get Rid of Your History, An Interview with Ernst van Alphen', *Praesens* 2004/3, pp. 79–89.

²⁹ 'You Can Never Get Rid of Your History', *op. cit.*, pp. 82–83.

³⁰ Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992 (originally published in 1967).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

he classifies signs according to their relation to reality, thus differentiating between symbol, icon, and index. This choice of the Peircian triad can be easily explained by art history's long term pursuit of, or even obsession with, mimesis and realism, i.e. the ways in which representations are linked to reality they refer to.

Part of the reason why for many art theorists and historians semiotics equals Saussure and Peirce is probably due to the way in which this understanding was 'officially' introduced and promoted as 'the' semiotic approach by the British art historian Margaret Iversen in a major book summarizing what has become known as 'new art history', even if this promotion could be equalled with relying exclusively on Freudian theory when it comes to psychoanalysis. The term 'new art history' was first used publicly in 1982 when the journal *Block*, 'and its seedbed, Middlesex Polytechnic, held a conference' with a question mark at the end of the phrase.³² 'New art history' is a term comprising different impacts and impetuses that reached the discipline in the post-1968 era, such as feminism, Marxism, structuralism and psychoanalysis, and it is unified only as opposed to the state of art history which preceded this turn.³³ In the context of my thesis, it is quite telling that among the 16 essays published in this volume (*The New Art History*), two deal explicitly with photography (as indicated in their respective titles): those of Victor Burgin and Ian Jeffrey.

Iversen not only introduces Saussure and Peirce as 'models for a semiotics of visual art', but with her title, immediately antagonises them.³⁴ She underlines the fact that according to a semiotic approach to 'meaning making', signs are arbitrary and thus conventional, which obviously undermines the understanding of representation as 'natural and immediate' to its

³² 'Introduction', in A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (eds.), *The New Art History*, Camden Press, London, 1986, p. 3. Middlesex Polytechnic is one of the educational institutions that was turned into a university by John Major's governmental policy in 1992 in Great Britain.

³³ The term new art history does not include the challenges that reached the discipline in the 1990s, such as postcolonialism, and gender and queer studies.

³⁴ Margaret Iversen, 'Saussure versus Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art', in Rees and Borzello, op. cit., pp. 82–94.

object.³⁵ This idea, however, cannot be exclusively attributed to semiotics, since Gombrich already problematized the question of resemblance between representation and its object in his famous essay on the hobbyhorse.³⁶ The hobbyhorse, being only a broomstick, is the ultimate proof for the denial of the necessity of resemblance, which probably dates back to the birth of playing. The broomstick does not represent the horse in any possible way, yet it is capable of functioning as a horse in children's games.

As a real art historian, Iversen had the need to make references to the age-old Platonic dichotomy between visual and verbal representation, which has appeared under many different guises, ranging from Plato to the Renaissance. Perhaps paradoxically, this understanding of the word and image relationship also falls into the category of the dichotomies that seek to demonstrate their similarities. As Iversen notes, 'The analogy with language is another, perhaps better, way of revealing the gap between pictorial representation and its objects.'³⁷ In my view, Iversen's comment, in its turn, reveals two things. One is the dichotomy she perceives between representation and its objects, and the other is that she indeed envisages an analogy between the ways in which visual and verbal representations produce meaning. I would like to suggest that such an analogy, no matter how appealing it may sound, is only a point of departure from the mimetic theory of representation, and does not equal with a semiotically-founded visual theory. The linguistic metaphor has proved to be extremely useful in this process, but it cannot by any means be considered a theory.

Iversen stresses an important contribution by Saussure to semiotics when he formulated some important statements about language as a system of difference. This she illustrates

³⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁶ E.H. Gombrich, 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form', in E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, Phaidon, London, 1985, pp. 1–11. In Hungarian, E.H. Gombrich, Elmélkedés egy vesszőparipáról, avagy a művészi forma gyökerei, in Horányi Özséb (ed.), *A sokarcú kép*, Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont, Budapest, 1982, pp. 15–25.

³⁷ Iversen, op. cit., p. 86.

with an amusing example taken from Saussure himself, comparing the relationality of linguistic units to the '8:25 pm Geneva-to-Paris trains that leave at 24-hour intervals. "We feel it is the same train each day, yet everything – the locomotive, coaches, personnel – is probably different ... what makes the express is its hour of departure, its route, and in general every circumstance that sets it apart from other trains."³⁸ According to Iversen's conclusion, it would be erroneous to assume that these signs have fixed meanings and this is the 'lesson' Saussure's anecdote may teach us. In my opinion, and within a functional understanding of meaning, these two trains are the same since they have the same function, which is to take the passengers from one city to another. Just as an iconographic motive bears the same significance in two different paintings because it stands for the same meaning, so two different editions of the same book generate the same meaning (or better to say, the differences of meaning do not stem from that of the editions, but from other factors and sources). Yet later developments in semiotics as well as Iversen's contemporaries show that even in the field of visual arts, semiotics possess a lot more analytical and critical potential than an 'improved version' of iconography.

The most problematic part of Iversen's account, however, is when she discusses the Peircian typology and claims that, 'Since for Peirce the sign relation is triadic, each of these signs bears a different relation to the interpretant as well as to the object. The [...] conventional relationship between sign-vehicle and object characteristic of the symbol relies upon an interpretant who knows the rule.' Just to avoid any possibility of mistaking the 'interpretant's' identity, she continues, 'To put it another way, there is an intrinsic dependence on the mind for there to be any relation at all.'³⁹ Yet to confuse the Peircian category of the interpretant with the figure and function of the interpreter is a serious misunderstanding of Peirce's typology, which is difficult to explain within the context of Iversen's essay.

³⁸ Iversen here quotes Saussure, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

³⁹ Iversen, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

From a different perspective, there is another problematic element in Iversen's application of semiotics, namely when she puts forward an understanding of Abstract Expressionism as 'the apotheosis of the indexical sign', which points 'back to the presence of the artist.'⁴⁰ It is, of course, obvious that the example of Jackson Pollock's work – his paintings being the end products of a highly subjective application of paint on the surface of the canvas – lends itself readily to such an interpretation, yet to equate the painting to the indexical trace of the artists cannot be confined to the domain of Abstract Expressionism, but should logically be extended to all paintings. Iversen's proposal therefore remains vague and only a general, almost metonymical comment on all allographic art.

It is exactly in relation to this gestural use of the indexical sign that Iversen mentions an essay that has become one of the most famous and well-known examples for the application of the Peircian typology in the interpretation of contemporary art. This is Rosalind Krauss' text on the index, which was published in two parts as early as issue 3 of *October* in 1977.⁴¹ Within the context of the relationship between semiotics and art history, it is quite astonishing that Iversen has only one short comment about this essay – that it has been 'written about Duchamp's preoccupation with the index.'⁴² Not only is this an intellectually inaccurate note to a long and rich text, it is also a sloppy summary of Krauss' most important claims. Duchamp himself could not have been preoccupied with the index as a semiotic category, but only with signs that we retrospectively consider indexical, such as his painting *Tu m'*, which can be taken as a reservoir of the indexical shadows of his readymades.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴¹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 1', *October* 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 68–81, 'Part 2', *October* 4 (Fall 1977), pp. 58–67. In Hungarian, Megjegyzések az indexről, *Ex Symposion* 2000/32–33. szám, pp. 4–16.

The first part of the essay was reprinted in *October: The First Decade*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1987, pp. 2–15; and the entire version in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1986, pp. 196–219.

⁴² Iversen, op. cit., p. 90.

Although not a unique endeavour in this field even from the 1970s, Krauss' essay nevertheless ended up being one of the most influential discussions of the ways in which the interpretation of the visual arts could leave the mimetic paradigm behind.⁴³ The reason why this paradigm shift proved to be necessary was exactly the growing need to theorise contemporary art and culture in the 1970s, and the rising discontentment with existing theories and interpretative frameworks which – with the emergence of postmodernism – seemed to be incapable of dealing with such dichotomies as the relationship between high and low, which has been one of the most recurring questions in art theory. Examples from the 20th century range from Clement Greenberg ('Avant-garde and Kitsch') and Walter Benjamin ('The Work of Art' essay) to the seminal project of The Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled *High and Low*.

Coming back to Krauss, the introduction of the category of the index allows her to take a stance against such previously functioning ones as 'medium' and 'style'. These are not only dubious terms for contemporary art, but also useless and irrelevant, too. Thus the notion of the index allowed the foundation of a critical discourse, which in its turn made the discussion of the 'photographic' possible. By the photographic Krauss does not mean a concrete medium, but a specific signifying and representational system that exercised a tremendous influence on both art theory and the shifting character of artistic practices of the 1970s. In this context it is interesting to note to what extent the contemporary art of the time generated, promoted and created that shift. To mention a few examples, we can think of the work of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Victor Burgin, Allan Sekula, Michael Snow, Jeff Wall, and later, in the 1980s, Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, and so on. I will come back to a full-length discussion of the 'Index' essay and its ramifications in two separate chapters.

There is an essay by Victor Burgin that is probably the fullest and richest survey of the conjunction of semiotics, photography and art theory, in which Burgin employs a variety of

⁴³ Other, less often cited, examples are the essays of Victor Burgin and Allan Sekula.

interrelated methodologies, including linguistics and rhetoric, to provide an interpretative framework for the field.⁴⁴ Needless to say, he goes much further than repeating and recycling Saussure and Peirce, or even Barthes for that matter. It is impossible to address all the issues raised in this essay adequately here; I will come back to some of its theoretical claims in later chapters. For the sake of this summary of the relationship between art theory and semiotics, I will outline two points that have certain resonances, and probably intentional ramifications, with other theorists who have worked on 'translating' and adapting semiotic concepts and theories to the area of visuality.

Among Burgin's manifold aims, one is to argue against the romantic understanding of the transparency of the image for which he borrows Eco's concept of realism, according to which realism is based on an analogy between the perception of the image and the perception of the image's model.⁴⁵ Another important comment Burgin makes is related to the nature of the linguistic model in the analysis of pictorial representations, as well as indirectly to the question of the basic unit of this analysis. The picture of a man, as Burgin claims, is analogous with a complex utterance rather than a 'simple' word, thus this picture of a man is far from being equal to the word 'man' but more with the phrase, 'middle-aged man in an overcoat and hat walking in a park'. This does not only have a resonance with Goodman's views on representation, but also with Metz's ideas concerning the potentials of a semiotic methodology in the area of non-linguistic sign production and reception.

There is an interdisciplinary area within the field of poststructuralist literary theory, namely narratology. Its influence on art history is sporadic, although this field has produced some critical tools that can be 'recycled' in art history, particularly when it comes to the discussion of spectatorship. Narratology is important because it focuses on the communicative aspects

⁴⁴ Victor Burgin, 'Photographic Practice and Art Theory', op. cit., pp. 39–83. In Hungarian Victor Burgin, 'A fényképezés gyakorlata és a művészetelmélet', in Bán András és Beke László (eds.), *Fotóelméleti szöveggyűjtemény*, Enciklopédia Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, pp. 203–232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

of the ways in which the beholders enter into an interaction with the works, emphasizing the temporality, the interactive and sometimes contingent character of this communicative act. An example of this is Roland Barthes' *S/Z* and the ways in which the codes he develops in this book can result in new readings of even older works of art, and how these codes are capable of activating the reader in the act of reading. The theorist who proposed this framework is the Dutch literary theorist, Mieke Bal, who is one of the leading academics in the fields of semiotics, art history and poststructuralism and their conjunction. In collaboration with the British literary theorist Norman Bryson, Bal produced one of the few surveys on the topic of 'semiotics and art history'.⁴⁶ In another survey essay that Bal wrote without any collaborators, she uses the case study of Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* to demonstrate her method.⁴⁷

The starting point of Bal's analysis is the discrepancy she notices within the pictorial unity of the painting, i.e. between the representations of the two women (Judith and her maidservant) on the one hand, and between Judith and Holofernes on the other. According to Bal, blood can be considered as the most important signifier for the lack of unity within the painting for a set of intertwining reasons. First of all, blood as a sign simultaneously functions as an icon, an index and a symbol. It is an iconic sign in the sense that there is a clear parallel between the colour of the applied paint and this bodily fluid. It is an indexical sign that refers to the victim of the killing since it stems from him. It is a symbolic sign in the sense that it enhances the realist illusion between the paint and blood. In addition Bal proposes to read the painting literally as text, as writing that adds an element of temporality to her interpretation according to which the fact that blood precedes the sword – although in a normal sequence of events the sword comes first, followed by blood – disrupts the traditional reading of the painting not only in the relationship with the spectator, but also in the relationships within the picture.

⁴⁶ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), pp. 174–208.

⁴⁷ Mieke Bal, 'Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art', in Mark Cheetham et al. (eds.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998, pp. 74–93.

Bal also demonstrates a possible way in which the codes that Roland Barthes 'itemized' (Daniel Chandler) in *S/Z* can be useful for visual analysis.⁴⁸ In the case of the Caravaggio painting, the status of the codes is defined by the disruption of the usual temporal sequence of blood-follows-sword. Thus – to quote Bal at length for the sake of precision – 'the *semic* code carrying cultural stereotypes had to recede, and the *symbolic* code was ambiguously suspended: "Blood" remained between hostility and suffering on the one hand, and passion on the other. The *proraitetic* code, bringing in known models of action, was equally brought to a standstill. These suspensions explain the odd stillness of the figure of Judith. Instead, the code that comes to the fore is the *hermeneutic* code, which presupposes an enigma and induces us to seek out details that can contribute to its solution. As I said before, there is a hermeneutic code at work for the viewer precisely when an image's subject is hard to make out.'⁴⁹

Within this framework, Bal only indirectly refers to Barthes' fifth code, the cultural, since according to her claim, the intertwining elements of this particular representation of Judith work exactly against this code, which refers to scientific and social knowledge, as Barthes formulates it.⁵⁰ The core of this knowledge is related to the conjunction of the traditional system of gender roles and the division of labour. The biblical story of Judith is in itself a story about the reversal of these roles, and labour divisions. In Caravaggio's painting, though, the challenge to and the disruption of this tradition is represented not only in terms of the narrative, but also with the support of a set of visual signs, such as Judith's position (she is not reclining but standing erect), her active participation in the story (as opposed to passivity), and the reversal of emotional expressions (she is emotionless and statuesque, while Holofernes' facial expression is dramatic). Thus Judith, or as Bal says, 'Judith', in the

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Osiris, Budapest, 1997.

⁴⁹ Mieke Bal, 'Seeing Signs', op. cit., p. 83 (original italics).

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 34. Bal calls this the 'referential code' (Bal, 'Seeing Signs', op. cit., p. 78).

painting becomes a sign 'that stands in for the absent referent', since Caravaggio painted her as 'already dead', as a monument.⁵¹

At this point I would like to mention another interdisciplinary field, film theory, which also investigates a special area of visuality in which semiotic theories have been employed. Compared to the historiography of art history, film theory's disciplinary history had its advantages and disadvantages. The arrival of semiotics to this field had been preceded by a relatively undifferentiated, impressionistic, methodologically loose, ontologically founded phase, operating with relatively undefined categories.⁵² It would be the topic of another dissertation to assess the ramifications of film theory and semiotics, so for the sake of my present argument, I would like to mention only a few which have a direct relevance in relation to *October's* intellectual trajectory. One area consists of those instances that are independent from each other, but have as their common denominator the use of semiotics as an interpretative tool, such as James H. Kavanaugh's essay on Ridley Scott's film *Alien* in which he applies Greimas' semantic square in order to pinpoint the ideological motivations of the film.⁵³ Another example for the breakthrough of postmodern theory and the changing relationship between high and low is the emblematic theoretical reception of another of Ridley Scott's films, *Blade Runner*. One essay among the many was published in *October*, where Giuliana Bruno analyses the capacities of photography in identity formation.⁵⁴

In her book *The Subjects of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman extensively discusses sature, an element of filmic rhetorics and one of 'the textual strategies whereby subjectivity is constantly reactivated', or rather, it 'is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic

⁵¹ Mieke Bal, 'Seeing Signs', op. cit., p. 84.

⁵² Cassetti, *Filmelméletek*, p. 126.

⁵³ James H. Kavanaugh, "'Son of a Bitch': Feminism, Humanism, and Science in *Alien*", *October* 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 91–100.

⁵⁴ Giuliana Bruno, 'Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*', *October* 41 (Summer 1987), pp. 61–74.

texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers.⁵⁵ In the case of films, the viewer's subjectivity is constructed by means of interlocking shots, in the form a syntactic relationship. The camera is able to survey and show a field that a viewer 'in real life', 'on the spot' would not grasp; however, under 'normal' circumstances this is not done in conformity with the so-called 180 degree rule. This rule 'is predicated in the assumption that a complete camera revolution would be "unrealistic", defining a space larger than the "naked eye" would normally cover. Thus it derives from the imperative that the camera deny its own existence as much as possible, fostering the illusion that what is shown has an autonomous existence, independent of any technological interference, or any coercive gaze.'⁵⁶

Sature, in fact, is most interesting when, instead of concealing the apparatus, we observe it being revealed and starting to function as a critical tool. This happens, for example, when the film makes constant references to the speaking subject, or when the viewer is constrained to take up an unpleasant position not only towards the cinematic apparatus, but also towards the spectacle it has created. By this, the viewer is forced, abruptly and constantly, to shift his/her identifications,⁵⁷ thus the formation of a coherent and, in a certain sense, universal subject position becomes impossible.⁵⁸

The reason why sature can be a useful critical tool is because of its capacities to deconstruct a kind of realism, which looks for an accumulation of 'perceptual equivalences' (Arthur Danto) within pictorial representations as a tautological reinforcement and justification of its own theoretical premises. Sature in this sense is closely related to – if not the same as – what Mieke Bal describes in her essay in which she mentions Vermeer's painting *Woman*

⁵⁵ Kaja Silverman, *The Subjects of Semiotics*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York and Oxford, 1983, p. 194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 201–202.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵⁸ See my related catalogue text, Timár Katalin, 'Nagyítás', in *Szépfolvi Ágnes*, Ludwig Múzeum Budapest – Kortárs Művészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 2003, pp. 38–39.

Holding a Balance (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC).⁵⁹ Bal draws the viewer's attention to a small detail of the painting, a nail, a hole and the shadow of the nail on the wall next to the picture of the Last Judgement. Compared to the rest of Vermeer's painting, these minor elements seemingly do not bear any meaning that would enhance the possibilities of focusing on the painting's main topic or support this interpretation, except for its function as a 'reality effect', as Bal designates Barthes' term. In this sense it does not matter whether the picture was painted in the painter's studio where he decided to shift the position of the Last Judgement – he could have chosen not to include the element that indicated the shift. It is in this way that the hole, the nail and its shadow function as *sature*, which invites the viewer to reconsider the question of realism.⁶⁰

When speaking about the conjunction of semiotics, film theory and *October*, there has been only one essay in the journal from a theorist working in this area – Christian Metz's 'Photography and Fetish' – yet even this text is not an example for his contribution to film theory.⁶¹ Metz's theory, though, raises some fundamental questions in relation to the limits and the potentials of the linguistic metaphor, and its difference from a linguistic analogy, since none of these equals semiotic theory. Metz intends to break with an ontological understanding of film in favour of method-oriented theories.⁶² This means that instead of searching for the essential qualities of film as a medium, critical analysis focuses on features that are defined by the given analytical approach. Thus for Metz, film is rather 'language' and not 'langue', and for this reason cannot be characterised by 'double articulation', and cannot be dissected to smaller, meaningful units (monemes) and even smaller, meaningless units

⁵⁹ Mieke Bal, 'Introduction. Balancing Vision and Narrative', in *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 1–24. In Hungarian, Látvány és narratíva egyensúlya, in Thomka Beáta (ed.), *Narratívák 1.: Képleírás, képi elbeszélés*, Kijarat Kiadó, Budapest, 1998, pp. 155–182.

⁶⁰ At the same time, Bal offers another reading for these reality effects, which corresponds to the overall topic of the painting – judgment. Yet she also underlines the potential of these effects to mobilise viewers in the act of reading, while establishing their relationship with the idea of 'judgement'.

⁶¹ Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', *October* 34 (Fall 1985), pp. 81–90. For a critique of Umberto Eco's theory of signs, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Macmillan, London, 1984.

⁶² Francesco Casetti, *Filmelméletek 1945–1990*, Osiris, Budapest, 1998, pp. 89–90.

(phonemes).⁶³ In addition, film does not possess a set of signs, which, in their turn, could comprise the units of a dictionary in which these units could be paradigmatically interchangeable or could be paired in binary oppositions. Finally, instead of meaning, film is about showing, i.e. film functions on the level of expression and not on that of communication. For Metz, although film is not as strong a sign system as language, semiotics can nevertheless study it as a flexible system with conformingly flexible methods.⁶⁴

According to Metz, the experience of the spectator is not analogous with dream but with reverie.⁶⁵ While watching the film, the spectator is looking for the 'good object' or signifier against which he/she can measure him/herself. As a consequence, there are three overlapping zones between film and the psyche: specular identification, voyeurism and fetishism (in the absence of an object, e.g. a heroic act, the film itself becomes a fetish).

Identification and voyeurism are the key concepts of Laura Mulvey's famous essay from 1975, which is one of the first in the area of a feminist approach to Hollywood cinema.⁶⁶ Mulvey employs Freudian concepts in a 'political' way in order to demonstrate how the unconscious of patriarchal society influences cinematic structures. Taking Freud's ideas as starting points, Mulvey claims that scopophilia is the result of the male spectator's narcissistic identification with the male protagonist of the film on the one hand, and the voyeuristic pleasure this spectator enjoys while sitting in the dark space of the cinema and watching the unfolding narrative from an outsider's position. The feminist aspect of Mulvey's critique touches upon the position of the female spectator for whom identification is possible only with

⁶³ See Umberto Eco's opposing views on this matter, Casetti, op. cit., p. 129. For more on the question of langue/language see Jonathan Culler's analysis on Sade, Fourier, Loyola in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, 1975, pp. 100–02.

⁶⁴ Casetti, *Filmelméletek*, op. cit., pp. 127–128.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

⁶⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington, 1989, pp. 14–26; originally published in *Screen* 16/3, 1975, pp. 6-18. In Hungarian: Laura Mulvey, 'A vizuális élvezet és az elbeszélő film', *Metropolis* 2000/4, pp. 12–23.

the female character who in her turn is only an image, and whose existence is secured via the male protagonist and thus the male spectator.

In the end, both as a summary and as a theoretical foundation for what follows, I would like to mention the most comprehensive ‘survey’ of the topic of semiotics and art history that has been written so far, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson’s extensive essay from 1991.⁶⁷ In this methodological and historiographic introduction it is not possible to discuss this text and its repercussions in detail but it is a point of departure and a reference, as well as a subtext for the following chapter. As a matter of disciplinary borders and exchange, it is probably not a coincidence that both Bal and Bryson have arrived at art history by way of literary theory. They both produced foundational texts on the word/image opposition – Bryson wrote an historical analysis of this relationship at the time of the *ancien régime*,⁶⁸ and Bal’s first major book in the field of the visual arts deals with one of the most emblematic figures of art history, Rembrandt, from the same perspective.⁶⁹

‘The basic tenet of semiotics, the theory of sign and sign-use, is antirealist,’⁷⁰ reads the first sentence of the essay, putting an overall emphasis on the ways in which the authors envisage the methodological instrumentality of semiotics. As I have already noted at various points in this chapter, this methodological foundation of anti-realism was essential in establishing a new theoretical paradigm for art history which allows a different, and probably more pertinent, range of inquiries to emerge, such as ‘the polisemy of meaning; the problematics of authorship, context and reception; the implications of the study of narrative for the study of images; the issue of sexual difference in relation to verbal and visual signs;

⁶⁷ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History’, *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2, 1991, pp. 174–208. Bal and Bryson explicitly oppose the term ‘survey’ for their essay, although its scope and depth would justify this categorisation (p. 175).

⁶⁸ Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1981.

⁶⁹ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1991.

⁷⁰ Bal and Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

and the claims to truth of interpretation.⁷¹ To these I would like to add some other important areas of discussion, such as intentionality (as a specific area of authorship in terms of a break with previous methodological paradigms where the search for the authorial intention was central); the issue of racial difference as it appears in postcolonial studies; the anti-hierarchical claims of high and low; and the various deconstructivist strategies of ideological formation. In my view these are equally important areas of investigation and are probably even further away from traditional, 'positivist' art history on the theoretical spectrum than those mentioned by Bal and Bryson.

There are eight topics Bal and Bryson discuss in detail, which reveal a lot from their titles: Context, Senders, Receivers, Peirce, Saussure, Psychoanalysis as a Semiotic Theory, Narratology, History and the Status of Meaning. It is important to note that most of these areas of research focus on the artwork's communicative aspect, and envisage it as an object with a certain level of agency as opposed to some dead fossil. These topics are, indeed, capable of offering a new, contemporary perspective on objects of art history that possess the paradoxical features of being our contemporaries while having been made in the past. Interpretation has to come to terms with this contradiction, but does not conceal it. Rather the opposite – every interpretation has to bring this temporal discrepancy to the fore and deal with it, not in a positivist way, but by striving to explain and analyse the contemporary interest in these historical objects – an ambitious project yet to be realised.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Besides the activity of Bal, an example of this is Michael Ann Holly's essay on the Mérode altarpiece, which she analyses from her position as a feminist. Michael Ann Holly, 'Witnessing an Annunciation', in *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1996, pp. 149–169.

NOTES ON THE INDEX PART 1

Within the trajectory of *October*, it was as early as in issue 3 that the linguistic metaphor and a semiotic approach to visual production appeared with the publication of Rosalind Krauss' highly influential and seminal essay on the index.¹ It is perhaps no coincidence that this happened in relation to the theoretical discussions of photography, at least for two obvious reasons. The first one is connected to the aim of establishing photography as an artistic medium in the 1970s, which Krauss also mentions as an endeavour in relation to all those specific art forms that emerged in the 1970s and which rely heavily on photographic documentation (earthworks, body art, story art, etc.).² The second one is informed – precisely in conjunction with photography – by the need for the foundation of a 'new' theory of representation which – at least in art history – would be able to leave the by then unproductive mimetic paradigm behind. In this respect photography seems to have a privileged capacity to evoke semiotically informed interpretations; at the same time, it is also a field of visual production that requires an interdisciplinary approach *per se*. Photography's direct link to – a certain type and understanding of – semiotics was also formulated by the photography critic and art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who takes the Peircean sign system metaphorically in relation to photography in the introduction to her book when she makes a reference to the methodological diversity of the theoretical approaches to this area: '[...] the *sine qua non* of photography's repositioning lay in its division, from the very outset, along one axis—supposed to consist of subjectivity, art, and beauty (the axis of the icon)—and another axis—composed of science, truth, objectivity, and technology (the axis of the

¹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 1', *October* 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 68–81. The second part of the essay was published in the next issue: Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 2', *October* 4 (Fall 1977), pp. 58–67. In Hungarian: Rosalind Krauss, 'Megjegyzések az indexről', *Ex Symposion* 2000/32–33, pp. 4–16.

² Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', *op. cit.*, p. 78.

index).³ In the accompanying footnote to this ‘taxonomy’ she refers to Allan Sekula (‘The Body and the Archive’ essay in particular), and John Tagg’s book *The Burden of Representation*.⁴ Yet, as Victor Burgin perceives, most writing on photography is informed by a certain ‘logocentric longing’⁵ which is in fact synonymous with an attachment to metaphysical interpretations, including the belief in the transparency of representations.

Coming back to *October* and the historical circumstances of the theoretical scene in the late 1970s, the journal proved to be one of the most influential platforms for a certain type of paradigm shift in the contemporary artistic discourse, including the one on photography. In this chapter I aim to demonstrate the self-contradictory, often controversial and problematic, ways in which *October* envisaged working with semiotics as part of a larger project of interdisciplinarity. It seems that semiotics entered the arena of theoretical tools in *October* as part of a more general claim for interdisciplinarity that would serve the necessary and much awaited renewal of art history (and criticism) in the context of the early 1970s.⁶

Interdisciplinarity seemed to be one of the strategic buzzwords of the past decades in the endeavour to dismantle the old and rigid academic disciplinary borders; as Robert Scholes formulated it, ‘the jurisdictional boundaries between those political fictions we call “departments”’.⁷ Disciplines such as visual or cultural studies also emerged as an answer to the crisis in respective areas of the humanities.⁸ The general political and economic crisis of the 1970s was ‘complemented’ by an academic disciplinary crisis that was induced,

³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. xxii (original italics).

⁴ The reason why I do not discuss these relations in detail here is because Chapter 4 focuses on an analysis of Sekula’s essay, and in Chapter 5 I have included ample references to Tagg’s ideas.

⁵ I borrow this term from Victor Burgin, ‘Photographic Practice’, p. 55, in Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, Macmillan, London, 1982, pp. 39–83.

⁶ This ‘renewal’ is related to a more scholarly and academic foundation of the contemporary field of the discipline, which, at the time in the United States, was also a generational question. Clement Greenberg did not have an academic training in art history, but Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss did.

⁷ Robert Scholes, ‘The Humanities, Criticism, and Semiotics’, p. 1, in *Semiotics and Interpretation*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven and London, 1982, pp. 1-16.

⁸ See e.g. Stuart Hall, ‘The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities’, *October* 53 (Summer 1990), pp. 11–24.

particularly in the area of contemporary art, by the changing modes and premises of artistic production of the time.

This general claim was also formulated by the editorial introduction to the first issue of *October* in 1976: '*October's* structure and policy are predicated upon a dominant concern: the renewal and strengthening of critical discourse through intensive review of the methodological options now available. *October's* strong theoretical emphasis will be mediated by its consideration of present artistic practice. It is our conviction that this is possible only within a sustained awareness of the economic and social bases of that practice, of the material conditions of its origins and processes, and of their intensely problematic nature at this particular time.'⁹

Interestingly and, in my view, quite tellingly, the term 'interdisciplinarity' appears as early as in the above-mentioned editorial introduction: '*October* is planned as a quarterly that will be more than merely interdisciplinary: one that articulates with maximum directness the structural and social interrelationships of artistic practice in this country. Its major points of focus will be the visual arts, cinema, performance, music; it will consider literature in significant relation to these. *October* will publish critical and theoretical texts, by scholars and critics, texts by artists of the past whose work has influenced contemporary practice [...] Its emphasis on contemporaneity is designed to initiate a series of reexaminations of historical developments.'¹⁰ For the time being, it is sufficient to note that within this introduction, the editors envisage putting an emphasis on the territorial expansion of their field rather than a methodological shift.

This formulation of goals already raises a number of questions, one of which, for instance, is related to *October's* vision of history and historicity and is discussed by Sande Cohen in the

⁹ 'About *October*', p. 4, *October* 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 3–5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4. '[...] the central aim of *October's* texts: the location of those coordinates whose axes chart contemporary artistic practice and significant critical discourse' (p. 5).

face of French theory in America.¹¹ Another obvious point of criticism could be directed to the understanding *October* employs in this introduction *vis-à-vis* the traditional division between the media. Yet, even if these points have further implications for the trajectory of *October's* relation to interdisciplinarity, in-depth discussion of them would divert my analysis from the main topic (i.e. *October* and semiotics). For this reason, I would like to focus on showing how *October's* initial commitment to interdisciplinarity, and the constant references their texts bear to semiotics prove to be retrospectively rather problematic. In my view, there are certain detectable 'patterns of grids' in *October's* relation to semiotic theory and I intend to use 'patterns of grids' both as a metaphor and as a subtext to refer to the ways in which semiotic theories have been applied by *October* with a distinctive pattern and a concrete – yet rather limited – shape. At the same time, the grid is, of course, concretely introduced by Rosalind Krauss as a motive with an historical and – paradoxically – an ahistorical genealogy in two of her essays, 'Grids' and 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde'.¹² Within the conjunction of photography and semiotics, it was as early as issue number 5 that the editors dedicated a special issue to photography, and as early as issue numbers 3 and 4 that Krauss published her essay on the index. In my view, these texts defined the ways in which *October* was about to tackle theoretical problems – not just those of photography and semiotics, but also a whole set of interrelated questions such as representation, originality, modes of production, the relation of high and low, etc.

In 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', Krauss on the one hand introduces a specific category of the Peircian sign system (the index) as a tool to discuss certain of Marcel Duchamp's works and some contemporary artistic practices in the form of a particular exhibition. On the other hand, she applies the linguistic category of the shifter to stress the relational character of a given body of artworks. Among these she confers special attention

¹¹ Sande Cohen, 'Critical Inquiry, *October*, and Historicizing French Theory', pp. 191–215, in Sande Cohen and Sylvère Lotringer (eds.), *French Theory in America*, Routledge, New York and London, 2001. See more about Cohen's views on *October* and historicity in Chapter 1.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* 9 (Summer 1979), pp. 50–64. 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition', *October* 18 (Fall 1981), pp. 47–66.

on Vito Acconci's video *Airtime* (1973), in which the artist mixes the usage of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you', depending on whether he is talking to the 'spectator' or to his reflected image in a mirror. According to Krauss, the shifter (a type of sign that directly refers to a temporal, a spatial or personal aspect of a situation in which an utterance is made, such as now/then, here/there, I/you¹³) is an 'empty' sign that gets 'filled with signification' by actual situations – an idea that she borrows from such semioticians as Jakobson and Benveniste.¹⁴ Krauss also claims that 'the confusion of the shifter' we encounter in Duchamp's work is a 'kind of breakdown' that is related to the autobiographic in his artistic activity, and she explains – almost in a classical, biographical manner – what exactly the excessive usage of shifters results in in Duchamp's personality (a split in his identity). In a similar manner, the shifter proves to be instrumental for Krauss in providing a psychological analysis of *Airtime*, connecting this linguistic term to Lacan's mirror stage and to a general breakdown of language acquisition and usage, such as aphasia.¹⁵ Yet none of these interpretations are able to give any account of the viewer's viewing (or rather, 'reading') process and his/her ways of engaging with the given artwork.

It seems to me, however, that the shifter is not necessarily emptier as a sign than any other sign, but its mutable referent puts the relational aspect of signs into the foreground. Thus it is a term that can be productive in analysing the ways in which a work establishes a network of

¹³ Deixis (or deictics) is another term that refers to the same linguistic phenomenon as the shifter. Mieke Bal notes that even adverbs of time, such as 'tomorrow', can fall into the category of deixis e.g. in reported speech (or indirect discourse). See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Univ. of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1997, pp. 48–49.

¹⁴ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', op. cit., p. 69. It is interesting to note that, when discussing Peirce's concept of the index, Winfried Nöth states that within this class, 'Peirce included [...] a weathercock, a yardstick, a *photograph*, a rap on the door, a pointing finger, an appellative cry, and the field of linguistic *deixis*, including proper names and possessive, relative, personal, and selective pronouns.' (See Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990, pp. 113–114, my italics.) Krauss mentions Duchamp's painting *Tu m'* (1918) which she calls a 'panorama of the index' (Krauss, p. 70), since it contains a number of indexical signs, such as identifiable cast shadows of Duchamp's readymades, and an index finger, painted in the realistic manner of now old-fashioned urban public signs.

¹⁵ A similar approach forms the basis of Fredric Jameson's essay in which he connects schizophrenia with disrupted language acquisition and production on Lacanian grounds. See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, pp. 111–125.

relationships with its viewers, rather than employing it in a quasi-psychoanalytic process of focusing on the artist's narcissistic persona. This also means that Krauss fails to give an account of the shifter's capacity to create a dynamics of reading with the mobilisation of the reader's involvement in the reception of the work. It is because the reader becomes an addressee and is forced by the work of art – and by its various linguistic and extra-linguistic devices – not only to establish a communicative relationship with it, but also to construct its internal framework for him/herself, what Jonathan Culler calls 'the fictional situation of [the] utterance'.¹⁶

Culler employs a spatial approach to deixis by which he primarily understands those forms of distance that come into being between the author and the reader. The example he uses complements this spatial distance with a temporal one – particularly in the case of works of art – by comparing the effects of deictic signs in the case of an imaginary poet's letter and his poem. The letter, as Culler claims, is already a direct form of communication where a concrete, identifiable reader or addressee is 'inscribed', whether we, subsequent readers, are aware of the identity of this addressee and the specific context in which the letter was produced, or not. In the case of the poem, there is, obviously, a sort of an 'implied reader' but this reader is not only unidentifiable as a concrete persona, but s/he may be – both in a temporal and in a spatial sense – far away from the poet and the original circumstances in which the poem was conceived. As Culler states, 'The poem is not related to time in the same way, nor has it the same interpersonal status.'¹⁷ Yet it is important to note, especially in relation to Krauss' psychoanalytical interpretation, that although readers obviously relate to actual or 'empirical' situations in order to distract meaning from a work of art, this is far from taking them as instances of 'truth'; readers 'are aware that such stories are fictional

¹⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca. New York, 1975, p. 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

constructs which we employ as interpretive devices.¹⁸ In my view, this is precisely where Krauss' approach falls short with her 'psychoanalytically' inclined interpretative framework.

As an anchor to the category of the index, Krauss introduces the snapshot in relation to Duchamp's *Large Glass*, based on an understanding of Duchamp's notes as 'a form of a huge, extended caption' and interpreting the work itself as – at least a metaphor for – a photographic image.¹⁹ (The *Large Glass* for her is a self-portrait; thus, paradoxically, it does not only require biographical background information in order to be interpreted as a self-portrait, but the work in itself is a source of biographical information.) Krauss takes on Benjamin's idea, as part of a larger project of differentiating between captions of paintings and of photographs, that it is only now – i.e. in the 20th century – that 'captions have become obligatory'. To which Krauss adds, 'The photograph heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign. A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled in by the addition of a text.'²⁰ In the second part of her essay she comes back to this idea again, claiming that it is with the excessive appearance of photographs in contemporary art that the use of captioning has become so widespread as well. At the end of the text, she extends this remark to paintings, explaining the 'necessity to add a surfeit of written information to the depleted power of the painted sign.'²¹ Since I come back to the relationship of word and image in the final chapter, it is sufficient to say here that on the one hand a certain set of textual information – whether it takes the form of a caption or it appears outside of the closest physical premises of the work – always accompanies the work of art in more or less explicit ways, and on the other, her comparison between painting and photography does not take the differences between the two media as different 'means of communication'.²²

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁹ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', op. cit., p. 77.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

²¹ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 2', op. cit., p. 67.

²² This difference is noted by Victor Burgin by relying to a series of articles by Jean-Louis Swiners from 1965, Burgin, 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., p. 70.

In the face of what has been done in the 'general' theory of representation, the following sounds equally problematic. In relation to the index, Krauss introduces a phrase from Barthes, '*message sans code*', to support the idea of the photograph as an uncoded representational mode. Krauss quotes Barthes himself: 'What this [photographic] message specifies [...] is, in effect, that the relation of signified and signifier is quasi-tautological. Undoubtedly, the photograph implies a certain displacement of the scene (cropping, reduction, flattening), but this passage is not transformation (as encoding must be). Here there is a loss of equivalency (proper to true sign systems) [...] the sign of this message is no longer drawn from an institutional reserve; it is not coded. And one is dealing here with the paradox of a message without a code.'²³ If a 'message' (or a pictorial representation) is uncoded, then it is unmediated, therefore direct. Is it possible to describe a representation of any kind in such terms, or to rely uncritically on such an understanding of coding? Victor Burgin steps back even further and argues for the impossibility of an ideology-free perception when he states, 'In the very moment of their being perceived, objects are *placed* within an intelligible system of relationships (no reality can be innocent before the camera). They take their position, that is to say, within an *ideology*.'²⁴ It is for this reason that Burgin argues for the consideration and inclusion of this 'pre-photographic' stage into photographic practice. In addition, Burgin, drawing on Umberto Eco's argument, also stresses the fundamental difference between 'our comprehension of an object and our comprehension of its image,'²⁵ and disagrees with the premises of Barthes' formula.

Barthes' famous phrase has been defended by many theorists, but its contextual embeddedness is discussed in a semiotic framework. When Barthes established the model of the denotative and connotative levels of meaning, together with the interplay between the two, he extended the idea of denotative meaning to photographs with the exception of press pictures, to which he also attributed a level of connotative meaning. As Winfried Nöth sums it

²³ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 2', op. cit., p. 59.

²⁴ Burgin, 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., pp. 45–46 (original italics).

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 61–62.

up, 'Since connotations are always derived from a code, Barthes concluded that in (press) photography there is a "co-existence" of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code. To Barthes, the generation of a "connoted message on the basis of a message without a code" constituted the specific *photographic paradox*.²⁶

In defending Barthes' statement, Daniel Chandler starts from the assumption that the famous phrase is largely misunderstood, although it is no coincidence that he mentions it in relation to Goodman's concept of realism. For Goodman, realism is just another system of representation with its own standards and codes,²⁷ yet Chandler does not here include the Peircean icon and index, partly because Peirce himself attributed a special status of photography as both an indexical and an iconic sign, and partly because Barthes does so too. Here Chandler refers to the distinction Barthes establishes between 'transformation' and 'recording', which describes the two ways in which the signifier may refer to the signified, with photography belonging to the latter by merely 'capturing mechanically' – as opposed to coding – the visual information in front of the camera. In addition, Chandler points to another important feature of Barthes' theory, namely his observation of the fact that, unlike language, a photographic sign cannot be broken down into 'elementary "signifying units"'.²⁸ In this sense, Barthes' theoretical standpoint is parallel to Christian Metz's investigations on cinematic communication. To answer his own, Saussurean, question as to whether film is a *langue* (language) or *parole* (speech), Metz claims that cinema resembles speech rather than language for two reasons. First is that it cannot be characterised by one of the most important features of language, i.e. double articulation, and second is that film is not a

²⁶ Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, op. cit., p. 462, original italics. Nöth refers here to Barthes' 'The Photographic Message', in Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* (1961), Fontana, Collins, 1977, pp. 15–31.

²⁷ Chandler here mentions Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1976, p. 37, in Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 163.

²⁸ Chandler, *Semiotics*, op. cit., p. 164. I briefly discuss the question of the basic meaning-making unit of photography in relation to Sekula's 'The Body and the Archive' essay in Chapter 4.

system of signs that are meant to intercommunicate.²⁹ This not only indicates the limitation of a direct understanding of the linguistic metaphor in the visual arts and of the mechanical application of semiotic theory in the field of visibility, but the limitation of relying on 'older sources, notably Roland Barthes'³⁰ when it comes to the discussion of both semiotics and contemporary visual production.

Complementary to Barthes' phrase '*message sans code*', André Bazin's ideas on the 'ontology of the photographic image' function as a point of reference for Krauss in her explanation of the relationship between the painted and the photographic image. Here Krauss quotes Bazin, 'The photographic image is the object itself [...] No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.'³¹ Culler's spatial views on deixis can be instrumental here again to critically assess the way in which neither Bazin nor Krauss observes a difference between signifier and signified in the case of photographic images. This is because distance is an obvious mode for a description that approximates a semiotic understanding of sign systems, since the distance between the signifier and the signified is a recurring question of semiotic investigations.³² In Saussure's model, the signifier and the signified are at best on the two opposing sides of a sheet, inseparable from each other, but never on the same side. Even if we insist on a dyadic model of the sign and the dichotomy entailed between reality and its representation, any kind of representation creates a distance *per se* between itself

²⁹ A useful summary of Metz's essay ('Le cinema: langue ou langage?', 1964) can be found in Francesco Casetti, *Filmelméletek 1945–1990*, Osiris, Budapest, 1998, pp. 126–128. See also Victor Burgin, 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., pp. 62–63, and pp. 67–68.

³⁰ Sarah James, 'What Can We Do with Photography?', p. 2, *Art Monthly*, December–January (2007–2008), pp. 1–4.

³¹ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', op. cit., p. 75. She quotes from André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1967, p. 14, original italics.

³² Kaja Silverman also employs a spatial description (contiguity) when she speaks of certain categories of the 'sign' (or figures of speech), such as metonymy. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York and Oxford, 1983, pp. 87–125. Victor Burgin also mentions distance that appears as a form of absence in conjunction with the relationship between the signifier and the signified (Burgin, 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., p. 53).

and the represented reality it attempts to evoke, and it does so by employing a degree and a mode of coding.

When Krauss evokes Barthes' phrase about the message without a code, she also implies the dichotomy between reality and its representation even if in the case of the indexical sign (or photography) these two overlap. Yet later, when she discusses the work of Dennis Oppenheim, David Askevold and Bill Beckley on the basis of their exploitation of the index, she claims that, 'the meaning of these three works involves the filling of the "empty" indexical sign with a particular presence. The implication is that there is no convention for meaning independent of or apart from that presence.'³³ The way in which she takes presence as a constitutive part of the indexical sign is in contradiction to her earlier definition of the same type of sign, when she claims, 'As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify.'³⁴ In my view, 'marks' and 'traces' are, indeed, indicators of a presence, but there is a clear temporality when it comes to connecting presence with them. Moreover, even if we accept that both the index and the shifter (deixis) are empty as signs, it is a misunderstanding of both and their relationship to make such a claim of the ways in which their emptiness gets filled with presence. In both cases, any presence can be taken indirectly or even metaphorically, and this is not a prerequisite of the production of meaning. An example for the index could be smoke when we do not actually need to see the source (i.e. fire) in order to attribute meaning to the indexical sign of smoke; and in the case of the shifter, reported or indirect speech would be helpful in refuting Krauss's statement on presence. It seems, though, as if the relationship that Krauss establishes between the index, the trace and the

³³ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', op. cit., p. 80.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

shifter can be described by what Burgin borrows from Umberto Eco, a partial analogy between 'perceptual situations'.³⁵

It is at this point that I would like to refer again to the two major influences of semiotics that appear in discussions on the visual arts and the limited ways in which these semioticians are employed and their works exploited. On the one hand, Saussure's ideas on the conventionality of languages proved to be useful in relegating mimetic theories to past methodologies, and on the other, Peirce's triadic and largely simplified typology contributed to the understanding of the variety of relationships in the process of meaning production. Yet there is only one of Peirce's triads that entered the field of the visual arts; even that ended up being so much simplified that one of its major achievements, the idea of endless semiosis, was lost.³⁶ It is exactly by endless semiosis that the production of signs and meaning becomes a process determined by contextual and temporal parameters, instead of being fixed, stable and eternal. So far, this understanding of meaning making has not been exploited very deeply within the discipline of art history.

Coming back to the snapshot, it was introduced in relation to the index and it returned in the special issue of *October* dedicated to photography. This time it is an essay not by one of the editors but by Thierry de Duve, with the suggestive title: 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox'.³⁷ In his taxonomy of photographic images, de Duve sets up two categories with distinctive features on the 'superficial' level and on the 'referential' level on the basis of the photograph as a signifier.³⁸ One of these is the snapshot, which is an 'abrupt artifact' and behaves as an 'event-like' representation (e.g. the press photograph). The other is the 'time exposure' which, besides having 'picture-like' qualities, functions as a 'natural

³⁵ Burgin, 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., p. 66.

³⁶ According to Peirce, a 'representamen' calls an 'interpretant' into being, which itself becomes a sign, thus resulting in a chain of endless semiosis.

³⁷ Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', *October* 5, Summer 1978, pp. 113–125.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

evidence' for the once existence of a semiotically taken signified (the example de Duve uses is the funeral portrait).³⁹ The first is a 'frozen gestalt', while the second is 'an autonomous representation [...] which curiously ceases to refer to the particular event from which it was drawn.'⁴⁰ It is between the superficial and the referential levels that we find the psychological response – 'in the form of an unresolved oscillation'⁴¹ – towards the photograph. In the case of the snapshot, de Duve calls this response 'mania', and in the case of time exposure, the appellation he employs is 'depression'. These psychological responses are related to trauma and mourning which accompany the reception of the given image. According to de Duve, these two kinds of photographic images mutually exclude one another because 'they do not constitute a contradiction that we can resolve through a dialectical synthesis. Instead they set up a paradox, which results in an unresolved oscillation of our psychological responses towards the photograph.'⁴²

De Duve goes further when he defines four features of the photographic paradox and places these elements into a dual, spatio-temporal matrix. His theoretical position raises two, fundamental questions, which are in diametrical opposition to all the lip-service de Duve pays in his essay to a semiotic approach. The first is the establishment of his unfounded categorisation along spatio-temporal axes, and the second is de Duve's traditional division of genres according to the images' themes. His essay does not only take these two assumptions for granted, but posits them as compatible with a semiotic analysis; yet it supports a phenomenological and formalistic approach to photography which is based on photography's sentimental association with death and a limited temporality of existence.

De Duve also refers to Krauss and her introduction of the Piercian index in his text – as a form of including semiotics in the discussion of the paradoxical nature of photography. Yet he

³⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

claims that, 'in the case of photography, the direct causal link between reality and the image is light and its proportionate physical action upon silver bromide.'⁴³ In my view this is a misunderstanding of the index, since light is not the cause of the creation of the image but its circumstance. The correct question in a semiotic sense that should be posed in relation to photography interrogates the referent of the sign. In the case of photography this is a form of reality – whether staged or found – that was in front of the camera at the time of the exposure.

Within his matrix, de Duve also establishes a network of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, yet this is based on a traditional division of genres that revolves around the content or theme of the image. In comparison with Tagg's taxonomy, where the categorisation is defined by the 'afterlife' of the picture and the ways in which it gets contextualised by its usage, de Duve's system seems to be traditionalist in its maintenance of a link with art historical approaches.

In the editorial introduction to this special issue on photography, the most fundamental, primal dichotomy of photography that is formulated by the editors sets the scene for what comes later. It is somehow distressing to see how the dilemma of whether photography is art on the one hand or merely a means of reproduction in the service of mass culture and vernacular cultural practices on the other has been prevalent since the technical invention of this medium. The articles in this issue and in *October* in general maintain this distinction on no other basis than the content of the images, sometimes with the addition of comments on artistic intentionality, traditional descriptions and a phenomenological approach. Besides de Duve's essay, another example for this approach in the same special issue is a text by Hubert Damisch, already titled 'Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image'.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 114.

To come back to my usage of the grid as a metaphor, in her text Krauss suggests a reason for the success of the grid in contemporary art. She compares it with the structure of myth as this is introduced by Lévi-Strauss and her definition runs as follows: ‘ ... the notion of myth I am using here depends on a structuralist mode of analysis, by which the sequential features of a story are rearranged to form a spatial organization. The reason why the structuralists do this is that they wish to understand the function of myths; and this function they see as the cultural attempt to deal with contradiction.’⁴⁴

As Jonathan Culler argues at the end of his book *Structuralist Poetics*, the paradigm shift that took place in the study of literature and altered the protocols of the discipline is due to the appearance of semiotics and semiotically informed interpretative methodologies in the middle of the 1970s.⁴⁵ It was at this point that it eventually became possible for literary studies to abandon its primary concern with establishing a chronology as the foundation of a mostly historical approach, and even to leave the old name of the discipline ‘literary history’ behind.

In discussing the appearance of the linguistic metaphor in criticism, Culler distinguishes two approaches in the way in which semiotics and structuralism influenced literary theory.⁴⁶ The first one is based on a general analogy between a given works of art and language and uses this analogy for further analysis. The work is taken as a system and dealt with accordingly. In the second case the work is understood as a semiotic project, a semiological system on its own, and investigated accordingly. This latter approach is able to produce more complex readings beyond the superficial metaphoric association of certain elements in the work with linguistic or semiotic notions ‘in the search for an invariant pattern in the work’.⁴⁷ It seems to me that Krauss managed to find this ‘invariant pattern’ in the visual arts of the 1970s concretely in the idea of the grid and in analysing works as a system metaphorically, parallel

⁴⁴ Krauss, ‘Grids’, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴⁵ Culler, ‘Structuralist Poetics’, op. cit., pp. 255–265.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 96–109.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

to the appearance of the linguistic metaphor in art history. Visual studies, however, is rather based on the second premise and takes works and other units as semiotic projects applying all the necessary interpretative tools that are foundational in the interdisciplinary and more productive analysis that visual studies can provide.

'Art history's troubled relation to visual studies' – to use Keith Moxey's formulation – is still prevalent.⁴⁸ Issues and basic questions of art history and theory, such as the word and image opposition, spectatorship, questions of high and low, the politics of visual production, etc. are central, even foundational points of discussion in visual studies. This is complemented with an understanding of the sign as a meaning making unit without an intrinsic value of its own, thus it is the task of interpretation and cultural analysis to show the values we attribute to these visual signs and the ideologies that inform these values. In the face of all this, the attack *October* leads against visual studies and visual culture with the 'Questionnaire' in issue 77 in 1996 is understandable, yet intellectually quite retrograde. A detailed discussion of *October's* relationship to visual studies and visual culture in the form of a conclusion follows in the final chapter.

⁴⁸ Keith Moxey, 'Nostalgia for the Real: The Troubled Relation of Art History to Visual Studies', pp. 103–123, in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 2001.

NOTES ON THE INDEX PART 2

In the second part of the 'Index' essay, Krauss puts forward examples of contemporary art works which she takes from an exhibition that was held at P.S.1, 'a public school building on Long Island City which has been leased to the Institute for Art and Urban Resources for use as artists' studios and exhibition spaces. The exhibition in question was called *Rooms*. Mounted in late May, 1976, it was the inaugural show of the building.⁴⁹ Via the concrete examples and the exhibition itself, 'Part 2' illustrates Krauss' theoretical standpoint and also the possible avenues she envisages for the application of her theory. Her choice of examples and particularly the fact that she uses this exhibition are indicators of the acute need for adequate critical theory in the 1970s.

The starting premises of Krauss' dealings with the index in this particular context are already formulated at the end of Part 1 when, introducing the exhibition, she relates the works to 'the functioning of the index in the art of the present.'⁵⁰ Within the exhibition, she continues, 'there was tremendous variation in the quality of these works, but almost none in their subject. Again and again this group of artists, working independently, chose the terminology of the index. Their procedures were to exacerbate an aspect of the building's physical presence, and thereby to embed within it a perishable trace of their own.'⁵¹ This somewhat lengthy quotation illustrates the confusion, and a certain level of inconsistency of the terminology Krauss applies, in discussing the indexical character of these artworks. In my view, it is a misunderstanding of the concept of the indexical sign in the first place to claim that it can

⁴⁹ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 2', op. cit., p. 60, footnote 3. P.S.1 has been an official external exhibition location, an 'affiliate' of MoMA since 2000, which, in my reading, is an ironic outcome and 'development' of the fate of artists' initiatives from the 1970s.

⁵⁰ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 1', op. cit., p. 81.

⁵¹ Ibid.

function as the subject of an artwork (or an exhibition), rather than perceiving the work as performing the function of that sign. In that sense it is not possible to 'choose the terminology of the index' since it does not possess any specific or particular terminology. It, indeed, defines a particular relationship between the signified and the signifier but this relationship is not a matter of terminology or of subject. It is also interesting to note that the artistic phenomenon Krauss aims at describing and identifying is what we would today call site-specificity, and what, in Krauss' definition, 'belongs to the genre of installation piece and [...] exploited the derelict condition of the building itself.'⁵² In my view, however, site-specific works do not enter into an indexical relationship with their location because they do not point to an aspect of the site in the same way as the indexical sign does, but they enter into a dialogical relationship with the context of the given location.

Moreover, an exhibition, whether its location is a white cube in the most classic sense of the term, or a derelict building, can never be reduced to a mere sum of the works it contains, rather it is the result of a dialogue among the works, the space, the curatorial 'intentions', and the viewers, at most. To formulate it another way, 'The exhibition is no longer the end result of a process, its "happy ending" (Parreno) but a place of production.'⁵³ Towards the end of her essay, Krauss makes it clear what this meaningful unit, or message, within her framework is: 'In each of these works it is the building itself that is taken to be a message which can be presented but not coded.'⁵⁴ It is in this sense, and also based on a reconsideration of the idea of a meaningful unit in the case of the visual arts, that I would like to propose to extend Barthes' phrase 'the rhetoric of the image' to a rhetoric of exhibitions.

⁵² Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 2', op. cit., p. 60.

⁵³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lucas and Sternberg, New York, 2007. Unfortunately, I cannot precisely locate the quotation which Bourriaud borrows from the artist Philippe Parreno.

⁵⁴ Krauss, 'Notes on the Index Part 2', op. cit., p. 65.

In his essay on exhibition rhetorics,⁵⁵ Bruce Ferguson not only places exhibitions in an anthropomorphic position as ‘central speaking subjects in the standard stories about art which institutions and curators [...] tell’, he also conceives exhibitions ‘as the *medium* of contemporary art in the sense of being its main agency of communication.’⁵⁶ Later he continues: ‘If an exhibition of art is like an utterance or a set of utterances, in a chain of signification, it can be considered to be the speech act of an institution [...], [W]hen an institution speaks, it speaks exhibitions [...] By asking who speaks it is possible to establish the gender, ethnicity, race, age and cultural background and the history of texts of the speaker.’⁵⁷

That the exhibition is a speech act, let alone of a particular kind, is a widely accepted view in the field of the semiotic approach to contemporary museology.⁵⁸ This constative speech act creating a narrative discourse entails the presence of rhetorical figures, such as the ‘invisible but authoritative “first-person” narrator [that] can be called the subject of such speech acts.’⁵⁹ I would like to argue that if we put an institution into the position of the speaker, this renders the narrator invisible, as part of ‘a “third-person” fictional narrative, that literary style wherein the agent of ordering and focusing, highlighting and obscuring, selecting and ordering, puts a special effort into making these acts appear as “natural”.’⁶⁰ Mieke Bal, while making a highly effective and useful differentiation between the narrator and the focaliser, opposes ‘the false neutrality’ of the ‘third-person narrative, with an invisible narrator and a non-identified focaliser’⁶¹ leading to the depoliticisation and, as a consequence, to the aesthetisation of not just the art objects, but of the exhibitions, i.e. showing and telling, too.

⁵⁵ Bruce Ferguson, ‘Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense’, in Reesa Greenberg et al. (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, pp. 175–190.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176 (original italics).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, p. 88.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

In the case of an institution, it also becomes impossible to establish the categories of 'gender, ethnicity, race, age and cultural background', because an institution is only capable of defining an impersonal subject. If we don't want to naturalise this impersonal subject, we can also define it as a universal subject, the male gendered agent of modernist exhibition practice and theory. In the modernist account the subject not only has no 'connotations of gender', and is therefore male,⁶² it is also 'part of the "scientific" quality of "modernist" causal narratives that the position of the analyst is not included in the narrative account',⁶³ or at least so it seems.⁶⁴ A very early effort for establishing such an impersonal position was conceived by Alfred H. Barr, MoMA's first and then director when, in the autumn of 1929, he made an exhibition of the paintings of Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh, which was the first instance of an exhibition display that later on ended up being called 'white cube'. The ideologies informing this mode of presentation become explicit within the dichotomy of art and ethnography, in the face of displays of the latter.

This ideology of neutrality leads us back to Bruce Ferguson's metaphor of an institution 'speaking exhibitions'. This linguistic metaphor easily gives itself over to simplification, and this is perhaps the reason why Ferguson is ready to conflate the notion of art with the sum of art objects in order to criticise the privileged position of the single art object. In his account, however, the basic unit of the utterance – both in linguistics and in exhibitions – is the single, autonomous object, 'separated from social spheres' as thoroughly as possible. Semiotics and its use in the field of visibility can serve here as tools to dismantle the belief in autonomous, discrete, and neutral showing (and viewing). Thus if we translate Ferguson's

⁶² As many articles and books discuss, the gender of modernity is without any doubt male. See e.g. Janet Wolff, *The Feminine in Modern Art: Benjamin, Simmel, and the Gender of Modernity*, public lecture at the Getty Summer Institute in Art History and Visual Studies, University of Rochester, July 19, 1999; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995; Ann Ferguson, 'Does Reason Have a Gender', in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *Radical Philosophy: Tradition, Counter-Tradition*, Temple Univ. Press, Philadelphia, 1993, pp. 21–47; etc.

⁶³ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', p. 184, *Art Bulletin* 73, 1991, pp. 174–208.

⁶⁴ It was Wayne C. Booth, among others, who showed the inevitability of the narrator's implication in the narration in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, originally published by The University of Chicago Press in 1961, and subsequently republished in 1983.

formulation of 'institutions speaking exhibitions', then 'exhibitions' become equivalent to language, a means of communication. The ways in which the standard, Jakobsonian model of communication becomes so far from the successful ideal was pointed out by Mieke Bal in her book about exhibitions.⁶⁵ According to Bal, this ideal model of communication can never be reproduced in real life and the message always arrives distorted in the process of communication. For Bal, it is crucial to note 'that this [ideal] model obscures [...] manipulation. Manipulation is an instance not only of ideological agency, but also of the historical embeddedness of that agency.'⁶⁶

There is another crucial difference in Bal's understanding of exhibition rhetorics, namely the way she defines the notion of the context. Together with Norman Bryson, Bal takes Jonathan Culler's critique of context and his proposition of using the notion of 'framing' instead. According to them, context 'is a text itself, and thus consists of signs that require interpretation.'⁶⁷ In my view, the simplifying model that context proposes – as opposed to frames – is parallel to the way in which Ferguson thinks about signs, as discretely interpretable units in a chain of signs, i.e. utterances. Framing in its turn takes into account how signs are 'constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, system of value, semiotic mechanisms.'⁶⁸

One productive and interdisciplinary way of establishing a critical approach to the relationship between exhibitions and audiences may lie in the application of Stanley Fish's reader-response theory about the process of interpretation as a communicative act. As an introduction to Fish's theoretical dealings with interpretation, I would like to rely on the metaphor of the interval in the theatrical sense of the term and connect it to a more politicised understanding of the production of meaning in the face of contemporary art

⁶⁵ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures*, op. cit., p. 261.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261–262.

⁶⁷ Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', op. cit., p. 175.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

exhibitions. The interval as a metaphor is also referred to by Jean-Luc Nancy as part of his theoretical dealings with communities. Nancy departs from music and provides us with a definition: 'In Western music, the interval is the name for a combination of two notes played at the same time, thus creating a sound that we hear as a new note. The separate notes composing the interval are still audible, but at the same time something new has installed itself between them; it comes to our ears without being reduced directly to its elements. The interval "is" nothing: it is nothing without its elements, and still it is some different from its elements. It "is" in the way of an event.'⁶⁹ For Nancy, the metaphor of the interval is instrumental in arguing for the inoperative and precarious character of communities in contemporary society from a fundamentally sceptical position; a position that nevertheless attaches value to the existence of communities and their loss. In my view, it is possible to retain an operative understanding of communities from a performative and semiotic perspective, which, in a convoluted manner, leads us back to the status of the interval as a metaphor for exhibitions. In this framework and in relation to contemporary art, community can be understood as the temporally constituted group of spectators who, according to a semiotic approach, function as an 'interpretive community' (Stanley Fish).

The idea of community in terms of how audiences are constituted in the face of contemporary art exhibitions is related to the phenomena of what is known as 'contextual curating', although in my view and according to a semiotic approach to exhibition making, every act of curating and exhibition making is contextual in a semiotic sense. I would like to argue for a reconsideration of the neutrality of the white cube since it is not less of a context than any other context, and is not less regulated by a given set of rules than any other context. The difference between the contextual parameters of the white cube and that of a project-based and site-specific approach cannot be explained in purely semiotic terms, since they are both sign systems. When we, as visitors, enter the exhibition space, we enter a

⁶⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Laurens ten Kate, "'Cum" ... revisited: Preliminaries to Thinking the Interval', in E. Ziarek & H. Oosterling (eds.), *Intermedialities*, New York, Continuum, 2007.

situation that is already organised along certain highly structured categories and codes (some theorists even call it a ritual⁷⁰). These categories and codes limit ‘the possibilities for action (both verbal and physical), [...] the world so organized [...] will be perceived as normal. [...] a normal context is just the special context you happen to be in, although it will not be recognized as special because so long as you were in it whatever it permits you to see will seem obvious and inescapable’.⁷¹ This means that the codes of the white cube have become so widespread and obvious that they are neutralised (and naturalised) to the extent that most people do not recognise them as codes but as ‘the’ ideal realisation of a code-free environment and neutral background for the presentation of works of art. Yet it is exactly on the promotion of neutrality that the white cube trades, and successfully manages to mask. The neutralisation of codes resonates with Krauss’ ideas on Barthes’ message without a code, although for Krauss this coincides with the case when the code ‘is out of reach of the [...] convention that might provide a code’.⁷² For Krauss, who here mentions Deborah Hay’s performance, this code is equivalent with the traditional language of dance performance; but Krauss fails to recognise that this language is ‘recoded’ or ‘reframed’ by the contextual parameters of the location, the dancer and the audience, to name just a few elements of the framing process.

To come back to the conjunction of ‘contextual curating’ and spectatorship, the former endeavours to create a *temporal* community that shares – to use Matthew Hills’ term – a ‘semiotic solidarity’ among its members, no matter how utopian this may sound.⁷³ There is a political aspect to emphasising contextuality these days that can be taken as a conscious move away from the approach to exhibition making that relies on the well-known context of

⁷⁰ See e.g. Krzysztof Pomian and Carol Duncan.

⁷¹ Stanley Fish, ‘Normal Circumstances and Other Special Cases’, p. 288, in Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1980, pp. 268–292. This essay was originally published in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1978), pp. 625–644.

⁷² Krauss, ‘Notes on the Index Part 2’, op. cit., p. 59.

⁷³ Coined by Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, New York Univ. Press, New York and London, 2006, p. 156.

the white cube. Even if in some cases this white cube takes the shape – but never the symbolic function – of a factory or other previously existing institution (such as a post office or a school for that matter). In my view, when an exhibition aims at the employment of a participatory approach to visitors and to communities, this decision is informed by explicit or implicit political considerations on the part of the curators, and is based on a political need to empower the spectators by the application of various methodological tools that do not exclusively belong to the realm of art, but often to other areas of social communication.

On top of all the metaphors that I have used so far, I would like to introduce yet another, taken from the field of the semiotic approach to spectators and interpretation. In his book about the theoretical foundation of the emancipation of the readers, Stanley Fish mentions the following anecdote. ‘On the first day of the new semester a colleague at Johns Hopkins University was approached by a student who, as it turned out, had just taken a course from me. She put to him what I think you would agree is a perfectly straightforward question: “Is there a text in this class?” Responding with a confidence so perfect that he was unaware of it (although in telling the story, he refers to this moment as “walking into the trap”), my colleague said, “Yes; it’s the *Norton Anthology of Literature*,” whereupon the trap (set not by the student but by the infinite capacity of language for being appropriated) was sprung: “No, no,” she said, “I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?”’⁷⁴

Despite all the criticism aimed at Fish’s ideas, his invaluable contribution to contemporary literary theory can be summed up as the radical emancipation of the reader in the face of the reception of works of art. Fish argued that texts – and, one might add, works of visual arts – do not have an intrinsic meaning invested in them by authorial intention, but rather meaning is always the product of an interpretation which – to a certain extent – contingently depends on the reader’s subjectivity. The element that, however, constrains the unlimited character of the signifying process, is the availability of codes and the ways in which we, as readers,

⁷⁴ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, op. cit., p. 305.

choose from among these codes for the given purposes. This choice is defined partly by context and partly by 'probability' – we tend to choose the code that is the most plausible or obvious in a given context. When Fish calls this factor of probability 'normal', he means that certain circumstances occur more frequently than do others, which would then elicit a different reading in their turn. 'But they remain circumstances still (statistically, not inherently, normal).'⁷⁵ It seems from Fish's account that we tend to assign a certain interpretation to a given situation according to our experiences, which are more quickly based on statistical data of probability than on any inherent and stable quality of the situation or the sign itself. This can also serve as an argument against Krauss' recurring usage of the phrase 'message without a code'.

In addition to this, as Fish claims, there is always a 'purposeful' approach to reading *a priori* the actual act of reading, and this also in the end affects which of the codes the reader decides to employ. One of Fish's examples is the classroom, and it is also in this context that we have to understand his anecdote about the student asking for the content of the seminar at the beginning of the semester.

The classroom – or the exhibition for that matter – is, of course, just one of these easily graspable contexts which can stabilise the otherwise unstable character of any text or meaning-making practice. Fish provides us with a number of convincing examples for that process, i.e. how the shift from one context to another may change the meaning of an utterance, demonstrating that 'paradoxically [this] exercise does not prove that the words can mean anything one likes, but that they always and only mean one thing, although that one thing is not always the same. The one thing they mean will be a function of the shape language *already has* when we come upon it in a situation, and it is the knowledge that is the context of being in a situation that will have stabilized it.'⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 291.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 275 (original italics).

Fish calls this contextual operation 'institutional nesting'⁷⁷ by which he means that in a given situation one context is 'more available' or more easily accessible than another. His anecdote can be taken as an instance of the discrepancy between the interpretations and the 'institutional nesting' of the two people taking part in that conversation, although they both belong to the educational industry and to a certain extent to the same interpretive community. For the professor, the context was first and most strongly defined by the circumstances of the first day of the semester; thus by the word 'text' he understands the assigned reading materials that the seminar will discuss, and for the student the context was primarily defined by a knowledge of literary theory's recent developments. It is interesting to note that there is an element of temporality at play with these two interpretations, since for those who are able to read the sentence 'Is there a text in this class?' in this second sense, the first meaning is also available, but not the other way round. This severely limits the utopian approach to communities on the foundation of 'semiotic solidarity'.

It is exactly in relation to the restricted possibilities of this solidarity that I would like to come back to the spatial confines of the classroom and to make use of this metaphor's potential once again. Fish places a strong emphasis on the circumstantial expectations of a given temporal community in his theory. '[P]rofessors of English literature do not put things on boards unless they are to be examples of problematic or ironic or ambiguous language. Students know that because they know what it means to be in a classroom, and the categories of understanding that are the content of that knowledge will be organizing what they see before they see it. Irony and ambiguity are not properties of language but are functions of the expectations with which we approach it.'⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 308.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 277.

To translate this to the area of visual arts, and given that visitors of exhibitions rely on the same set of expectations of and assumptions about the 'circumstantial forces' (Stanley Fish) in operation, they are either equipped with the knowledge to understand the ambiguities of meaning that works of art may have in that context by virtue of being displayed with that purpose,⁷⁹ or else all this is lost on them. According to Fish's convincing arguments and to a semiotic approach to the quality of the ambiguity of language, this quality is by no means the 'natural property' of a sign; it is rather the context that is 'responsible for the ambiguity the sentence will then have.'⁸⁰ An example of that could be Laurie Anderson's song, which is based on the ambiguity of the banal and everyday situation of greeting, 'Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am? / *In our country, we send pictures of people speaking our sign language into Outer Space. We are speaking out sign language in these pictures [...] / do you think They will read our signs? In our country, Goodbye looks just like Hello.*'⁸¹ With the example of the simple sign of raising one's hand, either saying hello or saying goodbye, the question of the ambiguity of meaning comes to the fore outside of the context of art. It is at this point and in this sense that the utopia of a temporal interpretive community falls short, and the question of political solidarity comes into operation.⁸²

The utopia of such a community has also been challenged and criticised by the British art critic Claire Bishop as part of her work attacking the theory of relational aesthetics and its practitioners. It is on behalf of the restoration of the 'aesthetic qualities' of artworks that Bishop condemns what she sees as the moralising attitude of artists and curators who

⁷⁹ In my view, the possible ambiguities of signs are the characteristics that can differentiate – in a semiotic sense – between signs in the context of exhibitions on the one hand, and signs outside of the context of art.

⁸⁰ Fish, 'Normal Circumstances', op. cit., p. 284. A similar idea is formulated by Jonathan Culler when he claims, 'No sentence is ironic *per se*' (Culler, 'Structuralist Poetics', op. cit., p. 154). Later on, in relation to deixis, Culler continues, 'we can observe the effects of our expectations here, because we can produce readings by making certain assumptions' (Culler, 'Structuralist Poetics', op. cit., p. 169).

⁸¹ Laurie Anderson, 'United States', 1984.

⁸² It is probably no coincidence that Panofsky also mentions the conventional character of greetings, in Erwin Panofsky, 'Ikonográfia és ikonológia: bevezetés a reneszánsz művészet tanulmányozásába', pp. 284–285, in Erwin Panofsky, *A jelentés a vizuális művészetekben*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1984, pp. 284–307. Panofsky's considerations of this sign usage are used by Victor Burgin in 'Photographic Practice', op. cit., p. 63.

conceive and implement community-based projects. If we want to translate this into semiotic terms, Bishop's intention is to defend the supremacy of the 'micro-context' of the exhibition at the expense of the 'macro-context' of locality. The irony and the paradoxicality of her critical position is that even if the number of community-based projects seems to be decisively high these days, there is very little theoretical and critical analysis of them on a non-aesthetic, more trans-disciplinary and social basis. This also proves, for better or worse, that the code that is the strongest, the most accessible, and the most probable for the interpretive community operating in this context is still the aesthetic one.

What is perhaps one of the most striking deficiencies of Part 2 of Krauss' 'Index' essay is not so much the way in which she uses the notion of the index as interchangeable with that of the trace, but an almost complete dismissal of a possible avenue of comparison between the context of the actual exhibition in P.S.1 and any other possible exhibitions with the same works in a white-cube-style gallery space or museum. Even if at one point in the essay she distinguishes abstract works in the exhibition from visually similar abstract painting, for example by Elsworth Kelly, it is never in order to formulate a theoretical stance of exhibition rhetoric or contextuality; rather it stays on a contingent and purposeful level of discussing the particular show at a particular moment of time.

THE BODY AND THE ARCHIVE

In the 1980s art theory and criticism discovered the body as a new field of investigation, which has continued to play a strong role since then. The emergence of this field is probably the outcome of several social, political and aesthetic components, already strongly visible in the 1970s, such as feminism, Foucault's theoretical impact, the emergence of new aesthetic forms (body art, performance, photography, video), and the foundation of new theories (e.g. the theory of the abject), among others. Even if there are visibly distinctive lines within the theoretical and artistic dealings with the body, not all of them have been directly reflected and referred to in *October*.¹

One distinct example for a politicised analysis of the representation of the body – and in opposition to an essentialist understanding of it – can be found in the textual and visual work of Allan Sekula. Since the very beginning of his career the territories of the verbal and the visual have existed in parallel, not necessarily complementing one another in terms of their content, but always as part of Sekula's overall concern for the representation of work and power. For this reason, in the following analysis I take Sekula's work – both textual and visual – as one unity but not as unified and monolithic, and I read his more historical work in conjunction with contemporary materials but not with an historicizing intention. His activity is a good example for a new and complex relationship between artistic work and critical activity, similarly to Cindy Sherman's practice as it is discussed by Rosalind Krauss, who claims that Sherman's artistic work is an instance of practicing criticism itself.²

¹ Such is the case with the notion of the abject, which is replaced by Bataille's *informe* as a result of the editors' theoretical (and partly subjective) preferences.

² Rosalind Krauss, 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral', *October* 31 (Winter 1984), pp. 49–68.

Sekula, however, does not use himself as the subject of his own images in the indexical sense, and in the way Sherman has done, his visual and textual activity both operate as instances of critical practice. His criticality, however, is different from Sherman's in the sense that Sekula seems to produce 'metapictures', inasmuch as many pictures can be taken as 'metapictures' in W.J.T. Mitchell's sense.³ Sekula's approach to creating a 'metalanguage' of images is more implicit and indirect, and in my view manifests itself as the foundation of a 'metainstitution' – if I may coin such a term – that is directed towards a critique of the institution of photography, including all the elements that constitute this 'institution', such as artistic practice, education, various discursive activities (theory and criticism), etc. Certain elements of this photographic institution, which have a relevance to *October's* trajectory – and which are also treated by Sekula – are discussed in Chapter 5.

Among Sekula's textual works, perhaps the most widely cited, referred to, anthologised, and 'recycled' (Hilde van der Gelder) piece of writing in the domain of photographic theory and criticism is 'The Body and the Archive' essay.⁴ It was first published in the journal *October* along with other texts that raised the necessity of creating a new discourse on photography, and discussed the specificities of the medium in conjunction with a new kind of artistic practice in this field. As for the reception of this essay, it is interesting to note that, in my view, John Tagg's activity in the field of the theory of photography is in many ways indebted to Sekula's early critical work, and this is duly referred to in Tagg's essays.⁵ Yet, even if Sekula's text is widely cited, Tagg's work on the relationship between photography and surveillance has been much more popularised than Sekula's. It is not so easy to provide reasons for this difference in the popularity between the respective receptions of the texts, but one might stem from the fact that Tagg recurrently refers to Foucault and surveillance

³ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, and particularly the chapter 'Metapictures', pp. 35–82.

⁴ Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3–64.

⁵ See John Tagg's essays, particularly 'A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law', in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Macmillan, London, 1988, pp. 66–102.

while Sekula's analysis of power and its representation is not exclusively based on this labelling. This difference is noted by Sekula himself who – towards the middle of his essay in a footnote – makes a comment about Tagg's approach and his exclusive reliance on Foucault's theory, and more specifically on the Panopticon. Sekula compares Tagg with Carlo Ginzburg, an historian whose historical analysis and semiotic comparison of the methods of Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes is widely referred to by those who have a critical stance *vis-à-vis* the still prevailing positivist art historical paradigm. As Sekula argues, 'Ginzburg has proposed a model of observation and description that is more open to multiplicity and resistance than that advanced by John Tagg, who subsumes all documentary within the paradigm of the Panopticon.'⁶

In trying to set up the context of the first publication of 'The Body and the Archive' essay and comparing it with Sekula's other theoretical texts from the 1970s and 80s, this one is strikingly the most 'art historically' or 'scientifically' written of all. Truly, its subject, the non-artistic and instrumental usage of the relatively new technology of photography, was not typically the topic and the main interest of academic research in the history of art when Sekula did his research and wrote his text. For this reason, it is no wonder that this is the one that ended up being published in *October* as it fitted into the editorial goals of providing a platform for the discussion and the theoretical emancipation of photography, not just in contemporary art, but in historical terms too, from the perspective of an 'ameliorated' version of the history of art. Retrospectively, though, from the point of view of the 1996 'Visual Culture Questionnaire',⁷ in which the whole idea of visual culture is questioned by the editors of *October* partly on the basis of using non-artistic images, the journal's whole editorial policy looks dubious if only for the publication of Sekula's essay. I will come back to discussing the 'Questionnaire' in the final chapter.

⁶ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 36, footnote 54 (and also p. 9, footnote 13). Sekula refers here to Tagg's 'Power and Photography Part 1, A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law', in *Screen Education*, no. 36 (Winter 1980), p. 45 and p. 55.

⁷ In *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 25–70.

Whether a text such as 'The Body and the Archive' essay is art historically written or not does not necessarily depend on its subject matter. A clear example of this in close relation to Sekula is an essay that appeared in the famous interdisciplinary journal *Third Text* in 2005, by the Australian artist and writer Zanny Begg.⁸ Begg, as her title suggests, tries to bring together recent pictures from the German artist Andreas Gursky with Sekula's work on the global justice movement dating back to the late 1990s. Begg takes one of the movement's most important 'scriptures' or apocryphal writings, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire*, and more specifically its magic word 'multitude', and reads it against the artists' images.

The somehow ironic undertone of my description of Begg's standpoint is not directed towards anti-globalist politics, or the work of Gursky and Sekula, but towards Begg's indiscriminate approach to her textual sources, which she puts into the service of uncritically praising the global justice movement. It is a traditional idea in Panofsky's sense to find the corresponding textual source for the interpretation of visual works of art, which would be the basis for a synthesising, iconographical interpretation. In Begg's case, the level of the history of style together with the history of types are obviously missing, since it would be impossible to define the content of such terms both in photography and in contemporary art. Yet, the way Begg relies on reading Negri and Hardt could serve as an example for the consistent realisation of Panofsky's iconological method; a reading which proves by its mere existence not only the untenability of the iconological method, but also its unproductive character as a method of interpretation.⁹ In Begg's specific case, the relationship between the images and her textual source material ends up in an almost tautological circuit in which one is capable, to a certain extent, of shedding some light on the other, but they are not capable of opening up the field of interpretation beyond themselves.

⁸ Zanny Begg, 'Recasting Subjectivity: Globalisation and the Photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula', *Third Text*, vol. 19, issue 6 (November 2005), pp. 625–636.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 626.

To come back to Sekula's essay and its relationship to art historical methodologies, his approach cannot be considered a purist one by the standards of the time. He makes extensive use of a variety of sources from the expanded domain of visuality, most of which were not born under the auspices of aesthetics. Yet his aim is not to use these materials in the service of an aesthetic theory or claim, but to demonstrate the intricate and dialectical relationship between artistic images and vernacular or instrumental visual production. We can think of a memorable period in art history's historiography when, in the 1980s, the biggest 'discovery' of the most up-to-date scholarship on Marcel Duchamp connected Duchamp's Cubist paintings with chronophotography on the basis of geometrical theories of the fourth (or $n+1$) dimension; it was claimed that the direct influence of these theories is visibly detectable in his paintings, as if Duchamp had been painting with a brush in one hand and with a geometry treatise in the other. Unlike this scholarship on Duchamp and non-Euclidean geometry, Sekula pinpoints the complexities of the relationships between different image making practices.¹⁰

One of the principle elements in Sekula's methodology is a strong emphasis on pictorial analysis, but not as this was described and advocated by Panofsky and post-Panofskyan art history. Sekula does not aim to search for and find the corresponding textual sources for the images he selects to examine, but rather has a dual goal in using these sources. On the one hand he takes words and images in one unity, as mutually supporting each other's meaning, and on the other, he highlights the structural parallels between the two in order to demonstrate their ideological determination. In this sense he makes it clear that neither art nor non-artistic visuality is neutral, since even a claim for neutrality is highly ideological.

Besides providing thorough analyses of his pictorial material and its ramifications in relation to textual sources, Sekula also touches upon the political-historical context of his topic. In the

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss mentions Lucy Lippard's references to the extraordinary proliferation of the scholarship on Duchamp and the distance they are both meant to take from this scholarship with their own approaches. See more on Krauss' position on Chapter 3.1.

context of 'The Body and the Archive' essay, this is the France of the 1880s, where not only the policy of transporting recidivists to the colonies was in operation, but as a result of the agricultural crisis, 'a renewed massive urban influx of displaced peasants' reduced the figure of the vagrant to the position of a potential social and criminal danger in addition to all the unemployed city dwellers.¹¹ In public debates, the vagrant was complemented by and partially overlapped with that of the anarchist as the outcome of a 'renewed working class militancy' a decade after the massacre of the Communards. An interesting historical outcome of the Commune and the following repercussions is the fact that 'during the Commune, all city records prior to 1859 had been burned', and thus 'any Parisian over twenty-two years old was at liberty to invent and reinvent an entirely bogus nativity.'¹² This 'crisis of identity' – as Bertillon himself called it – and the accompanying 'extraordinary traffic in false documents' flourished without any control. These three components (the vagrant, the unemployed, and the anarchist) merged 'into a single composite figure of social menace'¹³ and created the political backdrop for a scientific search for the definition and the need for control of the body and the biotype of the criminal.

The textual context Sekula intends to create in 'The Body and the Archive' essay draws on two intertwining – and to a certain degree complementary – scientific pursuits in the 18th and 19th centuries, physiognomy and phrenology. The traces that the 'pencil of nature' (Talbot) writes on the human face appear already in Lavater, who systematised this scientific area, and, as a result, these traces become indices to be read and deciphered in the same way as doctors read the symptoms of illnesses and detectives deduce information from clues.¹⁴ As I have already stated in connection with semiotics and art history, the problem with the analogy between these systems and art history is that it presupposes only one possibility for this deciphering, only one correct context as the framework of a given set of sign or

¹¹ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 33.

¹² Ibid., pp. 33–34.

¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

symptoms. Such as the case of Morelli's method, which posits the same principles that of Lavater, that certain signs or features of the human body (or artworks) are in a metonymic relationship with the whole person (or artwork), and thus they are capable of telling much more about the person (and the artwork) than they actually denote. When Bertillon later invented the '*portrait-parlé*' – the 'speaking-likeness' or 'verbal portrait', it was meant to be 'an attempt to overcome the inadequacies of a purely visual empiricism.'¹⁵ In his taxonomic system Bertillon followed Lavater and his special attention to such morphological details as the ear.

'Since physiognomy and phrenology were comparative, taxonomic disciplines, they sought to encompass an entire range of human diversity. In this respect, these disciplines were instrumental in constructing the very archive they claimed to interpret.'¹⁶ This is an important comment from Sekula, as it points to the way in which the ideological justification of the archival mode based on these two sciences was used – and abused. It also shows how scientific realism directly influenced the organisation of social life and, indirectly, mid-19th-century aesthetic ideas on realism (both in literature and in the visual arts).¹⁷ For Sekula, the 'usually ignored field of instrumental and scientific and technical realism' serves as 'evidence of a crisis of faith in optical empiricism' that helps us to deconstruct 'an overly monolithic or unitary model of nineteenth-century realist discourse.'¹⁸ Thus the optical model provided by the camera cannot adequately be equalled with the 'truth-apparatus' of the period; the camera was only part of a larger system of 'bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of "intelligence." This system can be described as a sophisticated form of the archive.'¹⁹ The scientific realism behind physiognomy and most of all phrenology was, in its turn, far from neutral. It functioned as an ideological background 'to legitimate on organic grounds the dominion of intellectual over manual labor [...] the ideological hegemony of capitalism that

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 30 (original italics).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁹ Ibid.

increasingly relied upon a hierarchical division of labor.²⁰ Paradoxically, though, even with the development of these elaborate taxonomies, all bodies ended up being 'either bourgeois or subject to the dominion of bourgeoisie.'²¹

As a special field for controlling bodies which fall outside of this bourgeois normality, Joan Copjec examines the photographic images that were produced – under the suggestive title *Iconographie* – in the Salpêtrière mental asylum by J.-M. Charcot in Paris in 1887–88.²² The pictures exclusively depict women who are diagnosed with hysteria – for the obvious reason that hysteria was considered a feminine mental illness at that time. Astonishingly, though, Copjec seems to defend Charcot's fundamentally masculine position by referring to his definition of this mental illness. For Charcot, hysteria 'is a disease of the imagination, of the *production of images* cut off from the natural,'²³ which is a definition that cannot be associated with gender specificity, thus, at its face value, seem to address to a generic mental condition. At the end of her essay Copjec formulates her oblique strategy of neglecting Charcot's underlying and implicit gender bias.²⁴ In defending her position, she underlies that Charcot's scientific importance lies in his demonstrating that hysteria was not a gendered mental illness, yet she admits that, 'all the photographs in the *Iconographie* are images of women.'²⁵ In my opinion, though, the strategy of overlooking the gender of Charcot's visual demonstration material is a universalistic claim that does not help the maintenance of the feminist perspective in her analysis. This is because Copjec endeavours

²⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

²¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²² Joan Copjec, 'Flavit et Dissipati Sunt', *October* 18 (Autumn 1981), pp. 20–40. It is hard to miss the structural similarity between Charcot's project and Panofskyan art history that comes back in Copjec's essay when, describing Charcot's method, she claims that, 'observable facts are primary and theory in an additive, syntactic transcription of them. A good clinician is one who has a fineness of sensibility, which fineness shades over to an appreciation of art [...]' (Copjec, 'Flavit et Dissipati Sunt', op. cit., p. 27). According to Copjec, Charcot's photographs indeed display an artistic sensibility that distinguishes his pictures from other contemporary clinical representations.

²³ Copjec, op. cit., p. 30 (emphasis added).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁵ Ibid.

to 'dismantle the master's house with the master's tool,'²⁶ which in her case is exactly that understanding of universalism which feminism has been fighting against.

It would be impossible to outline the ramifications of the ways in which mental illnesses entered representation as a source of danger to society; recurrent contemporary discourses amply demonstrate the prevalence of this fear of the mentally ill. Moreover, since this field so closely intersects with psychoanalysis proper and its historiography, it would be impossible to discuss it from the perspective of that discipline, even within the framework of my interdisciplinary aims. Bearing in mind that Copjec's essay focuses rather on the critical discussion of Charcot's clinical project, its afterlife and influences on Freud (and indirectly on Sartre), the essay is interesting for two reasons in this present context. One is related to the representation of obscene bodies – obscene in the etymological sense of the term, as something outside of the scene – and to the ways and modes in which they may enter into visual representation. The other important area in Copjec's text is her analysis of the character of these images.

There is a detectable element of resistance in Charcot's pictures as opposed to the images of the criminal in Sekula's essay, even if the former ones are much indebted to contemporary physiognomic researches. The hysteric is considered a malign trickster who, being fully aware of his/her machinations, tries to promote an *image* of him/herself in 'confusing categories of real and unreal [...] perceptions [...] making the physician a potential victim of trickery and deception and casting doubt on his senses which were the foundation of his knowledge [...].'²⁷ In my view it is not so much the question whether this is indeed the way in which the hysteric behaves, but that this is how his/her behaviour is feared to be a threat to scientifically founded knowledge on the one hand, and how this behaviour is capable of

²⁶ I refer here to Tania Modleski, 'Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or the Scandal of the Mute Body', *October* 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–24.

²⁷ Copjec, 'Flavit et Dissipati Sunt', op. cit., p. 23.

symbolically restoring the unbalanced power relationship of the hysteric and the physician on the other.

Similarly to the photographic records that are the focus of Sekula's essay, the images of the mentally ill were also created as visual supports for scientific research and to illustrate the conclusive remarks of scientific knowledge production on hysteria. In both cases, there exists an obvious interplay between the visual and the verbal but in psychoanalysis this exchange is underwritten by an age old, almost atavistic belief in the word/image dichotomy. As Copjec stresses, Freud himself distinguished a border between the two areas of representation, 'the analysand is on one side with images, the analyst on the other with thoughts.'²⁸ This setup already contains, by its mere existence, a division of power founded and 'legitimised' in this historical dichotomy. All this is complemented with a dichotomy of reality and its representation, which, in the case of the ways in which the hysteric patients function, is manifested in the analyst's fear of deception on the part of the patients.

Another interesting example for the word/image dichotomy is the instance of irony that Copjec mentions but does not further in relation to this. For her, irony is a question of representation even in the negative sense in which she discusses the visual accuracy of Charcot's images, and she formulates her disbelief in the possibility of this accuracy exactly in relation to the proper physiognomic expression of such 'mental constructions' as irony as opposed to the expression of emotional states like repugnance and terror. Copjec herself poses the question, 'What should a photograph of irony look like?'²⁹ For her the irony of this particular representation lies exactly in the fact that these images are made of hysterics 'which means precisely that they are all under the sign of irony, of deception, that what seems, what appears, *is not*.'³⁰ This does not only mean that Copjec shares the 19th-century opinion about the hysterics' deliberate deception (which, in the case of the hysterics, I would

²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 26 (original italics).

prefer to take as an instance of feminine resistance), but also takes irony as a visual function as opposed to another understanding of irony as a function of language.³¹ In this sense, even the visual sign needs to appear in a context or situation that is obviously created by extra-visual elements and this is why her question is, indeed, ironic, but the image of the hysteric woman is not capable of representing irony since ‘no sentence [or visual representation] is ironic *per se*’.³²

One of Copjec’s most crucial points is when she claims a structural parallel between the theory of hysteria and that of mimesis on the basis of the patients’ ‘mimicry of physical diseases, and of the imitation produced by hypnosis.’³³ In her discussion of mimesis she relies on the theories of Sartre and Lacan, where one can find a sort of a linear temporality in the creation and reception of works of art, starting with the ‘emotion of the painter’ (or with T.S. Eliot, the ‘object’) that, after being ‘sensed’ (‘painter’), is translated into a ‘a work of art’ (‘painting’) which on its turn is ‘sensed’ again (‘viewer’) and that evokes an ‘emotion in the viewer’ (‘object’).³⁴ As Copjec claims, between the (first) object and the painting ‘there is a relationship of equivalence’; the painting ‘is not the embodiment’ of the object, ‘not the externalization of a mental state’.³⁵ This ‘long parenthesis’³⁶ on a specific understanding of mimesis – forwarded mostly by Sartre and to a lesser degree by Lacan – serves, for Copjec, to connect her discussion of hysteria to Husserl and phenomenology which – according to her goal that she formulates at the end of the essay – allows her to avoid the structural and ideological critique of these images.

³¹ See Richard Rorty, *Esetlegesség, irónia és szolidaritás*, Jelenkor, Pécs, 1994, p. 89; and Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and New York, 1975, pp. 154–156.

³² Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, op. cit., p. 154 (original italics).

³³ Copjec, ‘Flavit et Dissipati Sunt’, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

In order to bring the analysis back to 'The Body and the Archive' essay and to a very different way of politicising the representation of the body, I would like to bring an early photographic work of Sekula into the discussion in order to open up the politicised visual field and also to demonstrate the intertwining relationship between his texts and his images. The *Untitled* slide projection from 1972 is a sequence of black and white images in which we see workers leaving the factory after their daily shift.³⁷ There is a recurrence of this topic in the representation of workers; the earliest example is perhaps the Lumière brothers' film from the very end of the 19th century. An interesting piece with the same topic is the painting by Bart van der Leek from 1910. In both cases – those of the painting and the Lumière film – men are to be seen with women together as an indication for a different gender structure that we know from the bourgeoisie. Harun Farocki's film with the same title uses the original Lumière 45-second-long sequence in order to bring together films, which depict workers within the factory and demonstrate that most films start exactly with the moment when 'workers are leaving the factory'.³⁸ Farocki also claims that the original Lumière footage already contains the germs for the disappearance of the visibility of physical work, which today is manifested in the geographical dislocation of global capital. Thus the representation of labour also regulates the way in which it is possible to envisage work; an idea that leads us to another aspect of the representation of work that is not related to the question of 'what is shown,'³⁹ but rather to another inquiry, i.e. 'who is authorized to look at whom with what effects'.⁴⁰ In this sense, Andreas Fogarasi's video *Arbeiter verlassen das Kulturhaus* (2006) is only capable of registering the fact that the workers are gone forever – not only from the factory, but in Fogarasi's case from the cultural houses, too – the factory has been demolished and its site has been turned into a shopping mall.

³⁷ Collection of the Generali Foundation, Vienna.

³⁸ See also Elio Petri, *La classe operaia va in paradiso* [The Working Class Goes to Heaven]. The film shared the Grand Prix with another film, *The Mattei Affair*, at the Cannes Film Festival in 1972.

³⁹ Griselda Pollock, 'Feminism/Foucault – Surveillance/Sexuality', p. 15, in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, Wesleyan Univ. Press, Hanover and London, 1994, pp. 1–41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

This brief survey has no intention of turning into a genealogy of how the location of physical work has shifted from the centres to the margins, but as Sekula's work demonstrates, physical work hasn't become extinct. At the time of Lumière, or even in 1972, capital was physically located in the same place with the workers, but today they are very far from each other geographically. This shift in the visibility of work from pre-Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism, in my view, coincides with what was noticeable at the time of the first Gulf War when the technology was there to broadcast the war itself live and globally – there were no bodies, either dead or alive, shown. The visible confrontation between the workers and capital are reduced to such events as the WTO meetings and other symbolic territories where the participants of these protests are not even those Third World workers who can hardly survive in their shameful working and living conditions, but those who share solidarity with them in the Benjaminian sense.⁴¹ This is probably the reason why such movements, as the Zapatista uprising (in 1994) and the large-scale strikes in France (in 1990s) are so highly estimated within the global justice movement – because in these cases the strikers are the same people as the victims of injustice.⁴²

To continue with the representation of the working class, Sekula's 'The Body and the Archive' essay is about the construction of the criminal body (and social deviance) via the means of visual representation in the form of the newest technology of the time, i.e. photography.⁴³ This was accompanied by other 'scientific', taxonomic methods to create the biotype of the criminal.⁴⁴ The construction of the biotype is important in the sense that it bears the 'organically' visible signs of Otherness as opposed to the bourgeoisie. Photography, however, was also instrumental in the creation of other kinds of bodies to reinforce and maintain the image of the bourgeois as a form of social and cultural norm. As

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in Peter Demetz (ed.), *Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1986, pp. 220–238.

⁴² Begg, 'Recasting Subjectivity', op. cit., p. 626.

⁴³ August Sander's 'archive' is a more sophisticated project that 19th-century taxonomies of physiognomy and phrenology, and Sander also questions realism in those 19th-century senses. See Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 12.

⁴⁴ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 16.

complementary to Sekula's 'The Body and the Archive' essay and also to his ongoing artistic concern with the visual representation of the working class and the suppressed in conjunction with a critique of capitalism,⁴⁵ I would like to mention Griselda Pollock's text in which she discusses 19th-century representations of working women through the lenses of Foucault and from a feminist perspective.⁴⁶

In the essay, Pollock introduces her argument with a provoking subtitle 'Classing the Body' by which she means two interrelated territories. One is, of course, the way representations of the body get classified, or archived, and the other, perhaps more interesting one, is how representations betray or conceal their subjects' social background in terms of class and what the ideologies behind this twofold endeavour are.⁴⁷ What is important in Pollock's analysis is that she introduces a feminist perspective and discusses images within the dual matrix of class and gender in the face of the Foucauldian reading of the Marxist class system. In my view, this is a crucial step, since it would be erroneous to speak about the representation of the human body as unified and universal in the 'post-feminist' age. It is almost a direct counter-argument against the concept of the worker that appears in Marx where the worker becomes 'the abstract embodiment of labor power' and is implicitly male.⁴⁸

Pollock's project in her essay 'concerns relation in representation between bourgeois men and working women [...] the conditions under which working-class women became the object of fascinated looking and of a disciplinary investigation in the nineteenth century.'⁴⁹ 'What were the pleasures of looking at representations of bodies that escaped or deviated from the bourgeois semiotics of the gendered and sexualized bodies of man and woman? These

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁶ Pollock, 'Feminism/Foucault – Surveillance/Sexuality', op. cit.

⁴⁷ Another way of representing and classifying women in the 19th century was to relegate them to the position of the mentally disturbed. This is discussed by Joan Copjec, 'Flavit et Dissipanti Sunt', op. cit. See also Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 16.

⁴⁸ Sekula refers here to Karl Marx's *Capital* (London, New Left Books, vol. 1, 1976, pp. 440–441), in 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁹ Pollock, 'Feminism/Foucault – Surveillance/Sexuality', op. cit., p. 9.

representations circulated both as part of the bourgeois deployment of sexuality amongst the proletariat and as an exciting defiance of it. They thus momentarily inched across the field of desire and law to proffer pornographic pleasure in the most unlikely fields—the fields of knowledge and power, where sexuality and surveillance mutually constructed each other in the interests of bourgeois men.⁵⁰

Pollock draws on many historical examples ranging from Van Gogh to Meunier, including not only a 19th-century French woman artist Cécile Douard, but also representations of female workers by male artists. Yet the most interesting, and perhaps less known, of her examples, are from the ‘extended field’ outside of ‘the domain of high art’,⁵¹ two sets of photographic images which were produced of working women, miners – one as visual evidence to support a petition for the House of Commons in 1863 to prohibit employing females on the basis of their indecent costumes. (They were wearing the same trousers as men did.) The other series of images was produced of the same women posing in their Sunday outfits to support the mine owners’ wish to ‘defend their access to cheap female labour’ by demonstrating the decency of these women.⁵² This latter follows the ‘standardized rhetoric’ for representations of both women and bourgeois sitters in general. The first series, however, may strike us as a result the women’s recurring poses, especially their posture of resting a hand on the hip, a gesture that alone could be a starting point for further analysis of the visual rhetorics of women’s representations, but I would like to follow another line now which is related to the figure of the ‘working girl’ both as a group of concrete women and also as a structural sign of capitalist society.

The term ‘working girl’ is commonly known as a slang designation for ‘prostitute’, but it probably dates back to the late 19th century when women started being employed in larger numbers not only in factories but also in offices, shops and the newly opened department

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵² Ibid., p. 20.

stores. Since they had to move around in the city to go to work and then back home without appropriate male companionship, men deliberately mistook them for prostitutes and assaulted them. To use Griselda Pollock's formulation, 'The virgin/whore axis is written upon a social division of lady/working woman.'⁵³ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, manuals were circulated among employed women in London and Paris with exact descriptions of 'safe' itineraries for them to follow. Many of them tried to organise themselves into groups with other working women from their neighbourhood in order to avoid unwanted solicitation from men on their way to or from work. Parallel to this, many working class women occasionally turned to prostitution to provide extra income for the family. This is exactly the landscape of late 19th-century urban life in which Jack the Ripper operated.⁵⁴

Coming back to Griselda Pollock, her essay has manifold ramifications with Sekula's textual and visual work which cannot be fully covered here, but one that I find especially important in the face of contemporary representations of politicised bodies is related to the ways in which these 19th-century representations engage with difference. The working women's bodies bear no signs of sexual difference, they are 'masquaraded' as men, and thus 'difference is seemingly suspended', or as Sekula formulated it in the context of criminal archives, 'zones of deviance and respectability could [not] be clearly demarcated.'⁵⁵ Yet these images were, indeed, subversive compared to traditional representations of the same women, bearing all the morally decent signs of femininity.

It seems to me that this blurring of the clear boundaries correlates with a projection and a resulting fear of the possibility of blurring other boundaries of social relations 'based on private property to the extent that the legal basis of the self lies in the model of property

⁵³ Ibid., p. 34, and also p. 25.

⁵⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

⁵⁵ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 14.

rights, in what has been termed “possessive individualism”.⁵⁶ The seemingly ‘rational’ legal discourse is put forward as an aid in enhancing psychological self-defence mechanisms. In this moral context the figure – or one of the emblematic embodiments – of the blurred or invisible boundaries between ‘normality’ and danger is the exceptional criminal genius who was invented as *visibly* ‘indistinguishable from the bourgeois, save for a conspicuous lack of moral inhibition.’⁵⁷

In my view, today it is quite common that representations of the ‘Other’ that bear no sign of their otherness paradoxically end up being more subversive than those images which are proliferated with signs of difference. One example of this is Rosalind Nashashibi’s film *Hreash House*,⁵⁸ which shows one day of the life of an extended Palestinian family living a collective existence in a concrete block in Nazareth during Ramadan. Nashashibi’s film is highly ideological, but not along the well-known lines of media representations in which Palestinians appear either as perpetrators of terrorist acts or as victims of mostly Israeli military violence. Nashashibi endeavours to de-trivialise Palestinians by showing this particular family’s daily routine devoid of the double cliché of media images, i.e. the dichotomy of the victim and the terrorist.

There is a similar and recurring subtext or project/ of de-trivialisation in Sekula’s photographs of workers and anti-globalists.⁵⁹ This is achieved partly by the emphatic textual component of his work, and partly by certain visual rhetorical elements, such as the camera’s spatial position *vis-à-vis* the subjects of the images, or – similarly to Nashashibi – by showing, for example, the members of the global justice movement differently from the ways in which widely circulated media pictures do. Another important element, which is partly rhetorical and partly a more profound inquiry of the well-known premises of photography, is Sekula’s long-

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁸ Rosalind Nashashibi, *Hreash House*, 20 mins., colour, 16 mm.

⁵⁹ Tania Modleski mentions the idea of de-trivialisation in relation to feminism (feminism de-trivialises women), p. 18, in Tania Modleski, ‘Some Functions of Feminist Criticism’, op. Cit., pp. 3–24.

invested interest in the use of double images or sequences, or I could even say, in what is normally called the 'photo essay'.⁶⁰ Sekula indirectly questions what is traditionally taken as the basic unit of photography, the singular and isolated image: 'singular' in the sense of the basic unit which is supposedly capable of meaning making, and 'isolated' in a way that is deprived of any extra-visual information, or a context, let alone a caption. In his view, the archival mode is reproduced very often in photographic books and exhibitions, thus reinforcing 'both the authority and the illusory neutrality of the archive'.⁶¹ His anti-archival drive results in a counter-archival practice that is not only a critique of the archive *per se*, but also a critique of the social conditions of the archival mode.

It is in the conjunction of the archive, the representation of the outcast, and the question of the photographic unit that the project of Francis Galton, an English statistician and the founder of eugenics, can be interpreted. Galton, who was a cousin of Charles Darwin himself, 'invented a method of composite portraiture',⁶² which served as a visual support – or a Sekula puts it, an 'epistemological tool'⁶³ – for his political programme of 'social betterment through breeding'.⁶⁴ This utilitarian ideology served as the 'biologization'⁶⁵ of the English class system and a justification for reducing the number of the 'unfit' in the face of the bourgeois fear of existing birth rates according to which there was a decline among the middle-classes and a definitive growth among the poor.⁶⁶ With his composite photographs, Galton also seems to have erased the border between 'the criminal and the working class poor, the residuum that so haunted the political imagination of the late-Victorian bourgeoisie [...] this meant that he merely included the criminal in the general pool of the "unfit"'.⁶⁷ For

⁶⁰ Sekula explicitly rejects the term 'photo-essay'.

⁶¹ Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital' (1983), in David Company (ed.), *Art and Photography*, Phaidon, 2003, p. 217.

⁶² See Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 18. For an illustration of composite portraiture, see Sekula, p. 45.

⁶³ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 44. An example of this is the series those composite images he made of officers and 'enlisted men of the Royal Engineers' (Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 50).

⁶⁷ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 50.

Sekula, Galton's activity is not so much about the ways in which visual representations are produced, but more an example of 'an overdetermined instance of biopositivism'.⁶⁸

Sekula himself poses the question that addresses the reasons for the relatively quick and easy embrace of the photographic archive into 'police work and an emerging social science of criminology'.⁶⁹ One crucial feature of the archive is the way in which it creates a 'general equivalence between the images'⁷⁰ in the sense that each image is taken as a unit and there is no hierarchy among these units. Archival classification is based on a paradigmatic relationship among its units but this is capable of conveying a false sense of equality when it comes to retrieval. It is in this sense that Sekula furthers the limited linguistic analogy, 'The photographic archive's components are not conventional lexical units, but rather are subject to the circumstantial character of all that is photographable.'⁷¹ Yet this imaginary 'dictionary of photographs' is possible only on condition of disregarding the specificities 'of individual images in favour of some model of typicality,'⁷² as for example in iconography.

If we want to translate this to works of art, then an exhibition (or photographs in an album or in a book for that matter) could stand for such a framework, and the modernist design for displaying art objects corresponds with the striving for archival equality. This design was 'invented' and first used on the occasion of an exhibition of the paintings of Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh which took place at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in the autumn of 1929 and was – to use this term as anachronistic in this historical context – 'curated' by Alfred H. Barr, MoMA's first and then director. He broke with the previous exhibition design practice and hung the pictures on plain, neutral walls without placing one

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 46. That the images themselves proved to be useless since they were too blurred and unclear is another point of criticism that Sekula raises (p. 47). A counter-example that Sekula mentions is a composite photograph by the sociologist-photographer Lewis Hine, which he made of girls working in a cotton mill and with which Hine intended to demonstrate the negative bodily effects of children's employment in factories (Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 53).

⁶⁹ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 17. 'Criminology hunted "the" criminal body. Criminalistics hunted "this" or "that" criminal body' (p. 18).

⁷⁰ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷² Ibid., p. 17.

above the other, as the result of a new method of visual interpretation. 'The idea was to let the pictures stand on their own feet' – as Barr's wife formulated it.⁷³ This intellectually defined, although aesthetically structured 'method of presentation has now become [...] institutionalised,⁷⁴ as the 'white cube'. The monolithic and fundamentally ideological nature of this mode of presentation is revealed when we compare it with the displays of ethnographic museums that are – even today – 'visual jumbles' rather than intellectually staged objects for 'monocular viewing'.

Coming back to 'The Body and the Archive' essay, Sekula's aim is also to construct a critical history of how photography and statistics intersected and resulted in providing a scientific method for the criminal archive, although this 'intersection [...] led to strikingly different results in the work of two different men: Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton.'⁷⁵ Their approach and work can be taken as dialectical opposites of the general and the particular – a common pursuit that many artists of the time shared. It is sufficient to think of Degas' paintings of ballet rehearsals, in which individuality is 'underwritten' by a sense of belonging to a group and sharing all the signs with other members of this group; yet even at all those moments of unified movement, we see signs of individuality which become apparent exactly because of the unified behaviour of the group.

Interestingly enough, though, statistics are capable of visually demonstrating how the average may become the norm. Sekula refers to Quetelet, a statistician who noticed that when working with a large enough social data, these end up producing a bell-shaped curve – similar to Gauss' curvature – where the more we approach the central mean, the more data we find around it. So in terms of probability, data tend to fall around the average. When it comes to criminals, according to the principles of a kind of 'moral statistics,' the probability

⁷³ Quoted by Marian Mazzone, 'The East Sees the West, But Can the West See the East?: Exhibiting NSK in America', conference paper, 'Ethics and Visuality: Constructing Social Space' conference, University of Pécs, Hungary, June 4–6, 2000.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 18.

was high that people fell into the average non-criminal mean, which seemed to suspend free will or choice, even if the average was ‘a statistical fiction’.⁷⁶ Physiognomy and phrenology was there to prove that social deviance correlated with physical ‘deviation from “normality”’.⁷⁷

Yet the approach of Bertillon, director of the Identification Bureau of the Paris Prefecture of Police, did not concentrate on defining a ‘criminal type’, but on reconciling empirical police work with scientific principles.⁷⁸ In this sense his method – and archival mode – can be paralleled with the standardisation of factory work as it was theorised by Taylor. In Taylorism, the work process is, on the one hand fragmented into smaller units, and on the other, these units in their turn should be able to be repeated and performed in an exactly identical manner an infinite number of times. Chronophotography is not only based on the same principles of standardisation, but also served as an instrument in the enhancement of productivity in such diverse areas as horse breeding and lean manufacturing.⁷⁹ In this field the camera was a tool or a prosthesis that allowed the rendering intelligible of those phenomena that were otherwise imperceptible to the ‘naked’ eye. In this respect I disagree with Joan Copjec, who draws a parallel between the goals of Muybridge’s and Charcot’s methods, since the latter’s images functioned as illustrations for something that was already visible, but needed to be recorded for scientific purposes.⁸⁰

Bertillon’s system was widely received enthusiastically, especially in the United States as an apt form of a ‘standardization of police methods’, yet it soon had to face the competing system of fingerprints, which proved to be, in semiotic terms, ‘a more radically synecdochic procedure’, as Sekula notes.⁸¹ With fingerprints, a small, visually interpretable – indexical – trace of the body serves the basis for identification, which allows subjective elements to

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 21–22.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 22, also p. 34.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁹ One of the most famous and entertaining critiques of Taylorism is visualised by Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936).

⁸⁰ Copjec, ‘Flavit et Dissipati Sunt’, op. cit., p. 26.

⁸¹ Sekula, ‘The Body and the Archive’, op. cit., p. 34.

interfere to a much lesser degree. In addition, 'fingerprinting was more promising in a Taylorist sense, since it could be properly executed by less-skilled clerks.'⁸² In relation to the workers' social position and to the condition of their legal rights, it is interesting to note that fingerprinting in this context demonstrates the anti-worker and anti-skill logic of Taylorism, which fragmented the process of production to such an extent that it did not require much skill or an overview of the entirety of the process. Thus workers became easily interchangeable and dispensable.

This is in direct opposition to the efforts of the Photo Secession and other related artistic movements at the beginning of the 20th century when, according to artists' claims, the visible marks of photographic hand labour gained a high prestige as opposed to the mechanically reproducible multitude of images or commodities. This elitist strategy, which valorised 'the elegant *few*' at the expense of 'the mechanized *many*',⁸³ has disappeared by the 1920s, but recurs every now and then since (and is still prevalent in the Hungarian photographic scene). As Sekula comments, photographers adopted the visual rhetorics of the archival mode, even if this adoption cannot be taken as a unified approach to this paradigm. One of the most interesting examples is August Sander and his series of German people, which can be taken as an encyclopaedic survey of the Germans, but also as a profound disbelief in the possibilities of producing such an all encompassing overview of a 'nation'.⁸⁴

As a conclusion of 'The Body and the Archive' essay, Sekula claims that there was a 'general demise of an optical model of empiricism' already detectable by the 1910s, even if the position of photography as an objective technical means of visualisation in the natural

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁴ Sander's project also questions, albeit implicitly, the definition of a nation by purely visual means. One of the key tools in dismantling these received notions – such as nation, or professions – is Sander's dismissal of his sitters' full names. Sekula mentions Walker Evans as one of the main figures of the anti-archival movement; it is because of Evans' relationship to the institutionalisation of photography that I discuss Sekula's point (p. 59) in the chapter that deals with the ways in which photography ended up being institutionalised.

sciences had not changed much. Photography's previously held potential for overall 'truth claims' receded, especially in the social sciences.⁸⁵ There have been instances, though, of politicised, ideologically charged photographic projects which were born out of an instrumentalised need for social improvement, such as the famous FSA (Farm Security Administration) project that endeavoured at recording the devastating social repercussions and human effects of the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Yet these projects did not necessarily endeavour to create an all encompassing, 'universal' archive of a given subject from a specific perspective, since their relationship to the dichotomy of the individual and the universal was resolved by their bias for the individual. It was no longer a question of speaking about the average man, but of creating images of the idiosyncratic Other with a different ideological agenda in the background. Nevertheless, photography's legitimacy has been still based on the archival mode and its 'encyclopaedic authority', whose 'shadowy presence [...] authenticated the truth claims made for individual photographs.'⁸⁶

Although Sekula's essay does not explicitly focus on a semiotic understanding of photography, even in its documentary form, he makes a brief attempt to connect the archival mode as it appears in the work of Bertillon and Galton to the theory of signs and to one of its founders, Charles Sanders Peirce. In Peirce's triadic typology, the index is a sign that is connected to its referent by a causal effect, while in the case of symbols – such as verbal language – this relationship is wholly arbitrary or conventional. Peirce mentions the photograph as an instance of the indexical sign yet, as Sekula notes, even if Bertillon 'subordinates' the picture 'to the verbal text of the *portrait parlé*', the photograph remains 'wedded to an *indexical* order of meaning.'⁸⁷ In his turn and as a form of an 'apotheosis of the optical', Galton 'attempted to elevate the indexical photographic composite to the level of the *symbolic*', as an outcome of a '*general law*' that he was to create out of 'contingent

⁸⁵ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', pp. 53–54.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 57–58.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 55 (original italics).

instances'.⁸⁸ Sekula compares Galton's endeavour to Stieglitz's (an artist from a younger generation than Galton) and other neosymbolists for whom the photograph meant a lot more than 'a mere trace, something that would match or surpass the abstract capabilities of the imaginative or generalizing intellect.'⁸⁹

As Sekula concludes, both Galton and Stieglitz believed in meaning stemming from the sign's 'organic' properties, and were blind or ignorant of how meaning is 'in fact certified by a hidden framing convention.'⁹⁰ It is perhaps with a good reason, partly because the frame of the archive and that of science were considered neutral, thus non-existent, and partly because they both had another cause to defend beyond the meaning making and contextual capacities of their images. Yet Sekula 'reproaches' art historical approaches to photographic practices for ignoring the specific social field of image production and consumption that appears in the police archives. He explains this dismissal with a drive to maintain 'a certain liberal humanist myth of the wholly benign origins of socially concerned photography.'⁹¹

Sekula is quite unique in his approach to bringing artists and 'scientists' together on the same platform (even if he has theoretically founded reasons for doing so). Generally there is a strict division between artistic and socially instrumental images, which very often results in attributing too much power to social application and too little to artistic usages. Since Sekula is himself an artist, the questions follow. How can pictures attain at least a certain level of power and on what level, in which context, and in what ways can this power be operative? I would like to argue with the metaphor of the prostitute in relation to promiscuity and 'permissiveness' (Charles Esche⁹²) for the reclamation and the expansion of the – political – power of images that, in my view, is a specificity of Sekula's work.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁹² Sarah Pierce, 'A Politics of Interpretation', p. 162, in Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, De Appel, Amsterdam, pp. 159-173.

To start offering a possible answer to these questions, I would like to make use of W.J.T. Mitchell's proposition, with which he wants to shift from the power model to the subaltern model when it comes to images and desire.⁹³ In this context, it is no wonder 'that the "default" position of images is feminine' within the structure of the 'opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of the look.'⁹⁴ In my view, it is the second, subaltern, model, which can be productively complemented by the model, or the metaphor of the prostitute in reclaiming political power to images. Prostitution itself – the act of selling one's own body for the sexual gratification of the customer in exchange financial recompense – is not about a wish to sell indiscriminately and without any scruples, because that alone would not be considered as outrageous, abject, and something to be controlled or banned. Prostitution is neither about a moralising drive, nor a feminist cause. '[T]he prostitute is the ur-form of the wage labourer', and at the same time a dangerous sign. As Susan Buck-Morss claims, in the case of 'regular' labour, 'every trace of the wage labourer who produced the commodity is extinguished when it is torn out of context by its exhibition on display.'⁹⁵ So the prostitute becomes dangerous as a sign, 'as a dialectical image'⁹⁶ that epitomizes capitalism's mechanisms clearly and visibly, exactly because she simultaneously embodies and 'synthesizes' both seller and commodity.⁹⁷

The answer in the domain of art theory that Mitchell gives to his own question 'what pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visibility adequate to their

⁹³ Mitchell, 'What do Pictures Really Want?', p. 74, *October 77* (Summer 1996), pp. 71–82.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Mitchell quotes Norman Bryson, 'Introduction', in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. xxv.

⁹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1989, pp. 184–185.

⁹⁶ The idea of the relation of the dialectical image to Sekula's work is raised by Ruth Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit? Ein Versuch, die Aktualität des Dokumentarischen mit den materialistischen Wahrheitstheorien Benjamins und Adornos zu verstehen', p. 70, in Karin Gludowatz (ed.), *Auf den Spuren des Realen: Kunst und Dokumentarismus*, MuMok, Vienna, 2003, pp. 65–89.

⁹⁷ See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., pp. 184–185; and Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2006, pp. 56–59.

ontology';⁹⁸ That is, we allow them to speak for themselves and we listen to what they have to say. All this sounds good until we try to place this into a poststructuralist framework and within existing theories of the Other. The Austrian philosopher Ruth Sonderegger takes a critical stance *vis-à-vis* the poststructuralist understanding of the relation between subject formation and political representability. Poststructuralism can be criticised for giving up the idea – even if it was for good theoretical reasons – of a coherent, self-sufficient, self-contained and universal identity, and the possibility of its transparent representation. All this happened exactly at the moment when the 'subaltern' could have been given a voice. This has been paralleled by the loss of the belief in the transparency of the documentary as a result of various deconstructivist theories. As Sonderegger formulates it, 'this took the carpet off from under the feet of those for whom the documentary could be still instrumental in their political agendas.'⁹⁹ In this context, Jacqueline Rose's comment about the 'nostalgia for unmediated representation'¹⁰⁰ sounds theoretically acceptable, but politically quite retrograde, since a consequent theoretical disbelief in 'the homogenizing calls to the universal subject position of the working class'¹⁰¹ would render political activism's unifying aims impossible.

Yet, the relationship between artistic and documentary representations should be envisaged in a more complex manner, and exactly for political reasons. As Sonderegger summarises it, 'A mere document cannot be art, as some say. For them, documents are essential parts of scientific, pedagogical, and legal proofs and demonstration materials, and one expects different things from art. Others are not even interested in the conflictual border between documents and art.'¹⁰² For them everything is representation, there is no truth and no reality, only opaque constructions. It is equally possible that some may even have a need to

⁹⁸ Mitchell, 'What do Pictures *Really* Want?', op. cit., p. 82.

⁹⁹ Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit?', op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ Jacqueline Rose, 'Sexuality and Vision: Some Questions', p.117, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1988, pp. 115–127.

¹⁰¹ Begg, 'Recasting Subjectivity', op. cit., p. 628.

¹⁰² Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit?', op. cit., p. 65.

envisage a pure, '*avant la lettre*' state for the documentary which, in fact, probably never existed, as John Grierson, the filmmaker from 1920s who first used the term 'documentary' in relation to film, reminds us in his text *First Principles of Documentary*: 'Here [in the world of documentary proper] we pass from the plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it.'¹⁰³ I agree with Sonderegger's suggestions about the need to find alternatives between these polarities, and in my view the work of Sekula is an important instance in this quest.¹⁰⁴ Particularly because the 'abolition of the category of the referent' – to formulate it in a semiotic way – would render the 'alteration of material reality' difficult or even impossible.¹⁰⁵

It seems to me that one of Sekula's answers to the dichotomy of aesthetics and politics lies in his recurrent use of the term 'realism' in conjunction with a variety of qualifying adjectives, such as 'critical', or 'socially instrumental', etc.¹⁰⁶ 'Socially instrumental realism' is of course applied to describe the sort of realism that 'was central to the process of defining and regulating the criminal.'¹⁰⁷ This Sekula calls 'new juridical photographic realism',¹⁰⁸ the potential of which was recognised almost as early as the invention of the medium. This recognition stemmed from the need to regulate and observe a new 'sub-proletarian' class as a dangerous social Other onto which many fears of the upper classes were projected.

As Sekula claims, the potential for using the medium of photography for different, and sometimes even opposing, purposes had been investigated ever since medium had first been invented and used. This duality of technology in general is a common dialectic, yet it is interesting to see to what extent the pioneers of photography were aware of it. Sekula

¹⁰³ Quoted by Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit?', op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit?', op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ Modleski, 'Some Functions of Feminist Criticism', op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ Okwui Enwezor, 'Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument', p. 26, in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, Steidl/ICP, 2008, pp. 11–51. Enwezor mentions Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*, in which Foster coins the term "traumatic realism" in relation to the work of Andy Warhol and uses it as the title of a whole chapter (pp. 127–168).

¹⁰⁷ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 7, and p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

mentions Daguerre, and in particular Fox Talbot, both of whom recognized this duality; he writes: 'we are confronting, then, a double system: a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*.'¹⁰⁹ According to Sekula, the pictorial genre in which the clearest dialectical form manifests itself is 'photographic portraiture', which on the one hand subverted 'the privileges inherent in portraiture' (in its original, 17th-century bourgeois form), and which on the other hand, as a form of illustration, provided subjects for a '*generalized look*—the typology—and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology.'¹¹⁰ Traditionally taken, the portraiture in its 'ceremonial' form belongs to the domain of art historical analysis, and the same genre in the second, 'repressive' form to the field of instrumental social usage. It is in this sense that Sekula's text works on different premises, which from my temporal perspective can be labelled as 'visual culture' and not even an expanded form of art history *per se*.

It is exactly the genre of the portrait that became the major instrument in Bertillon's police archive. The 'semantic value' of the photographic portrait proved to be 'the final conclusive sign in the process of identification.'¹¹¹ The major shift in Bertillon's method is related to standardisation; he was not only critical of the inconsistencies of earlier photographic practices, he also 'argued for an aesthetically neutral standard of representation.'¹¹² This new system consisted of 'standard focal length, even and consistent lighting, and fixed distance between the camera and the unwilling sitter. The profile view served to cancel the contingency of expression; the contour of the head remained consistent with time. The frontal view [...] served better in the search for suspects.'¹¹³ It is interesting to note that this standardised mode of lighting and 'objective' presentation became an important visual rhetorical means later in the 1920s (August Sander), 1930s (Edward Weston), and 1980s

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 6 (original italics).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 6–7 (original italics).

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 30.

¹¹³ Ibid.

(Robert Mapplethorpe) with artists whose work, to various degrees and from different positions, challenged objectivity and semantic equality.

'Against the grain' of a monolithic reception of Foucault as the ruthless critical analyst of the mechanisms of power and repression, Sekula makes it clear that the duality of the technology also appears in Foucault's writings. This means that a 'positive therapeutic or reformatory channelling of the body' was present along with the appearance and the refinement of these scientific and technological inventions, as Foucault himself discusses.¹¹⁴ Yet Sekula, while acknowledging this dialectics, claims that the inherent logic that is behind the refinement of this kind of 'socially instrumental realism' inevitably results in repression, since the conjunction of the technical and 'the semantic refinement and rationalization of precisely this sort of realism was central to the process of defining and regulating the criminal.'¹¹⁵

When discussing realism, it seems to be obvious to think of the question Richard Rorty posed in the introduction to his famous book on the linguistic turn.¹¹⁶ Instead of asking the rhetorical question 'Should we philosophize?', Rorty inquires, 'How should we philosophize?'.¹¹⁷ The same line of inquiry could be applied to realism when, instead of trying to define its meaning, we could perhaps aim at defining it in this indirect way, via its adjectives. As Sekula puts it, 'Any interest that I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain "realism," a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism.'¹¹⁸ I think the fact that

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7, referring to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and Volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality* (1978).

¹¹⁵ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992 (originally published in 1967).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹⁸ Jennifer E. Quick, 'The Dialectics of Time: Reflections on the Work of Andreas Gursky, Omer Fast, and Allan Sekula', p. 17, in *Trajectories*, pp. 14–19.

http://www.postmastersart.com/artists/omer_fast/O%20Fast%200908%20Trajectories.pdf (accessed March 2, 2010)

Sekula applies the notion of realism in such a heterogeneous and even instrumental way is part of his 'promiscuous' overall strategy both as an artist and as a theorist.

The question of the various understandings and strategies of realism leads us to the conflict between aesthetics and the documentary, which is a recurring topic in discussions on art, and with a good reason. This recurrence is probably an indication of the acuteness of the conflict, of its politically charged character, and of the impossibility of resolving their relationship once and for all. In contrast to her general statement on 'the nostalgia for unmediated representation', Jacqueline Rose mentions the example of the Black British film collective, Sankofa, and their production from the mid 1980s, *Passion of Remembrance*.¹¹⁹ According to Rose, the film mixes two modes of representation, the surreal and *cinéma vérité*, precisely 'at the level of cinematic form to represent their incommensurability *and* their relation.'¹²⁰ The film makes use of 'techniques which deconstruct the positionality of the spectator as controller of the field of vision [...] This is a film whose political force stems from inmixing, from its refusal to settle the question of representation, in the way that it uses simultaneously what have been historically two antagonistic cinematic forms.'¹²¹

The reason why I mention Rose's accurate comments on the representational strategy of this film is that I see a clear parallel with Sekula's methods, which also serve to create a possible position, even if it is an unstable one, for politically engaged art. In my view it is exactly this mixed and unstable constellation of a position that is able to produce the possibility for political engagement in a wider sense. It is in this respect that Ruth Sonderegger speaks of 'the double identity of Sekula's work.'¹²² This is manifested in his mixing of the styles of his textual elements and 'captions' – sometimes they take the form of a description, background

Quoted from Sekula's *Photography Against the Grain*, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Nova Scotia, 1984.

¹¹⁹ The artist Isaac Julien was also founding member of Sankofa film collective.

¹²⁰ Jacqueline Rose, 'Sexuality and Vision: Some Questions', p. 125, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, op. cit., pp. 115–127.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 125.

¹²² Sonderegger, 'Nichts als die reine Wahrheit?', op. cit., p. 83.

information, theoretical reflection, etc., sometimes they are factual, personal, or ironic.¹²³ One of the most famous cases in which this mixing of styles, modes and registers has already proved to be effective for political purposes is the Communist Manifesto, which also employs a variety of disparate elements, ranging from the gothic novel to fortune telling and even drawing on popular culture.¹²⁴ In the case of 'The Body and the Archive' essay, the text also has a composite character in the sense that it mixes various discursive modes, ranging from historical analysis to aesthetic interpretation and from political claims to theoretical statements. Yet, as for all of Sekula's activities, this is exactly – and paradoxically – its methodological, intellectual and political strength.¹²⁵

It is in the conjunction of solidarity and the postmodernist critique of authorship that Sekula concludes his essay. For him, the story of the South African photographer Ernest Cole serves as a moral conclusion for the advice 'to avoid an overly monolithic conception of realism,'¹²⁶ with which he retrospectively, though implicitly, explains his promiscuous usage of the term. Cole was a Black South African photographer in the 1960s, who photographed everyday instances of the operation of 'power, survival, and criminal resistance' until his activity caught the police's attention. He managed to flee South Africa with the images he had taken, which were published in 1967 under the title *House of Bondage*, after which he vanished 'from the world of professional photojournalism.'¹²⁷

Cole's disappearance can be taken as an act of solidarity, and his photographs as instances for the ambiguous status of images. These pictures document the effects of oppression, but

¹²³ Ibid., p. 85.

¹²⁴ See Peter Osborne, 'Remember the Future? The *Communist Manifesto* as Cultural-Historical Form', in Peter Osborne, *Philosophy and Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 63–77.

¹²⁵ At the end of his essay Sekula mentions the actuality of Bertillon's and Galton's presence, which is manifested in renewed forms of surveillance and also in works of art which deal with these repercussions. Yet, in the face of the attacks of 9/11, it would be too easy and also too far-fetched to extend this to the contemporary situation. Nevertheless, the resonance of 'political issues [...] can be heard in the aesthetic sphere' (Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 62).

¹²⁶ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', op. cit., p. 64.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

also the act of committing petty crimes, depending on the framing intentions and contextual parameters of their readers. It is exactly at this point that Sekula calls for solidarity as a context-producing force, which may be useful in preventing ‘the cancellation’ of such testimonies as Cole’s. Solidarity – a nice, old-fashioned term which recurs in Sekula’s texts and images – may also lead us back to the beginning of this chapter. ‘Neither the contents, nor the forms, not the many receptions and interpretations of the archive of human achievements can be assumed to be innocent. And further, even the concept of “human achievements” has to be used with critical emphasis in an age of automation. The archive has to be read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced, or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress.’¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Sekula, ‘Reading an Archive’, op. cit., p. 218.

THE JUDGEMENT SEAT OF PHOTOGRAPHY

When considering and reconsidering *October's* almost legendary relationship to photography, one soon encounters the fact that the number of essays published in the journal are far less numerous in comparison with their fame and impact on aesthetic discourses and art theory. For this reason it is crucial to examine the most important and influential claims of these texts on the one hand, and on the other to compare their aesthetic stance to other theoretical positions that appear outside of the journal. This investigation also aims at demonstrating the specificity of the medium, which partly manifests itself in its recurrent naming; no other artistic field has been so consistently differentiated from the other media by its own, self-proclaimed designation as photography has done.¹ This endeavour by photography is underwritten by another assertion aimed at an aesthetic consideration of the medium. This approach not only dismisses the fact that the 'ideas of aesthetic rightness' within the aesthetic discourse are 'mutable',² it is also in a conflictual relationship with a recurring claim from the 1970s that has been explicitly and implicitly formulated by such theorists and critics as Christopher Phillips, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Clifford Geertz, Rosalind Krauss, Pierre Bourdieu, John Tagg, Martha Rosler and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who all raise the need for a non-aesthetic, or a not exclusively aesthetic, discourse on photography. The ways in which these theorists outline the principles and methodologies of

¹ A telling example of this, within the Hungarian context, is the existence of a separate board for photography at the Hungarian National Cultural Fund. On the international art scene one can think of the existence of specialised museums or journals of photography.

² Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', p. 186, in Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 2004, pp. 151–206. (Also published in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1989, pp. 303–341.)

such an approach are nevertheless rather sporadic. This chapter aims to summarise and confront theoretical understandings of the institutionalisation of the photographic field.

The question of photography's institutionalisation is far less obvious than it seems at first sight. Douglas Crimp, a former and very influential editor of *October* whose impact on the journal's editorial dealing with photography was decisive, makes an astute comment about the historical character of this institutionalisation in an essay which interestingly enough did not appear in *October*. According to Crimp, 'If photography was invented in 1839, it was only *discovered* in the 1960s and 1970s—photography, that is, as an essence, photography *itself*.'³ For Crimp, the paradoxicality of this institutionalisation lies precisely in the fact that it happens at the moment when photography enters the museum, becomes autonomous, and starts to be framed by an exclusively and all encompassing, institutionally supported aesthetic discourse.⁴

One of the few texts in *October* that raises this question of photography's institutionalisation is Christopher Phillips's seminal essay entitled 'The Judgement Seat of Photography', published in issue 22 in 1982.⁵ The title of Phillips' text is already suggestive in the sense that it is a quotation taken from Walter Benjamin's essay 'A Short History of Photography'.⁶ Phillips's article starts with two mottos and within the context of my present aims, both bear a symbolic importance. The first motto comes from Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay and

³ Douglas Crimp, 'The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject', in *On the Museum's Ruins*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1993, pp. 66–83. Originally published in *Parachute* 22, Spring 1981. The version published in *On the Museum's Ruins* is obviously revisited since it contains references of essays that were published after the original 1981 publication of Crimp's essay, such as Christopher Phillips's text. See footnote 4 below.

⁴ Crimp, 'The Museum's Old', op. cit., p. 74.

⁵ Christopher Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat of Photography', *October* 22 (Autumn 1982), pp. 27–63.

⁶ In Phillips's essay, in footnote 5, he probably refers to the first English-language publication of Benjamin's essay in the journal *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1972) (trans. Stanley Mitchell). There is at least one other English language version of this essay available with the title 'A Small History of Photography' in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London and New York, 1979, pp. 240–257 (trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter). This is important only because there are differences between these two translations, and, interestingly, precisely between the formulations of this phrase. Instead of the term 'judgement seat', in the second version the translators employ the word 'tribunal'.

underlines photography's capacity for the production of an infinite number of perceptually identical copies. The second is taken from Alfred Stieglitz, and states almost exactly the same as Benjamin. The first motto is interesting in the face of Benjamin's American reception and the role *October* played in the promotion of Benjamin's views on mechanical reproducibility, and Phillips' essay is one instance within this history.

As for Stieglitz, his statement is in a sharp contrast with his artistic endeavours and principles, and can be taken either as the manifestation of some wishful thinking or as a way of – not necessarily consistently – navigating between the polarities of photographic practices and theories of the time. In the face of *October's* implicit editorial policy, it is no wonder that neither a critique of this discrepancy nor a critical analysis of Stieglitz's activity appears within the journal. In this respect it is easy to detect the editorial biases of the journal with the few 'monographic' essays on photographers, which it is hard to explain with any detectable policy.⁷ The reason why this discrepancy between Stieglitz's 'words and images' is worth discussing is his – probably involuntary – role in the foundation of the most basic and long-lasting schism on photography between artistic and documentary images. The idea of this division was raised by Allan Sekula in an essay he devoted to the discussion of this question, using the visual examples of Lewis Hine and Stieglitz.⁸

According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the notion of the documentary entered into the 'lexicon' of photography only in the late 1920s. According to her, this fact 'implies that until its [the category of the documentary] formulation, photography was understood as innately and inescapably performing a documentary function.'⁹ The appearance of this appellation seems

⁷ Examples for these vary from Abigail Solomon-Godeau's text on Auguste Salzman ('A Photographer in Jerusalem, 1855: Auguste Salzman and His Times', *October* 18 [Autumn 1981], pp. 91–107) to Carol Armstrong's essay on Diane Arbus ('Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus', *October* 66 [Autumn 1993], pp. 28–54).

⁸ Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', in Victor Burgin (ed.) *Thinking Photography*, Macmillan, London, 1982, pp. 84–109.

⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography', p. 169–170, in Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays in Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 169–183. The

to have been inspired by film, where John Grierson started to employ the term in the mid-1920s (see more about it in Chapter 4). For Solomon-Godeau, the foundation of this terminology is directly related to the then prevalent photographic practices, which she characterises as dominated by ‘symbolism and aestheticism (in the stylistic form of pictorialism).’¹⁰ Her observation has a strong resonance with Sekula’s approach and with the ways in which he envisages the dichotomy of the aesthetic and the documentary.

Sekula’s text starts with two images, Lewis Hine’s *Immigrants Going Down Gangplank, New York* (1905) and Alfred Stieglitz’s *The Steerage* (1907). To compare the pictures of these particular photographers is probably not the most obvious choice, but the similarities of the images’ subject matter and the fact that they were produced at roughly the same time provides Sekula with the intellectual justification to do so. Both images depict the scene that became so typical in the formation of the United States and its foundational propagandistic metaphor of ‘the melting pot’. Yet the visual rhetorics of the images ‘betray’ many different aspects of the aims and positions of the two photographers. As we know from Stieglitz’s personal recollection, he was obliged to take this journey to Europe with his current wife, but he was scornful of the snobbery of social division that manifested themselves in the strict separation of the classes on the ship, so he wandered off from his social circles and became interested in the lower deck’s daily life. His picture’s vantage point is a signifier for his social distance, but this distance could also be interpreted as an indication for an ‘objective’ position for the photographer and a possible position for a scientific observer. The objectivity suggested by the distanced photographer’s symbolic position is in sharp contrast with Stieglitz’s writings on his own work and his views on the principles of photographic image making.

essay was originally published in 1987, and in Hungarian in 2000: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Nézd csak, ki beszél? Néhány kérdés a dokumentarista fotográfia kapcsán’, *Ex Symposion*, 2000/32–33, pp. 65–74.

¹⁰ Solomon-Godeau, ‘Who Is Speaking Thus?’, op. cit., p. 170.

In arguing for Stieglitz's major role in the foundation and the promotion of the schism between documentary and artistic photography, Sekula mentions the magazine *Camera Work*, which 'was solely Stieglitz's invention and [...] an artwork in its own right, as a sort of monumental container for smaller, subordinate works [...] whatever appeared between these covers passed through Stieglitz's hands.'¹¹ The aim of establishing the status of art in relation to photography is clearly there in the magazine not only in the selection of the publishable images, but also in the magazine's choice of textual material, and it is for these reasons that Sekula holds *Camera Work* (and Stieglitz) responsible for 'inventing, more thoroughly than any other source the myth of the *semantic autonomy* of the photographic image.'¹²

This way of understanding a magazine as 'a monumental framing device'¹³ easily makes sense when we consider our contemporary situation and try to envisage the different visual and textual contexts in which images may appear, which in most cases fall out of the control of the producer of the images. In the case of high culture, the pictures are contextualised by the format of an exhibition (or a catalogue). The framing histories and capacities of the art institution have to be compared and confronted with the context of magazines such as *Newsweek*, for instance. The American critic David Levi Strauss has demonstrated the ways in which 'hard core' documentary and photojournalistic images get 'corrupted' and ideologically 'hyper-charged' within such publications in the proximity of other pictures, especially advertisements.¹⁴ Another significant point is the question of agency; not necessarily in the sense of artistic authorship, but in terms of the power to control the life of one's own images after they have been made. In the case of these magazines, the recurring phrase about the pictures is '*Newsweek* took them,'¹⁵ thus agency – and we could add, subjectivity – is obliterated from the beginning. The reason why this is important for Levi

¹¹ Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 92.

¹² Ibid. (emphasis added).

¹³ Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 92.

¹⁴ The same question of contextual framing is also raised by Solomon-Godeau, 'Who Is Speaking Thus?', op. cit., pp. 179–180.

¹⁵ David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, Aperture, New York, 2003, p. 17.

Strauss is not to trade on promoting 'objectivity' versus propaganda; for him the problem with mainstream news media is exactly that it masquerades its own ideological biases by claiming objectivity. It is in this sense that such publications as *Newsweek* (or *National Geographic* for that matter) can take the position of objectivity versus the subjectivity of magazines like *Camera Work* (even if they are produced in different historical periods).

The promotion of photography as art reveals one of the most fundamental paradoxes of photography in the face of high art, which was raised and discussed by Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁶ The camera is an object or a device that is economically accessible to less socially privileged classes and groups, and to use a camera and produce acceptable images does not need any special training or skill. In the system of cultural division, the upper classes aim at distinguishing themselves from the petite bourgeoisie and from the working classes by – among other things – maintaining their privileged access to certain cultural practices, such as high art. That is why 'members of photographic clubs seek to ennoble themselves culturally by attempting to ennoble photography, a substitute within their range and grasp for higher arts.'¹⁷ And this is exactly the reason why, in terms of formal and aesthetic criteria, photography is probably the most conservative of all genres and media, since it needs to be elevated from and kept outside of the visual premises of popular culture.¹⁸

Photography's artistic status has not only been challenged from the position of the documentary and vernacular practices, but also from the position of high art itself, particularly by painting. It is not necessarily because of their similarities as two-dimensional pictorial representational systems or because of painting's privileged position within the hierarchy of artistic media and genres. The 19th-century Romanticists, such as Théophile Gautier and

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, Polity Press, 1990. Originally published in French in 1965 with the title *Un art moyen*.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Photography*, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁸ To my understanding and in my terminology, popular culture is not equivalent to mass culture. In the case of the former, the producers and the consumers of culture largely overlap, while in the case of the latter, the consumers are provided with the products of the cultural industries.

later on the Goncourt brothers, formulated their ideas about the fear of the possible threat of mass production on the privileges of high art that also found its echo in Baudelaire's thought. His most famous quote is repeated by Sekula as well, 'A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah.'¹⁹ Paradoxically, though, Baudelaire failed to notice that although the daguerreotype was capable of 'reproducing' Nature, it was not based on technical reproducibility since its end result was a unique image.²⁰ In fact Baudelaire's attack was probably as much diverted against naturalism, the prevailing aesthetic mode of the time, as against the appearance of technology within the arts.

Coming back to Sekula's comparison of Stieglitz's and Hine's images, Hine's goals and purposes were diametrically opposed to Stieglitz's artistic intentions. Hine was far from being an artist; he was a sociologist who published his images outside of the aesthetic 'discourse situation',²¹ in social-work journals with a reformist political aim and with a philanthropic undertone. These journals and reformist movements often appeared as 'a political threat to capital' due to the 'lack of a clear institutional status' even if they 'stood clearly to the right of the Socialist party.'²² Yet Hine's images betray as many aesthetic concerns as Stieglitz's; they are not only aesthetically composed and have other aesthetic characteristics (lighting, framing, etc.), but also address the historical conventions of the artistic canon, as the examples of the images published and analysed in Sekula's essay demonstrate (e.g. Lewis Hine: *A Madonna of the Tenements*, 1911²³). In Hine's case, the aesthetic concerns clearly serve political needs and not the other way around. He does not only intend to elevate his subjects and subject matters to a higher cultural level, but at the same time, using these artistic and aesthetic conventions, renders his images legible for an audience that is well acquainted with high cultural pictorial formulas. It is also in this sense, and in relation to

¹⁹ Baudelaire is quoted by Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 96.

²⁰ In this context it is also ironic to see the quantity of known photographic portraits of French intellectuals that have survived (in comparison with painted portraits).

²¹ Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 103.

²² Ibid., p. 104.

²³ Reproduced in ibid., op. cit., p. 106.

raising the historical contextual parameters of Hine's images, that Sekula's approach becomes political.

Another noteworthy aspect of Sekula's theoretical standpoint within the framework of this chapter is that when confronting with the dichotomy of aesthetics and the documentary (which he calls 'binary folklore'²⁴), he convincingly demonstrates that both are ideologically constructed categories that serve a variety of different, often political interests. For Sekula, there is no proper documentary or artistic image, only a contextually defined reading according to which 'every photograph tends, at any given moment of reading in any given context, towards one of these two poles of meaning.'²⁵ This 'tendency' corresponds with the ways in which different ideological interests intermingle within a given reading, such as in the case of Hines, where the aesthetic or artistic 'pole' (as Sekula calls it) is in the service of the political (i.e. the documentary).

What is important to note in relation to the politicised and political approach of Sekula's essay and the reception of his – and other theorists' critical – texts in *October* is the overall neglect of his theoretical and critical position that remains – at best – underrepresented in the course of the journal's history. This generally stands for a kind of poststructuralist analysis that aims at a critique of the ideologies – visible or hidden – that inform the images. The fact that this approach is so much missing from the journal is in direct contradiction with some seminal essays within the journal (such as Christopher Phillips'²⁶ or Rosalind Krauss'²⁷) that raise the need for a non-aesthetic discourse on photography, but never develop the exact parameters of such a theoretical approach. The critique of ideology is an even more burning

²⁴ Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 108.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit.

²⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral', *October* 31 (Winter 1984), pp. 48–68.

issue when we bear in mind the quantity and the popular forms of the dissemination of photographic images, as Pierre Bourdieu also noted and commented on.²⁸

When discussing the dichotomy of aesthetics and the documentary and their conjunction with the polarity of realism and symbolism, Sekula establishes a series of binary oppositions to describe some aspects of these terms' relationship, such as 'photographer as seer vs photographer as witness, photography as expression vs photography as reportage, theories of imagination (and inner truth) vs theories of empirical truth, affective value vs informative value, metaphoric signification vs metonymic signification.'²⁹ The polarity of metaphor and metonymy can serve here as a useful opposition in discussing and analysing various areas of photography, especially in the face of contemporary ethnography and the critique of museum display which are recent, interdisciplinary areas of visual studies where cultural signs – both visual and verbal – are often analysed from a postcolonialist perspective and with the critical tools of the semiotic approach to narratology.

An example I would like to use here to demonstrate this interdisciplinary investigation is the work of the Hungarian photographer Péter Korniss who, in 1997, held a major retrospective exhibition of the photographs he has been making/taking in Transylvania (Romania) since 1967 in the Múcsarnok (Kunsthalle, Budapest) – the largest contemporary art exhibition space in Hungary at that time. Parallel to the exhibition, a coffee-table-like book of 160 pages was also published. Korniss has published his images in the form of monographic books since as early as 1975 at least, and he cannot, by any means, be considered a so-called 'banned artist' under the socialist regime. Since the political changes of 1989, his career has reached unprecedented heights and full official recognition.

²⁸ Bourdieu, *Photography*, op. cit.

²⁹ Sekula, 'On the Invention', op. cit., p. 108 (original italics).

It is important to note that Abigail Solomon-Godeau perceives the notion of the documentary mode in a radical way, claiming that, within this context, the surveillance camera would be the degree zero of the documentary. See Solomon-Godeau, 'Who Is Speaking Thus?', op. cit., p. 169.

The work of Korniss readily offers itself as a 'theoretical object', to describe it using a term coined by Mieke Bal. The first and most conspicuous problem with Korniss's work is a lack of coherence, which manifests itself in a discrepancy between the words and the images he presents. Textually he claims he documents a disappearing way of life, but visually he displays the images in an art gallery, thus using the same sign both as a metaphor and as a synecdoche. Textually he claims he documents his trips, but visually he uses black and white photography, which functions as a metonymy of art in this case. Textually he claims to represent the past, visually he aims at constructing an identity for an 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson³⁰), which is ready to accept this as its own in the present. In my view this lack of coherence serves to blur these above-mentioned boundaries, thus blurring the ideology and resulting in the neutralisation of this very ideology.

On the level of rhetorics, the narratological function that Korniss occupies in the narrative he has created poses a dilemma *vis-à-vis* his subjects. Syntactically, Korniss himself is a narrator writing in the first person singular and referring to his own subjectivity with the use of this first person. Semantically speaking, however, there is also a third person singular present, whose role is to document and to show us the Transylvanians and their life 'objectively'. Moreover, there is an – unsuccessful – attempt to display a pragmatically taken second person narrative in which the 'you', the Transylvanians, are supposed to be given 'voice'. In reality, however, this 'voice' can never be 'heard', since in the narrative structure these people do not appear as narrators, as speakers for themselves, having their own voice, but are bequest with the narratological position of the 'focaliser', which can be understood as the extension or doubling of the role of the narrator. They are not capable of telling any other story except the one that the narrator chooses for them to tell.³¹

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1983.

³¹ Phillips also mentions the 'unitary authorial "voice"' which is capable of creating different modes of narratives ('comic, harsh, ironic, delighted, and even cruel'), and which can be contrasted with 'the uninflected "mechanical utterance of a machine"' (Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 59).

The dilemma that Korniss's narratological position poses is the same as the one Descartes' famous statement formulates. The Cartesian division between subject and object became the central dogma of modern epistemology.³² The analysis of this division from the point of view of narratological-rhetorical functions shows that the notions of objective truth and impersonal knowledge are connected to 'the third person fictional narrative', where the narrator is external and invisible, and the presentation aims to be neutral.³³ All this becomes fundamentally contradictory when we want to position Descartes' famous statement ('I think, therefore I am') in this system: his statement is based on objective knowledge and epistemology, but from the point of view of narratology, it is a first-person mini-narrative with the denotative and connotative functions of subjectivity. It is the incoherence and contradictory character of the Cartesian dilemma, among others, that can be taken as an indication to the impossibility of a complete subject/object division, and therefore the impossibility of totally impersonal and objective knowledge.

The choice of the narrative form on the part of the narrator cannot, by any means, be considered as a merely formal element, but as a – conscious or unconscious – decision that carries serious consequences, which directly touch upon the question of epistemological competence and indirectly raise questions of power. In Korniss's case, these can be summed up in three main points: 1/ The photographer's problematic, and to a certain extent abusive, relation to the subjects of his images; 2/ the viewers' connotative and fantasmatic relation to the images and to the reality these images are meant to denote; 3/ the association of these images to the proliferation of Hungarian political propaganda of the 1990s, which is related to symbolic territorial claims, directed towards our neighbouring countries.

³² Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, p. 59.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

For Solomon-Godeau, the various subject positions that appear in photography can be summed up in three, 'unchanging tropes',³⁴ which partly overlap with those problematic aspects that I have just outlined in relation to Korniss's images. The first one is related to the ways in which the subject is 'depicted' 'as a pictorial spectacle usually targeted for a different audience and a different class.'³⁵ The second revolves around the ways in which the representation of an individual, the pictorial effect of his/her 'victimization or subjugation' starts functioning 'as a metonym for the (invisible) conditions that produced it [...] irrespective of good intentions, personal or institutional politics, or ameliorative intent,'³⁶ or, as one could add, irrespective of the good intentions of the photographer. This leads to the third 'trope', to a 'probably inevitable slippage from the political to the anecdotal or the emblematic.'³⁷ The individualisation of the subjects inevitably results in entering the field of the personal and the anecdotal, which takes off the edge of political militancy and turns these subjects into representations that are easy to relegate away from the political field of immediate intervention.

All this is not to inscribe Korniss's images to a tendency that Martha Rosler describes and calls 'a new genre of victimhood'³⁸ in relation to the labour photography of the late 1920s and 30s (even if the 'subjects' of Korniss's images become representations, they are by no means turned into victims). This tendency aims at rescuing those people who became victims as 'helpless persons' 'by *someone else's* camera'³⁹ by adding a new layer of documentary on top of the existing one from 1930s with the means of historical research which is capable of discovering the subjects' real names and circumstances. Yet, as Rosler concludes, this endeavour eventually cannot succeed in truly rescuing the poor from their

³⁴ Solomon-Godeau, 'Who Is Speaking Thus?', op. cit., p. 178.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 178–79.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

³⁸ Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts', op. cit., p. 187. The essay was originally published in 1981.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 187 (original italics).

poverty because the 'relative distance' between them and us 'has not been abridged,'⁴⁰ but is reproduced time and again. According to Rosler, one of the best and most powerful instances of this is the work of Diane Arbus.

The creation of a pictorial narrative raises another question in relation to the reception and the institutionalization of photographic images. Christopher Phillips refers to the ways in which the ambivalent discourse surrounding Robert Capa's photographs is highly ideological when it becomes part of the more general dilemma between aesthetics and the documentary. The effort to reframe Capa's 'politically committed Spanish Civil War reportage as a self-conscious "experimenting with photographic syntax"' serves the institutional interest of 'redeeming' Capa's picture from the 'aestheticized photographic tradition,'⁴¹ and this can be realized only by stressing his own claims for fictionalizing his photographic practice. If there is an element of narrativity in the images, it supports this fictionalizing reading of the images. There seems to be a whole range of documentary photographers whose work has fallen prey of this museological and theoretical tendency.

The most important claim of this reading of Korniss's images is related for several reasons and from a poststructuralist position to a reassessment of the notion of ideology. The 'stale aroma of a theoretical anachronism' – as Kaja Silverman puts it⁴² – has not stopped exuding from the notion of 'ideology' which is probably due to the 'vicissitudes of Marxism', to lend Terry Eagleton's formulation⁴³ to a certain type of 20th-century political thinking (and action). It seems that neither the vulgar Marxist methodology of interpretation, nor the political events that happened under the banner of Marx's name in the 20th century are helpful in dismantling the aversion not just to the overt and political usage of the term, but to any form of thinking

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

⁴¹ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 60. Phillips' quotes are from Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene', p. 107, *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 103–118.

⁴² Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992, p. 15.

⁴³ Terry Eagleton, 'Ideology and its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism', in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp.179–226.

where it may be detected as an agenda. To a certain extent this overall resistance, and even paranoia, appears to be justifiable particularly in those parts of the world – like ours here in East-Central Europe – where Marxist social and political theory, with its specific understanding of the term of ‘ideology’, was directly translated into a justification of power, and abused partly via the invasion of not just the political but of the everyday, too, by a certain directly politically motivated form of this particular term (i.e. ideology). Yet ideology in some form or another is always present, and often in forms that have so long and to such an extent been naturalised that they are taken as non-ideological.

In the original, late 18th-century understanding of the term ‘ideology’, epistemology was closely related to it.⁴⁴ The most influential development of ideology, however, can be found in Marx, when he tried to articulate the relationship between politics, economics and culture, and referred ideology as not only the foundation of social relations, but also as a means possessed exclusively by the ruling class and used in the suppression and exploitation of the working class. The term ‘ideology’ comes back when we would least expect it: with New Criticism of the 1940s and 50s. The New Critics opposed ideology as being irrelevant, and even detracting from the aesthetic value of the artwork. In the past 60 years, ‘ideology’ has been used as a synonym for politics to designate an especially coherent and rigidly held system of political ideas.

The semiotic understanding of the notion of ideology makes a radical break with most previous definitions and usage on the basis of ‘a conception of sign as permeable and open both to the sign systems that surround it and to the circumstance in which it is articulated [... A] semiotic view of ideology allows us to define the political interests of all social groups as

⁴⁴ Late 18th-century French rationalist philosophers used it to designate the ‘science of ideas’, or the ‘philosophy of mind’ as opposed to older metaphysical conceptions. See James H. Kavanagh: ‘Ideology’, in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd edition, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995, pp. 306–320. Also W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, pp. 164–168.

ideologically motivated.⁴⁵ This not only means that there is no privileged class or social group which can exclusively be associated with ideology, but also that in as much as the production of signs is incoherent, no ideology can be total and coherent either.⁴⁶

Another question that the semiotic approach to ideology has posed is related to the ways in which ideology is responsible for the formation of human subjectivity, both that of the author and the reader. I would like to argue for a reconsideration and a re-acceptance of the notion of ideology in the field of art theory and criticism from the position of semiotics. This position may help to avoid committing the 'intentional fallacy', but still be able to produce a dynamic reading, and to make critical comments about the author's position as he/she is the source of the artistic utterance/statement (i.e. the work of art) – as I tried to demonstrate with the example of Korniss.

The semiotic understanding of the formation of subjectivity can be used as a deconstructivist tool in dismantling the authoritative approach to the function of the 'author', as Robert Scholes claims, 'The producers of literary texts are themselves creatures of culture, who have attained a human subjectivity through language [...] Through them speak other voices—some cultural and public, some emerging distorted from those aspects of private need repressed as the price for attaining a public subjectivity in language. An author is not a perfect ego but a mixture of public and private, conscious and unconscious elements, insufficiently unified for use as an interpretive base.'⁴⁷ Thus, interpretation cannot exist out of ideology, but together with ideology can 'explore and exploit the gap between representation and responsibility.'⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 1994, p. 43.

⁴⁶ There remains, of course, the possibility of speaking about a hegemonic ideology (in Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's sense) in political terms (such as global capitalism). This, however, would lead this discussion very far from its original goals and purposes even if such discussions are central in the contemporary art scene these days.

⁴⁷ Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven and London, 1982, p. 14.

⁴⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 421.

To come back to Phillips' text, he convincingly argues for a reconsideration of photography in the face of modernist museum practice, which has tried 'to portray photography as the legitimate (albeit eccentric) off-spring of the Western pictorial tradition and to demonstrate that it was born with an inherent "pictorial syntax" that forced originality (and modernism) upon it'.⁴⁹ The integration of photography, which is originally an 'industrial simulacrum',⁵⁰ happened in such a gradual and unquestioned way that photographic images became the museum's 'natural and special object of study'⁵¹ and display without any theoretical or practical opposition. (This reached such a point that – primarily historical – photographic exhibitions are the most popular shows in museums with record visitor attendance.) As Phillips points it out, the authority with which the museum assimilated photography is in diametrical opposition to Benjamin's theory of aura and its related territories of generally old fashioned art historical categories such as connoisseurship, originality, reproducibility and authorship.

In Phillips' terminology, the 'museum' may refer both to an institutional category and also specifically to The Museum of Modern Art in New York and its Department of Photography (with John Szarkowski as its then head), whose activity in the domain of photography marked the ways and possibilities in which photography became institutionalised.⁵² On his turn, Douglas Crimp notes that MoMA's Department of Photography was 'the first such department in any art museum', and takes its seminal activity as a starting point for further critical comments on the ambivalence of photography's position within the museum.⁵³ For Crimp, one of Szarkowski's distinctions is a telling example not only for the position of

⁴⁹ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 62. Here Phillips refers to MoMA curator Peter Galassi's exhibition and catalogue *Before Photography* from 1981.

⁵⁰ Phillips refers here to Jean Baudrillard's term and the related theory that the French philosopher developed in his *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1976, pp. 85–88) among others, in Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 27.

⁵¹ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 28.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Crimp, 'The Museum's Old', op. cit., p. 68.

photography within existing artistic and picture making practices, but also for its intertwined relationship with the reception of these images. Crimp quotes Szarkowski, 'The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process—a process based not on synthesis but on selection [...] Paintings were *made* ... but photographs, as the man on the street puts it, were *taken*.'⁵⁴ The way in which Szarkowski (and Ansel Adams among others⁵⁵) differentiates between making and taking only underlies the recurrent need for photography's reconsideration as art, thus instead of dealing with its dual, or ambivalent character, it adds to its confused and often unproductive aesthetic reception. When Crimp compares the artistic legacy of such emblematic artists of the 20th century as Picasso and Duchamp, and examines how these legacies exercised an influence on the artists of 1970s, he arrives at the dichotomy of making and taking, 'the readymades propose that the artist cannot *make*, but can only *take* what is already there.'⁵⁶ Thus Crimp's usage of this dual metaphor is justified by a larger aesthetic field than that of photography.

Photography's comparison with painting may happen in various forms and on different levels, yet painting's art historical vocabulary is often borrowed in analyses of photographs. The reason for this is not exclusively motivated by the art market's pressure on photography to produce unique objects that resemble 'art', but by the implicit assumption that the pictures produced by these two mediums are similar enough to allow the extension of that vocabulary to even non-artistic images. It is quite revealing to observe how even critics working exclusively with photography apply this vocabulary, such as is the case with Ben Lifson, then critic of the popular New York weekly *Village Voice*, who claimed that 19th-century photographers such as Le Gray, 'had sketching on his mind [...] Watching him discover how a camera sketches the world differently from a brush is to watch him come to grips with his medium [...] to come to see in ways we might call abstract but which he just called

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 71, original italics. Solomon-Godeau also mentions this phrasing ('taking an image') as an instance of the historically established, aggressive vocabulary of photography and its implications in her 'Who Is Speaking Thus?', op. cit., p. 181.

⁵⁵ Crimp quotes Ansel Adams' views on this difference in 'The Museum's Old', op. cit., p. 71.

⁵⁶ Crimp, 'The Museum's Old', op. cit., p. 71 (original italics).

photographic.⁵⁷ One can easily oppose this description of Le Gray's working procedure with exactly what Abigail Solomon-Godeau raises in the discussion with Lifson, that the usage of the *metaphor* of sketching blurs precisely those features that distinguish the two mediums in terms of originality. Solomon-Godeau's argument echoes Szarkowski's as well as Crimp's above-mentioned observation, 'I don't believe that one sketches with a camera, no matter how minimal or reductive the image—I think one *takes* pictures with a camera.'⁵⁸ Yet it is Lifson, who himself introduced the idea of sketching with a camera, who later on in the discussion opposes the false and unproductive comparison between photography and painting.⁵⁹

The dichotomy of the artistic images and the utilitarian usages of photography also appears in Phillips's essay as one of the implicit foundations of MoMA's Department of Photography and the authority the museum had started to build, since its foundation, with a series of over-extensive exhibitions, ambitious scholarly catalogues and art historical connoisseurship. Phillips formulates this dichotomy with a kind of figurative language where the metonymy 'Moholy-Nagy' is meant to stand for a more expanded understanding of 'fotokunst' [sic!], while Stieglitz becomes equivalent with his promotion of 'kunstfotografie' [sic!].⁶⁰ With the 100th anniversary exhibition of photography at MoMA, *Photography: 1839–1937*, its curator, Beaumont Newhall, displayed a disinterest 'in the old question of photography's status among the fine arts.'⁶¹ Yet even if Newhall seems to have managed to avoid this dichotomy by refusing 'to make the expected pronouncement on photography's place among the fine arts,'⁶² his categorisation is, from my perspective, no less problematic with its technocratic approach, where the exhibited items were 'grouped according to technical processes (daguerreotypy, calotypy, wet-plate, and dry-plate periods) and their present-day applications

⁵⁷ Lifson and Solomon-Godeau, 'Photophilia', op. cit., p. 105.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 106 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹ Lifson and Solomon-Godeau, 'Photophilia', op. cit., p. 109.

⁶⁰ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., pp. 32–33.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 32. Beaumont Newhall was not only MoMA's first appointed curator of photography, but also the first such curator in any art museum. See Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 35.

⁶² Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 33.

(press photography, infra-red and X-ray photography, astronomical photography, “creative” photography).⁶³ This mixing of criteria and approaches does not, in my view, solve the problem of categorisation, but rather prolongs it without allowing its critical reconsideration. Moreover, it does not provide any new typology or taxonomy for photographic images where the dichotomy between art and vernacular image production could be productively and consistently resolved (or at least, exposed). In addition, or even prior to these arguments, the exhibition was on display in an art museum that – even if only implicitly – framed the reception of the photographs as images that have at least something to do with art and aesthetics.

When dealing with the dichotomy of aesthetics and the instrumental usages of photography, the impact of MoMA cannot be under emphasised, since the ways in which photography ended up being integrated into the art museum was intellectually a parallel endeavour to the creation of a then new discourse on art. It is in this sense that we can compare Newhall’s standpoint within photography with Alfred Barr’s approach to modern art that, for Phillips, is perhaps best represented by his famous chart, on which Barr set up a web of influences among the artistic trends and tendencies of the 19th and 20th centuries. As Phillips points it out, according to the chart, ‘the various “currents” of modern painting depended on an admittedly formalist supposition: the existence of a self-enclosed, self referential field of purely aesthetic factors, untouched by the influence of any larger social or historical forces.’⁶⁴ Thus the question, ‘How were these aesthetic factors to be isolated?’⁶⁵ automatically follows, assuming that this isolation is indeed possible. Newhall’s answer to this question, as Phillips sums it up, lies in his technical understanding of the medium, including an historical understanding of successive ‘technical innovations’ that are taken independently ‘of developments in [...] graphic arts or painting.’⁶⁶ Newhall’s almost technocratic approach is

⁶³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

then complemented by his way of discussing photographic images, which appraises them on the ground of these technical innovations' 'aesthetic consequences'.⁶⁷ Within Newhall's scheme, these became photography's intrinsic properties and the basis for any aesthetic judgement concerning the medium.

Phillips also explains how photography has never been the exclusive terrain of art history, since most photographs we encounter daily are produced – and I would add, consumed – outside of the realm of art, yet their interpretation has, from the very beginning, been based on an assumed similarity to the classical – and supposedly transparent – system of representation. On the one hand Phillips refers here to Louis Marin's comment that, in the system which 'posits: [that] "nobody is speaking"; it is reality itself that speaks.'⁶⁸ On the other hand he also makes it clear how, historically, MoMA, with its position of power with the foundation of the photography department and with a combination of authoritative standpoints (such as connoisseurship, 'the singling out of monuments', the establishment of a canon, and a historical standpoint),⁶⁹ is responsible for photography's integration into the vast area of art history, with its prevalent theories of representation (see Marin's comment). This was complemented by a vocabulary of collectors and 'print connoisseurship', with such terms as 'rarity, authenticity, and personal expression'⁷⁰ in conjunction with anchoring this vocabulary within the existing system of the fine arts by employing such categories of genre as 'landscape, portraiture, and architectural studies.'⁷¹

On top of all this, Newhall and his circle made the ultimate claim to position photographers they intended to canonise within the modernist discourse with an understanding of the artist as the source of creativity. Here, Phillips quotes Newhall again and his text accompanying

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 37.

the canonical exhibition *60 Photographs*: 'Each print is an individual personal expression.'⁷² With MoMA's successful activity, its department of photography, its curator(s) and board members, photographs became museum objects with exactly the same style of display as other multiples, thus 'they were given precisely the same status: that of objects of authorized admiration and delectation,'⁷³ without paying any attention to the circumstance of their production and previous reception.

Following Newhall's ambitions, and after Edward Steichen's somewhat interim period, the same instrumental handling of photography appears with John Szarkowski, whose curatorial and art historical contribution subscribes itself to the promotion of photography's aesthetic interpretation, at the expense of any other approach.⁷⁴ Szarkowski went further than Newhall in creating the aesthetic framework for photography; further than merely emphasising those formal qualities of the photographic image which could create the basis for its similarity with other fine art printmaking techniques (limited editions, framing and other displaying devices, etc.). Szarkowski's aesthetic, yet formalist, approach, however, insisted on those descriptive elements of the image that were otherwise available to the 'organizing logic' of an art historical analysis too ('the detail, the thing itself, time, the frame, and the vantage point,' which all meant a 'stage for a move to the iconographic level'⁷⁵ for Szarkowski), and dismissed – or even disagreed with – the possibility of adopting Greenberg's formalist standpoint on painting for photography with Greenberg's emphasis on the 'material support' of the medium. Ironically, despite these crucial differences, they both rely on T.S. Eliot's poetic theory.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 38. This success story was somehow interrupted when, in 1947, Newhall resigned from his position due to Edward Steichen's appointment as Director of Photography at MoMA. But the museological framework for photography's reception was already established by then and is still prevalent today. According to his own recollections, Steichen himself was not interested in the promotion of photography as fine art (Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 41).

⁷⁴ See the details of Szarkowski's methodological aims in Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 56.

⁷⁵ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 57.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

There is an even stronger, political facet to promoting the value of connoisseurship on the part of the museum. As Martha Rosler claims, a new genealogy of documentary photography was established precisely by Szarkowski when, describing the work of the ‘new documentarians’ (Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander), he emphasised the personal quality of their images as opposed to earlier, more socially concerned approaches, such as that of Walker Evans and particularly that of Robert Frank. These latter artists, as Szarkowski notes, ‘made their pictures in the service of a social cause ... to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right.’⁷⁷ As for the newer generation of documentarians, ‘what they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.’⁷⁸ For Rosler, Szarkowski’s views are hardly acceptable, given the circumstances in which they were formulated; Szarkowski’s text was written in 1967, and, as Rosler points out, ‘in an America already several years into the “terrors” and disruptions of the Vietnam War. He [Szarkowski] makes a poor argument for the value of disengagement from a “social cause” and in favor of connoisseurship of the tawdry.’⁷⁹ Within this particular political context, I can only admire Rosler for refraining from a sarcastic tone in her judgement of Szarkowski’s conservative, museological position, although she voices her reservations *vis-à-vis* the problematic aspects of seeing artists as looking at the world from ‘elevated vantage points’ and picking out society’s ‘frailties’ and ‘imperfections’.⁸⁰

As a general judgement on this museological position Phillips concludes, ‘The dual sentence spelled out here—the formal isolation and cultural legitimation of the “great undifferentiated whole” of photography—is the disquieting message handed down from the museum’s

⁷⁷ Rosler, ‘In, Around, and Afterthoughts’, op. cit., p. 189. Later on Rosler highlights the fact that for Szarkowski, the real forerunners of these subjective documentarians are the ‘bohemian photographers like Brassai and the early Kertész and Cartier-Bresson’ (Rosler, ‘In, Around, and Afterthoughts’, op. cit., p. 190).

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 189.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

judgement seat.⁸¹ All this, of course, seems to be problematic *vis-à-vis* the museum's privileged role in producing not just a pictorial, but also a discursive canon; the latter, in its turn, becoming the source of a further blurring of critical ideas, and the site of further unquestionable authoritative intellectual and financial power.⁸²

It is not so much a critique of the museum's position of power that is important in this context, but rather the way in which the interpretation of photography has been related to that of the visual arts as a pictorial representational mode, and also what is at stake with the maintenance of this relation. Why is a certain category of photography so willing to give up power in favour of guarding its fragile and highly questionable autonomy?⁸³ And why do certain theoreticians support this endeavour? These seem to be rhetorical questions in the face of *October's* editorial policy, but not within a more general framework of possible theoretical approaches to photography.

The institutional questions that Phillips raises have a strong resonance with Tagg's classification of photographic images. According to Tagg, the origins of the current taxonomy of photographic images date back to the time when, approximately a hundred years ago, the most influential technical revolution of photography took place.⁸⁴ The invention of the portable Kodak camera and the film roll made photography accessible to a vast number of people with no training or aesthetic inclination and possible for them to become so-to-say picture producing beings. According to Tagg, it is since then that the two categories of photography have existed together with the efforts of a certain group of photographers to

⁸¹ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit, p. 63. Phillips quotes here Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye*. The same question of isolation is raised by Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts', op. cit., p. 188.

⁸² Rosler also points out the museum's problematic relationship to the cultural legitimacy of the documentary when photographs are interpreted within a generalised, and thus eternalised, framework of the dealings with the 'human condition' (Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts', op. cit. p. 195).

⁸³ A similar question is formulated by Rosler in 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts', op. cit., p. 187. Rosler employs the word 'protectiveness' in describing photographers' attitude *vis-à-vis* the position of their own work within the visual and aesthetic realm.

⁸⁴ John Tagg, 'A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law', p. 66, in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Macmillan, London, 1988, pp. 66–102.

promote an aesthetic discourse on photography, thus trying to preserve this category's relatively autonomous status as art.

To the second group belong those images that, on the one hand, can be related to the modern institutions of knowledge, images that function as tools in storing data and which are used as proofs by various scientific, technical, medical, legal and political apparatuses.⁸⁵ On the other hand, we find images of the more expansive and less autonomous provenance, such as advertisements and images produced and consumed by the basic unity of consumption, the family. Thus, according to Tagg, photographic practice can be divided into the realm of art, whose privilege is a function of the lack of power, and the scientifico-technical domain whose power is a function of the renouncement of privilege.⁸⁶ This categorisation by Tagg is based on Althusser's ideological theory and Foucault's critique of power, and manages to avoid classification along the lines of the intention of both the producer of the image, as well as its user.

Interestingly enough and quite exceptionally, another categorisation appears in a later issue of *October*, in which Krauss takes on Bourdieu's analysis of photographic images.⁸⁷ Bourdieu suggests that there is no legitimation whatsoever for privileging the aesthetic discourse on photography rather than any other discourses. Photography's immense popularity is due to its social function, and aesthetic categories are simply not compatible with this. Yet Krauss never seems to apply this approach, which is very difficult to explain even in the face of her theoretical position.

For the relationship between artistic work and critical practice, Krauss raises the particularity of certain artistic practices of the 1970s and 80s when she analyses Cindy Sherman's work

⁸⁵ Tagg, 'A Means of Surveillance', op. cit., p. 66.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁸⁷ Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit.

as a means of practicing criticism itself.⁸⁸ She departs from Bourdieu's claim according to which '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 judgement is not about value but about identity'.⁸⁹ Thus the formalist-aesthetic approach to photography is not more legitimate than any other approach. Similarly to Bourdieu, Krauss claims that photography's immense popularity can be explained exactly by its social function. The photograph 'is an agent in the collective fantasy' of a given social unit's cohesion, which is produced as a tautological proof of its own unity. As Bourdieu formulates it: 'Photography itself [...] is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration.'⁹⁰ Therefore, a critical discourse on photography is incommensurable with such traditional aesthetic categories as originality, singularity, expressiveness, etc.⁹¹

When photography aims at deconstructing 'the possibility of differentiating between the original and the copy', it does so through stereotypes,⁹² such as in the work of Cindy Sherman. Her '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.'⁹³ Moreover, Sherman's images bear another, more important and more profound consequence: the fact that she 'is both subject and object' of her images 'functions as a refusal to understand the artist as a source of originality,'⁹⁴ which is one of the basic premises of Western art. This artistic strategy is in opposition to what has been prevalent within the photographic field, namely the dichotomy of artistic and documentary images. For Sekula, this dichotomy is epitomised by the polarity between Stieglitz and Hines, and for Crimp, between Picasso and Duchamp, and the ways in which subjectivity (and its

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1965, p. 48. Quoted by Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit., p. 56 (original italics).

⁹¹ Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit., p. 58.

⁹² Ibid., p. 59.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

artistic product, originality) becomes foundational for such modernists as Ansel Adams or Szarkowski.⁹⁵

By introducing the notion of the simulacrum as a means of discussing the anti-originality tendency, Krauss makes use of it in designating the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and fantasy, between the actual and the simulated.⁹⁶ Photographic images, therefore, are not copies of reality, but products of the 'reality effect' created by simulation and signs, and it is exactly by this token that photographic images are capable of deconstructing 'the whole concept of the uniqueness of the art object, the originality of its author, the coherence of the oeuvre [...] and the individuality of so-called self-expression.'⁹⁷ It is on this basis that Krauss revises Bourdieu's claim, that photography has no discourse of its own (although Bourdieu has never said that). According to Krauss, 'there is a discourse proper to photography; only [...] it is not an aesthetic discourse. It is a project of deconstruction in which art is distanced and separated from itself [...]. Thus Sherman's 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 in 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.'⁹⁸ To this I would like to add that with her pictures Sherman doesn't reproduce the existing social relation, but by using her own body and employing 'techniques of patriarchal panopticism,'⁹⁹ she creates a gap – a kind of a 'suture' – between the 'original' film and her image. When spectators are confronted with this gap or suture, they mobilise their knowledge in order to handle it, so they get an opportunity to look at the stereotypical within these representations.

⁹⁵ See Crimp, 'On the Museum's Old', op. cit., p. 72.

⁹⁶ Krauss, 'A Note on Photography', op. cit., p. 62.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

⁹⁹ Tania Modleski, 'Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or The Scandal of the Mute Body', p. 6, *October* 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–24.

This genealogy of photography's dichotomy between art and the documentary that I have outlined here looks seamless if for nothing else but the maintenance of this dichotomy through changing historical, political, social and aesthetic circumstances. But there is another area that needs to be addressed within the context of the institutionalisation of photography. This is related to a specific, somewhat blurred territory of instrumental usage which appears in the conjunction with the museum's display practice and design, advertising, mass culture and avant-garde artistic movements. This question has been raised not only by Christopher Phillips, but other important art historians, as well, such as Benjamin Buchloh, who, in one of his most famous essays, analyses the ways in which Russian avant-garde art and exhibition display design was used and recycled with diametrically opposing ideological and propaganda aims in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and later in the 1930s under different historical circumstances.¹⁰⁰ Solomon-Godeau also raises the need for an historical understanding of the instrumentality of documentary, and she perceives this as a result of its 'altered ideological parameters'.¹⁰¹

The application of photography within these frameworks has in part to do with a general usage of photography in the context of the museum. Phillips mentions here Beaumont Newhall's resignation and Edward Steichen's appointment as Director of Photography at MoMA. Comparing the two experts' approaches to exhibition making, Newhall's resignation probably due to the fact that Steichen's main interest was not the promotion of photography as art and as a museum object, but in exploiting the potentials of the medium to convey politicised 'messages' to the audiences, and disregarding those – 'aesthetic' – aspects of the photographic image which, for Newhall, turned it into an artwork. Thus in Steichen's display,

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October* 20 (Fall 1984), pp. 82–119. It is interesting to note that both Phillips' and Buchloh's articles were reprinted in an important collection of essays that aimed at assembling critical texts about photography. See Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1989.

¹⁰¹ Solomon-Godeau, 'Who Is Speaking Thus?', op. cit., p. 176.

the photograph was enlarged, cropped, directly mounted on the wall, and so on, in the same way in which it is used in non-artistic practices, such as in advertising or in non-art museums – where the photograph functions as a source of additional visual information but not as an autonomous and unique object of contemplation.¹⁰²

On the other hand, this blurred territory is also related to the political climate of the 1920s and 30s, and specifically to the ways in which this usage (i.e. that of Steichen) was intended to be mobilised as a tool against Nazism and Fascism. This claim is a central element in Walter Benjamin's activity, and, more concretely, one of the focal points of his 'Work of Art' essay. Yet, as Phillips remarks, the avant-garde project of the 1920s was subsequently 'abused' not only before the end of World War II, but also after the victory of the allied forces when, with the installation design devised by an ex-Bauhaus member, Herbert Bayer, Steichen realised a powerful exhibition titled *Road to Victory*¹⁰³ in which he included those images of 'quasi-documentary reportage'¹⁰⁴ which he had collected during his service in the War.

In the case of these quasi-documentary images, the production of a 'visual narrative'¹⁰⁵ and the ideology that informs the display are more apparent than in the curatorially organised displays of photographs as artworks. For Phillips, this museological dichotomy of photographs can be summed up as follows, '[...] the underlying premise at work is that of the ultimate availability and duplicability of photographs [...] not reappropriated and domesticated in a later and very different set of circumstances. To prise photographs from their original contexts, to discard or alter their captions, to recrop their borders in the enforcement of a unitary meaning, to reprint them for dramatic impact, to redistribute them in new narrative

¹⁰² Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., pp. 43–45.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 43. Bayer left Germany in 1938.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 43. The introduction of this term 'quasi-documentary reportage' on my part further complicates and nuances of the basic dichotomy of art and the documentary, yet it is important to stress this distinction.

¹⁰⁵ Phillips, 'The Judgement Seat', op. cit., p. 45.

chains consistent with a predetermined thesis – thus one might roughly summarize Steichen’s operating procedure.¹⁰⁶ All this was meant to attract a wider audience for MoMA’s exhibitions, which were otherwise considered elitist, partly as the result of the activities of such curators as Beaumont Newhall.

On top of all this, Steichen’s (and MoMA’s) exhibitions were meant to travel to venues all over the United States, sometimes even simultaneously all over the world, thus repeating the distribution of mass-produced picture magazines and Hollywood films. It is in the conjunction of mass culture and the questionable standing of photography’s autonomous status that one can think of the ways in which institutions (magazines and museums) become – as Allan Sekula says – ‘monumental framing devices’, or – as Phillips designates it – ‘orchestrator[s] of meaning’.¹⁰⁷ And it is in this sense that David Levi Strauss’ comments on the anonymity of the photographer and the framing potentials of such news media as *Newsweek*. One can, however, encounter a huge difference between magazines and museum that Phillips entirely dismisses, i.e. the presence/absence of extensive textual materials, and advertisements. No matter how frivolous the exhibited pictures are, both modify largely the contextual reception of the images, as David Levi Strauss has demonstrated.¹⁰⁸

When dealing with the dichotomy of aesthetics and the documentary, the artist and writer Martha Rosler offers a unique and very productive position for viewing the products of an expanded field of photographic practices. Instead of looking at photographs in the framework of this binary opposition, she proposes ‘a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning [...] their interpenetration.’¹⁰⁹ Rosler makes her standpoint clear beyond doubt when making a statement about her understanding of this dialectical relation, ‘I would argue

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰⁸ John Szarkowski, who was Steichen’s successor in the position of Director of Photography at MoMA in 1962, followed Newhall’s line and curatorial principles. Szarkowski’s activity was also a reaction to Steichen’s institutional heritage, which may count as an important standpoint *vis-à-vis* mass culture.

¹⁰⁹ Rosler, ‘In, Around, and Afterthoughts’, op. cit., p. 186.

against the possibility of a nonideological aesthetic; any response to an image is inevitably rooted in social knowledge – specifically, in social understanding of cultural products.’¹¹⁰

From the vantage point of my contemporary position, it is interesting to observe that despite all the theoretical efforts that have been made in favour of the foundation of a new discourse on photography, recently traditionalist ideas and approaches have managed to creep back into the discussion – with all sorts of pretexts and subtexts that are engaged to legitimise them either consciously or as side effects. An example of this is an article by Sarah James, which is important to mention for two reasons. One is because of her critical stance *vis-à-vis* the ways in which photographic theory was established by *October*, and more specifically by Krauss, with her insistence on the index as a central theoretical tool within the framework of her – as James claims – ‘structuralist’ approach to photography. The other reason is that even if, from a chronological standpoint, James’ article falls out of the scope of my discussion, it aptly demonstrates the fact that most of the fundamental theoretical questions of photography have not ceased to exist in spite of all the literature written on the topic and in spite of photography’s immense popularity (which is probably due to the maintenance of photography’s basic myths and the lack of adequate critical debates around them).

James’ text starts with a provoking sexual metaphor for photography. James uses ‘a well-recycled quotation from 1969’ which Jean-Louis Bourgeois created as a metaphor for ‘the public’s popular reaction to photography exhibitions: ‘Going to a gallery and finding “only” photography is a little like going to a whorehouse and finding only pornography. You feel gypped.’ The meaning and purpose of this anecdotal citation seems to be clear enough, but James continues and expands the metaphor for our contemporary situation, ‘Today’s galleries must be veritable empires of porn and masters of dupe, so ubiquitous is the photograph within our art institutions’ walls. Yet today the gallery-going public is more

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

comfortable with the photograph – and its artistic status – than it has ever been.¹¹¹ To reflect on the ways in which art institutions are obliged to function these days when facing their financial supporters' demand for ever increasing visitor numbers would divert my discussion in another direction. Yet it is interesting to note within the frameworks of this chapter to what extent exhibitions of photography have reached a level of popularity among the visitors; art institutions often display these exhibitions in order to ameliorate their statistics, thus justifying their financial needs with the public's attendance.

In her article, James formulates a recurring discontentment with the state of critical engagement with photography, but unlike many theorists who argue for a reconsideration of these theoretical methods on various grounds and on behalf of visual culture or cultural studies, James reclaims an aesthetic approach 'to the photographic medium', as she calls it.¹¹² Besides lamenting the over-theorisation of the relationship between painting and photography as passé, James also condemns the appearance of a new genre of 'monumental photography' which 'has led to a theoretical engagement with photography's new proximity to the traditional arts, specifically with painting.'¹¹³ Here she refers to such theoreticians as the formalist 'Michael Fried and his detractors ([Diarmuid] Costello included),'¹¹⁴ but she considers these discussions boring, unproductive, and passé. Within this present context, this demonstrates the fact that even today – in spite of the time when *October* actively took part in discussions on photography – there is very little new theory available in the field of photography that is able to detach itself from the traditional pictorial tradition and its preference for artistic imagery.

¹¹¹ Sarah James, 'What Can We Do with Photography', *Art Monthly*, December–January, 2007–2008, pp. 1–4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* James finds Costello's ideas on photography relevant from a philosophical point of view, though.

The article also condemns what James takes as a semiotic approach to photography, although her vision has practically nothing to do with a poststructuralist and interdisciplinary 'theory of signs'. James intends to go back to such concepts as style or mimesis, even at the expense of simplifying and misreading poststructuralist theories of representation and textuality. It is worth quoting her at great length in order to more clearly illustrate her position, 'What I want to do here has a lot to do with aesthetics. If we establish the necessity of leaving behind the tautological linguistic and textual analysis of photography – properly, once and for all – then instead of seeing the medium of photography in all of the ways it negates traditional aesthetics, we can see it in all of the ways that it transforms them. Photography is to do with aesthetics. We do experience photography aesthetically. Photographic artists do engage in the medium aesthetically.'¹¹⁵ In my view, James' authoritative voice and seemingly unquestionable position hides the fact that within her vocabulary the notion of the aesthetic remains undefined and unclear, almost to the point where it becomes synonymous, or even equal, with the visual. Yet the question of establishing a new discourse for photography is left without an adequate answer. It is in no way enough to do lip service and talk of 'the inherently dialectic nature of photography'¹¹⁶; it is equally important to describe what this dialectic is comprised of.

The – half-heartedly – hinted at target of James' criticism seems to be *October* and some other structuralist approaches to photography with which she implies to argue in favour of mimesis as it appears in Adorno's theory. From my poststructuralist perspective, James' maintenance of such binary oppositions as, for example, the real and its representation, subjectivity and objectivity, photographer and spectator, the original and imitation, blurs the fact that the legacy of the Frankfurt School needs a historically embedded reception similarly to the reading of those photographic works which James intends to rescue from the allegedly 'ahistorical' semiotic interpretation. In my view, James fails to fulfil her aim of contributing to

¹¹⁵ James, 'What Can We Do with Photography', op. cit., p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

the creation of a new discourse for photography, as some vague interpretations of individual bodies of interesting photographic works are not really enough to do this. At the very end of the article she claims, '... perhaps most importantly [...] we can start to rethink documentary photography – still one of the most dominant forms of contemporary practice – and its crucial and mislaid attachment to the real.'¹¹⁷ Since James also fails to explain this in detail, it is difficult to imagine in what ways she considers photography's relation to the real 'mislaid' and how exactly she envisages this reconsideration of the relationship of pictorial representations 'to the real' outside of framework of the semiotic approach that she so vehemently and categorically opposes.¹¹⁸

Photography's immense popularity has prevailed for many decades, to the extent that has it ended up being institutionalised as a pictorial representational genre in its own right, unlike many other genres in the realm of the visual arts. The theories – whether aesthetic or 'non'-aesthetic – that have been conceived to support or critically assess photographic image production are numerous, yet they do not seem to be able to put forward a radically new and truly interdisciplinary approach. In the rare cases when they are capable of mobilising an interdisciplinary interpretive framework, they do not strive to establishing a 'theory' but content themselves with the analysis of a given set of images without the desire for a foundation of a theoretical stance. It may very well be possible that such a theory should be considered as part of some newer disciplines, such as visual culture. The final chapter deals with possible avenues of research into the conjunction of photography and new disciplinary models.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹⁸ See more on the potentials and critique of the semiotic approach in Chapter 3.1 on Krauss' 'Index' essay.

CONCLUSION/VISUAL CULTURE QUESTIONNAIRE

This conclusion takes an unusual form inasmuch as it could also function as a chapter of its own. My reason for merging these two purposes, i.e. the function of a separate chapter and a conclusion, is quite simple. In 1996, *October* published a 'Questionnaire' on the then new discipline of visual culture¹ which, by the mere fact of its publication, made *October's* standpoint – both symbolically and very concretely – explicit when it came to theoretical and political discussions of knowledge production and its institutional framework. The questions formulated by the editors retrospectively interpret *October's* fundamentally modernist heritage on the one hand, and the journal's relationship and commitment to semiotics and to a new understanding of art and art history within a larger framework of structuralism and/or poststructuralism on the other. It seems to me that *October's* initial interest in the promotion of the *photographic* is reframed by the theoretical standpoint and the rhetorics of the 'Questionnaire'.

In conjunction with the analysis of the 'Questionnaire', it is perhaps equally important to pose a set of questions that address *October's* intellectual and institutional trajectory. Has there ever been a truly structuralist period in art history, let alone in *October*? Who would be the structuralist art historians? In his book *Cultural Theory*, Philip Smith places the beginning of structuralism in the 1950s.² In the arts and in art history that was the peak of modernist criticism and Greenberg's intellectual and organisational power. Can Krauss be considered as a structuralist at all? In Chapter 3 and in relation to the index, I indeed interpreted her approach as a structuralist one in the sense of Lévi-Strauss and structural anthropology. The

¹ 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', in *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 25–70.

² Philip Smith, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 97.

question of who else can be considered as structuralist automatically follows, but the answer is not to be found so easily. Another territory that is worthy of being considered touches upon the relationship between poststructuralism in art history and the visual turn (i.e. the appearance and emergence of visual studies). This latter is – at least partially – addressed in this chapter-cum-conclusion.

Before I start discussing the 'Questionnaire' itself and attempt to answer these interrelated questions, I would like to put forward some other arguments which may support my choice of the 'Questionnaire' for the final chapter, some of which lead us back to the beginning of *October* and my text. One is a similarity between *Artforum* and *October*, a resemblance between their handlings of personal and intellectual disagreements. From time to time, editors and contributors such as Krauss and Michelson left *Artforum*, and a similar yet more profound schism took place when Douglas Crimp decided to resign his editorial position at *October* in 1990.³ This latter is an indicator of the fact that since its foundation, *October* has not been able to give an adequate platform to the discussion of conflicting ideas and intellectual positions. In this respect, the journal is the opposite of *Critical Inquiry*, in which debates in the form of replies and counter-replies often continue through several issues.

Coming back to the 'Questionnaire', there are four questions that the editors put forward for 'a range of art and architecture historians, film theorists, literary critics, and artists' to respond to. Besides a textual analysis of the questions and the responses with which I aim to point out some of the most symptomatic and crucial points of the discussion in the context of the previous chapters, one of the most striking characteristics of the debate is the absence of some of the most important protagonists and advocates of visual culture, such as Nicholas Mirzoeff, W.J.T. Mitchell, Irit Rogoff and Mieke Bal. This absence might be an indicator of the

³ Douglas Crimp, 'The Editors: To Our Readers', in *October* 53 (Summer 1990), pp. 110–112. Some even go so far as to claim that Tim Dean's essay 'The Psychoanalysis of AIDS' was 'commissioned' by the editors as a belated and indirect reply to Crimp's resignation. (Tim Dean, 'The Psychoanalysis of AIDS', *October* 63 (Winter 1993), pp. 83–116.

possibility that the editorial questions are indirectly addressed to the understanding of visual culture these theorists advocate, even if for them, visual culture is shorthand for a large field, or 'strategy' with conflicting ideas, tools and approaches.⁴ In this respect, it is interesting to compare two key texts that both bear the title 'What is Visual Culture?' by Mitchell and Mirzoeff respectively; with this suggestive title they both aim at defining the parameters of the new discipline.⁵ They do this in a complementary manner; Mitchell is more interested in answering the question 'how', while Mirzoeff focuses on the territorial expansion of 'what'.

Coming back to Mitchell, right at the beginning of his text he notes that it was originally meant as an 'internal memo' for the Visual Culture Working Group at the University of Chicago, but later on in the text he defines it as 'a failed attempt at a manifesto', a 'working paper', a 'proposal', a 'syllabus', 'remarks', and finally a 'document'. All these designations of genres imply very different, sometimes even diametrically opposing, textual and reading strategies, which indeed defines the 'slippery' and hybrid character of the text itself. On top of a detailed analysis of Panofsky's essay 'The History of Art as a Humanist Discipline' (1940), we can also find elements of a curriculum and pedagogical principles, and even a list of keywords in the field. The fact that Mitchell pays so much attention to Panofsky may be justified by the fact that the essay was published in a volume commemorating/celebrating the 100th anniversary of Panofsky's birth, but it does not explain his intellectual commitment to Neoplatonist philosophy and Panofskian art history as foundational traditions within the framework of visual culture. To a certain extent and in an implicit way, Mitchell clarifies the hybridity of his essay when he mentions the deep disagreements among members of the working group. Interestingly enough, the most crucial of these resulted in an understanding of semiotics as the most important foundational disciplines in visual culture; as opposed to

⁴ It is Irit Rogoff who employs the term 'strategy' to describe the project of visual culture. See Irit Rogoff, 'Studying Visual Culture', in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998 (1st edition), pp. 14–26.

⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What is Visual Culture?', in Irving Lavin (ed.), *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside: A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1995, pp. 207–217. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Introduction: What is Visual Culture?', in Mirzoeff (ed.), *Visual Culture Reader*, op. cit., pp. 3–13.

this, the group preferred the notion of *visual experience* as the most appropriate and acceptable starting point.

In his turn, Mirzoeff's text is just one of the many (in the first edition three, in the second, six) introductory essays and conversations in the seminal volume of which he himself served as editor,⁶ and in that sense his essay is framed by all the other texts in the book. This also underlines one of the major features of visual culture, its 'tactical' (Mirzoeff) potentials for diversity. In order to answer the implicit question of 'how visual culture should proceed with its workings,' Mirzoeff first mentions Heidegger's term 'world picture', and then goes on to another, 'visualizing', and later comes to the notion of the 'sublime', claiming that there have been considerable shifts in the history of these terms' meanings, so they cannot adequately be used in the analysis of the changed and changing situation.⁷ It is precisely due to the existing 'gap between the wealth of *visual experience* in contemporary culture and the ability to analyze that observation marks both the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study.'⁸ One of Mirzoeff's most crucial remarks addresses the institutional framing of visual experience; he notes that most of this experience reaches us 'aside from [...] *formally structured moments of looking*.'⁹ In my view, one of the most innovative aspirations of visual culture lies exactly in its attempt to address these instances and to propose 'formally structured' discursive frameworks in order to analyse them. In this respect, Mitchell envisages the institutional parameters of visual culture differently from Mirzoeff; for Mitchell, these parameters are already there and given along the lines of university departments, syllabuses, and structures. In his turn and contrary to Mitchell, Mirzoeff believes that the answer to the contemporary crisis of visibility must be addressed outside of these structures, and 'rather than simply create new degrees in the old structures of the liberal arts canon, let

⁶ These include essays by Irit Rogoff and W.J.T. Mitchell.

⁷ Mirzoeff, 'What is Visual Culture?' (1998), op. cit., p. 8.

⁸ Ibid., p. 3 (emphasis added).

⁹ Ibid., p. 7 (emphasis added).

us try to create ways of doing postdisciplinary work.¹⁰ It is, indeed, a political question to leave the old, 'territorialized' and 'compartmentalized' structure of knowledge behind, instead of 'redrawing them along another set of lines.'¹¹

The notion of visual experience, however, is an element that recurs in both Mitchell's and Mirzoeff's texts, yet neither of them feels the necessity to define precisely in what ways and with what kind of meaning they employ the term, whether they attribute more to it than a mere emotional/cognitive reflection of the world and its events/happenings in human consciousness (although for some, experience taken in this sense is contrasted 'with the kinds of consciousness involved in reasoning and conscious experiment'¹²). In Mitchell's essay, visual experience is juxtaposed with, or even opposed to, semiotics, suggesting their mutual exclusivity. Indeed, working with visuality starts with a simple experience of encountering, or becoming aware of a visual phenomenon (very often a cultural product, such as a work of art),¹³ yet even Peirce thought it was more than passive perception, as the everyday usage of the word would suggest.

There is an interesting recurrence of one of the most fundamental topoi of the American way of life in Mirzoeff that strangely echoes the same experience recalled by Michael Fried some thirty years prior to Mirzoeff's text. Both texts touch upon the question of visual experience in the face of an understanding of what art and culture respectively consist of. As Mirzoeff sums up the experience, 'Consider a driver on a typical North American highway. The progress of the vehicle is dependent on a series of visual judgements made by the driver concerning the relative speed of other vehicles, and many maneuvers necessary to complete the journey. At the same time, he or she is bombarded with other information: traffic lights, road signs, turn

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹ Mirzoeff quotes here and refers to Irit Rogoff, 'What is Visual Culture?' (1998), op. cit., p. 11.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 1983 (revised edition), p. 127.

¹³ It is interesting to note that Raymond Williams connects experience with innocence as opposing terms, which seems to have a relevance for the famous art historical topos the 'innocent eye'. See more on that in Chapter 1.

signals, advertising hoardings, petrol prices, shop signs, local time and temperature, and so on. Yet most people consider the process so routine that they play music to keep from getting bored. Even music videos, which saturate the visual field with distractions and come with a soundtrack, now have to be embellished by textual pop-ups.¹⁴

In his turn, Fried refers to the sculptor Tony Smith, and his description of a car ride the artist had taken one night. 'When I [Tony Smith] was teaching at Cooper Union [...] someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove [...] to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing *experience*. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art [...] There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.'¹⁵ The multifaceted character of the experience even from a historical perspective not only allows us, readers, to muse about the ways in which this experience is culturally and visually constructed, but also on its relationship to art, and, in a broader sense, on a theoretical understanding of visual culture's instrumentality as an academic discipline. In my view, it is exactly these blurred and ambiguous territories where visual culture is able to establish productive strategies of interpretation.

Coming back to a semiotic approach to the notion of experience, and in a Peircian vein, an experience is more than just an instantaneous event between an individual and the world. It is a process, a constant exchange between a subject and the world. In her book on semiotics and cinema, Teresa de Lauretis dedicates a whole chapter to the relationship between

¹⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'What is Visual Culture?', p. 5, in Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, pp. 1–32.

¹⁵ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', pp. 130–131, in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc, New York, 1968, pp. 116–147 (emphasis added).

semiotics and experience in the face of recent film theories.¹⁶ According to her, experience is not just something ‘individualistic, idiosyncratic’, and particular, ‘but rather [...] a *process* by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective [...] those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical.’¹⁷ Thus experience ‘is the effect of [...] interaction’ with the world, and ‘is produced [...] by one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world.’¹⁸ This semiotic understanding of the construction of human subjectivity is interlinked with a semiotic construction of ‘social reality’, and it is for this reason that de Lauretis employs the Peircian term ‘semiosis’ to name ‘the process of their reciprocally constitutive effects.’¹⁹

The theory that de Lauretis outlines in her book is, on the one hand, based on a critique of current semiotic and film theories (e.g. that of Umberto Eco and the journal *Screen*), and on the other an attempt at constructing a feminist theory of subject formation in the face of cinematic spectatorship. The construction of identity within the framework of this latter conjunction is also a central point in the vast literature on Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, to which *October* contributed by publishing Giuliana Bruno’s essay on the film.²⁰ Such an approach to mass culture may be the result of postmodernism’s powerful academic positioning in the sense that brings it the closest to the project of visual culture, namely that for many, postmodernism became synonymous with an ‘engagement of mass culture by critical art and theory.’²¹ In her essay Bruno also underlines the almost overwhelmingly visual

¹⁶ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington, 1984, pp. 158–186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159 (original italics).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁰ Giuliana Bruno, ‘Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*’, in *October* 41 (Summer 1987), pp. 61–74.

²¹ See Helen Molesworth’s reply to the ‘Visual Culture Questionnaire’, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

character not only of the film, but of contemporary culture in general, by quoting a relevant passage from Paolo Portoghesi, 'Postmodern in architecture can be generally read as the re-emerging of the archetypes and the reintegrations of the architectural conventions and thus as the premise for the creation of an architecture of communication, an architecture of the visual, for a *culture of the visual*.'²² In her analysis, Bruno relies on Jameson's two key notions, schizophrenia and pastiche,²³ but she goes further and places them in a spatio-temporal matrix as 'schizophrenic temporality and [...] spatial pastiche.'²⁴ Similarly to the schizophrenic, the replicants live in a continuous present without a conceivable past or future, therefore 'they are denied a personal identity, since they cannot name their "I" as an existence over time.'²⁵

One way they attempt to secure an identity, though, is the replicants' constant referring to *photographic images* from their 'past', as a token (or proof) to extend their existence beyond the momentary present. The other token, which could anchor them in the past and provide them with both an identity and a history, is the figure of the mother. In a semiotic vein, Bruno also claims that pastiche celebrates 'the effacement of the referent in the era of post-industrialism'²⁶ which is not only a 'mechanical', one-to-one understanding of signs and meaning making, but an argument similar to Krauss' ideas on the shifter as a prominent instance of an 'empty' sign. As Bruno formulates it, 'photography is perceived as the medium in which the signifier and the referent are collapsed onto each other.'²⁷ Yet what is important here is to note the ways in which *Blade Runner* and Bruno's essays record the changing notion of a document and the construction of an identity: in postmodernism they have both become visually presented and secured.

²² Giuliana Bruno (quotes Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodern: l'Architettura nella società postindustriale*, Milan, Electa, 1982, p. 11), 'Ramble City', op. cit., p. 67 (emphasis added).

²³ See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, pp. 111–125, and also Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *New Left Review* 146, July–August 1984, pp. 53–92.

²⁴ Giuliana Bruno, 'Ramble City', op. cit., p. 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

There is another example, prior to the foundation of visual culture as an academic discipline, for the establishment of a strategically interdisciplinary interpretative framework, which was published in *October*. It is probably not a coincidence that the essay is about the film *Alien*, another 'aesthetically effective mass-cultural' hit from the late 1970s.²⁸ In the text, James H. Kavanaugh mobilises a set of seemingly disparate theoretical tools (from Marxism through Lacan to Greimas) in his analysis of the network of ideologies that the film addresses. One of the most important 'achievements' of the film from a feminist perspective is the way in which the female protagonist is depicted or, rather, defined. Ripley is not only the commander of the space ship; a fact that the film itself takes for granted, but unlike an overwhelmingly large number of Hollywood films with female protagonists, her story is not turned into a love story, so her character is not defined by a relationship to a man. As de Lauretis formulates the mainstream cinematic tendency within the context of experience, 'women are also human beings, although in the symbolic order of culture they do not speak, desire, or produce meaning *for themselves*, as men do, by means of the exchange of women.'²⁹

It is also interesting to observe how Kavanaugh employs the Greimasian semantic rectangle (or semiotic square) in order to demonstrate the ideological conjunction between feminism, science and humanism within the cinematic narrative.³⁰ Within the context of this particular film as an instance of a feminist perspective, it is even more important to note that the square is capable of going beyond the customary system of binary oppositions inasmuch as the relationship between given pairs may vary from contradiction (between the furthest points of the square), to contrariety (along the horizontal axis of the points), to complementarity (along

²⁸ James H. Kavanaugh, "'Son of a Bitch": Feminism, Humanism, and Science in *Alien*', in *October* 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 91–100.

²⁹ De Lauretis, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

³⁰ Kavanaugh, 'Son of a Bitch', *op. cit.*, p. 98. Kavanaugh calls it a 'semantic rectangle', and Nöth uses the term 'semiotic square' (Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990, p. 319).

There is an attempt by Krauss to apply the semiotic square to the domain of minimalist, site-specific sculptural installation in the face of architectural interventions. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 31-44.

the vertical axis of the points). Thus in the film, the top left corner of the square (S) would be 'human' (i.e. Ripley); the top right corner (-- S) is 'antihuman' (the Alien); the bottom left corner (-- S⁻) stands for 'not-human' (Ash, the robot), and the bottom right corner (S⁻) is for 'not-antihuman' (i.e. the cat). All this means that in the film, a woman is selected to represent the human, which is a major shift from the patriarchal matrix that many feminists, including film theorists, assess with a critical approach. Kavanaugh sums it up, 'To say that *Alien* broadcasts a very sophisticated set of overwhelmingly feminist signals articulated in contradictory relation to other signals about class, and about humanism and science, opens the way to knowledge of how this film, *and* those ideological raw materials it extracts from a specific field of social discourse, operate.'³¹

As opposed to the publication of these essays for instance, *October's* explicit relationship to the new field of visual studies is best represented by the 'Questionnaire'. According to Mirzoeff, for many who are critical of the idea of visual culture as a new discipline, its most problematic aspect does not revolve around 'its emphasis in the importance of visibility' but 'its use of a cultural framework to explain the history of the visual.'³² For Mirzoeff, this was manifested in 'a widespread nervousness among art historians' *vis-à-vis* a questionably founded fear of the relativisation 'of all critical judgement'.³³ As Mirzoeff also implies, many of the replies to the 'Questionnaire' amplify the already emotional approach of the editors' questions, often in a condescending tone, such as Thomas Crow's reference to the phenomenon of the 'mass-market bookstore'.³⁴ As a counter-argument against those who fear the challenges that visual culture could bring to 'the cozy familiarity of traditional university power structures,'³⁵ Mirzoeff refers to Tom Conley's highly critical response in

³¹ Ibid., p. 99 (original italics).

³² Mirzoeff, *What is Visual Culture?* (1999), op. cit., p. 22.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 22–23. Crow's contribution to the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', op. cit., pp. 34–36.

³⁵ Mirzoeff, *What is Visual Culture?* (1999), op. cit., p. 23.

which Conley sees the usage of 'a "fraudulent" scare tactic' exactly as a challenge to his power.³⁶

As Mirzoeff also remarks, the art historians' fear is probably based on one of visual studies' 'false oppositions', the possibility or impossibility of distinguishing 'between the products of culture and those of art.'³⁷ For Mirzoeff, this is an untenable opposition that feeds the anthropological understanding of this division, but, as he perceives it, 'art is culture both in the sense of high culture and in the anthropological sense of human artifact.'³⁸ Instead of abandoning the usage of the term 'visual culture', Mirzoeff proposes to examine its relation to other usages of the notion of culture and the historical legacies of these usages. Instead of subscribing to the dichotomy between the two notions of culture (the artistic and the anthropological), Mirzoeff refers here to Stuart Hall's understanding of the term. 'Cultural practice [...] becomes a realm where one engages with and elaborates a politics.'³⁹ Within Mirzoeff's framework, culture is an area 'where people define their identity and [...] it changes in accord with the needs of individuals and communities to express that identity'⁴⁰; thus both a historical and geographical axis are in play within this structure.

There are other examples that attempt to establish the disciplinary boundaries of the field of visual culture, and aim at providing a survey of the possible theoretical approaches to the discipline. Some of these are visibly critical of the implicit approach that appears in *October's* 'Questionnaire' (Moxey, Rogoff, Bal, Mirzoeff, etc.); others simply record, or even reconcile the differences within the parameters of an introductory essay to the field, such as is the case with James D. Herbert's text, written for the second edition of the foundational volume

³⁶ See Tom Conley's contribution to the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', op. cit., pp. 31-32.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Critical Terms in Art History.⁴¹ Indeed, Herbert's essay summarises the most important claims of visual studies, and sheds light on *October's* rather obscure and undefined terminology, including their famous claim for the dematerialisation of the image, but it does so at the expense of losing visual culture's foundational dichotomies or even antagonisms, especially the ones that this relatively young field has *vis-à-vis* art history, even in its revisionist state (i.e. 'new art history'). In Herbert's case, this approach also results in an implicit and perhaps even involuntary depoliticisation of the social context of image production. For example, when he describes the origins of the World Wide Web and claims that it 'began as an esoteric electronic medium for the ostensibly disinterested transmittal of scientific information,'⁴² not only does he accept the belief in scientific disinterestedness, but dismisses the potentiality of the World Wide Web's military use and the original research that was conducted for the development of that technical facility.

To go further with Herbert's description, it is interesting – and at the same time quite telling – to see how the division between disembodied images and 'materialized' ones overlaps with the borderline between the commodified products of the cultural industries (mainstream Hollywood cinema, television, the World Wide Web, etc.) on the one hand, and that of high culture on the other. Yet, there is no reason formulated in his essay for this duality, it simply appears to serve the interests of defending traditional art history's premises. This duality, or rather dichotomy of mass culture versus high art, appears also in a politicised framework within the 'Questionnaire' as a fear of visual studies producing 'subjects for the next stage of globalized capital,'⁴³ which is an assumption obviously based on an understanding of 'capitalist hegemony' as 'coherent and consistent.'⁴⁴ Yet, as Mirzoeff also notes while referring to Michel de Certeau's ideas, this is far from the case, and where there is power (i.e. 'globalized capital'), there is always resistance and criticality, even if this voice is weak

⁴¹ James D. Herbert, 'Visual Culture/Visual Studies', in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms in Art History*, 2nd edition, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, pp. 452–464.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 457.

⁴³ 'Visual Culture Questionnaire', *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Herbert, 'Visual Culture/Visual Studies', *op. cit.*, p. 457.

and hardly visible.⁴⁵ Another reason why the foundation of the discipline of visual studies cannot afford 'to dismiss the world of the commodity as unworthy of serious cultural analysis, or to hand that realm of investigation over to the social scientists'⁴⁶ is exactly because this would also entail a dismissal of the disciplinary and the critical power of the field. When I use the term 'criticality', I refer to Irit Rogoff's understanding of the term. For Rogoff, criticism, critique and criticality possess both a temporal and a structural quality; temporal inasmuch as they designate successive phases of critical approaches, and structural in a way that they establish different networks, i.e. rearticulate the relations between 'makers, objects, and audiences.'⁴⁷ One strategy Rogoff proposes here is to look at culture from 'oblique angles', or, to put it another way, 'the diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it, i.e. the actual work on display, can at times free up a recognition that other manifestations are taking place that are often difficult to read, and which may be as significant as the designated objects on display.'⁴⁸

The fact that the 'Questionnaire' did not fulfil the potentials of a criticality for the establishment of, at least, a distance between academic disciplines and a total assumption of commodity culture is manifested in the impersonal language and the authoritative tone that the questions employ as dubious rhetorical tools to suggest an overwhelming opinion attributed to large quantities of impersonal, unidentified or, rather, 'disembodied' subjects, as Keith Moxey suggests.⁴⁹ The rhetorical position that the editorial questions imply strangely echoes the editors' criticism *vis-à-vis* Douglas Crimp's statement that he formulated on the occasion of his resignation. As the editorial 'reply' claims, 'Although Douglas' reference to "larger conflicts ... about editorial policy" remains unspecified and therefore wholly obscure to

⁴⁵ Mirzoeff, 'What is Visual Culture?' (1998), op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁶ Herbert, 'Visual Culture/Visual Studies', op. cit., p. 458.

⁴⁷ Irit Rogoff, 'Looking Away', p. 119, in Gavin Butt (ed.), *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Blackwell Publishing, London, 2005, pp. 117–134.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴⁹ Keith Moxey, 'Nostalgia for the Real: The Troubled Relation of Art History to Visual Studies', in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 2001, pp. 103–123.

us, it does, of course, cast a rhetorical shadow over the journal and its editors.⁵⁰ Yet, unlike the case of the 'Questionnaire', Crimp clearly stated the reasons for his departure, which he explained by referring to a concrete instance of editorial disagreement on the 'quality' of certain texts to be published on AIDS and activism.

It is at this point that I would like to come back to Modleski's metaphor of the 'innocent reader' ('Never a virgin, but always a whore'),⁵¹ which provocatively joins at least two important elements. One is related to the age-old art historical topos of the innocent eye, the other one to the social position and the theoretical function of the prostitute (as I discussed it in Chapter 4). It is quite telling that this topos takes vision and the acquisition of knowledge via visuality as corruption, as something negative that we have to accept, live with, but not necessarily like. In order to extend the metaphor of the whore, I would like to mention yet another, although indirect and subdued usage of it that has a direct relevance to visual culture and the 'Questionnaire'. As I have mentioned above, some of the main protagonists of visual culture were left out of the circle of the interviewed, among whom W.J.T. Mitchell has a separate essay within the same issue of *October*, a fact that I interpret as a manifestation of the editors' ambivalence *vis-à-vis* the discipline and Mitchell's theoretical stance.

Besides analysing the artworks' interpretative meaning, rhetoric, and power, Mitchell suggests personifying pictures and examining what they are indeed about when they become 'animate'.⁵² In his definition Mitchell recalls one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Condemned to death for raping a noble lady, a knight is granted a year's reprieve. During that time he must find the answer to the question of what women want most. This is the recurring question that Freud also posed much later, yet he too was unable to provide an

⁵⁰ Crimp, 'The Editors, To Our Readers', op. cit., p. 111.

⁵¹ Tania Modleski, 'Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or The Scandal of the Mute Body', in *October* 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–24.

⁵² W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What Do Pictures Really Want?', in *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 71–82.

adequate answer. As Freud himself concluded: 'The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul is, What does a woman want?' Coming back to Chaucer's tale, unless the knight returns with the correct answer, he cannot avoid his execution. The knight sets off on his quest and poses the question to a number of women, but seems to get the wrong replies: women want money, fame, love, beauty, fine cloths, admirers, etc. The sophisticated and somewhat cynical storyteller, the Wife of Bath, obviously knows the right answer: women want power/sovereignty most, because that is what they mostly lack.

Pictures – like the women in Chaucer's story – want power, power over the viewers, so, as Mitchell suggests, the question is not so much about what pictures do, but rather what they want. This means not only a shift from power to desire but also, and perhaps paradoxically, a realistic move since 'images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think,'⁵³ even those images that pretend either not to have this desire or not to be pictures at all, such as abstract paintings. According to the modernist theory formulated by Greenberg and Michael Fried, these works of art are even corrupted by the spectator's presence. Lacan, however, reminds us that the desire not to display desire is itself a desire, so instead of iconoclasm, i.e. fighting against this power, we should examine how it functions. As Mitchell concludes: 'perhaps the most interesting consequence of seeing images as living things is that the question of their value (understood as vitality) is played out in a social context'⁵⁴ which in its turn needs critical analysis, too.

It is interesting to perceive the discrepancy between the editorial questions and some of the essays that *October* has published since its foundation. One such discrepancy may be detected between the way they refer to 'anthropology' and how models of 'ethnographic criticism' appear within the journal. Tania Modleski's essay is an instance of the latter when –

⁵³ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005, p. 92.

in relation to 'women's response to a largely oppressive popular culture' – she poses the rhetorically suggestive question of 'whether this particular tool [reception theory, i.e. ethnographic criticism] of the "master" can aid us in "dismantling" his house.'⁵⁵ According to Modleski's critical stance, this refers to women's position in culture and a critical approach to hegemonic cultural consumption as such, but it can be easily extended to other forms of oppressive and asymmetrical cultural or economic relationships and their critical assessment.

According to Modleski, the emergence of reception theory, or as she calls it, ethnographic criticism, is due to the discontent 'with the formalistic analyses associated with the work of the film journal *Screen* in the 1970s.'⁵⁶ These analyses were mostly concerned with the explanation of how subjects are constructed by products of popular culture, which ignored the 'complex histories and multiple cultural affiliations (educational, religious, vocational, political, etc.)'⁵⁷ of these actual subjects. Ethnographic criticism is able not only to ascertain how meaning is conveyed by a given cultural 'text', but 'more importantly how and in the name of what *other* system of meanings and values people might come to refuse the dominant or "preferred" readings of that text. Ethnographic criticism takes as its slogan the phrase coined by Stuart Hall that people are not "cultures dupes," and insists that therefore popular texts must somehow "allow ... audiences to make meanings that connect with their social experience." The aim of ethnographic criticism is, then, to locate these areas of resistance to the dominant ideology which, once identified, could theoretically be pressed into the service of radical political struggle.'⁵⁸ In my view, this is not only an answer to Sarah James' accusation of galleries as 'veritable empires of porn and masters of dupe' these days,

⁵⁵ Modleski, op. cit., p. 4. Here, Modleski refers to a text of Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Persephone, Watertown, Mass., 1981, p. 98.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 5 (original italics).

it is also an indirect and antecedent answer to *October's* accusations of the disciplinary organisation of visual culture along the models of anthropology.

Within the parameters of this thesis, I aimed at analysing some aspects of *October's* theoretical standpoint and the role it played in the process of art history's disciplinary renewal in the 1970s and 80s. In the face of the given array of methodological approaches and tools of that era, *October's* achievement cannot be assessed as anything else but profoundly radical, yet from an interdisciplinary perspective, this renewal proves to be rather limited. *October* ended up staying within the disciplinary boundaries of art history and has clearly been not able to shift its focus and methodology to meet the challenge of contemporary visual production, whether cultural or artistic. Perhaps not so much in the case of the journal, but rather in the wider context of art history, this gate keeping may entail a risk of turning – or as Keith Moxey puts it, 'fossilizing'⁵⁹ – the discipline into an 'antiquarian' field of inquiry, while visual culture will continue to adopt those areas of investigation that have critical and contemporary relevance. It is precisely the challenge that arrives from the contemporary field of artistic production and critical theory that may help the discipline to reshape its disciplinary engagements, no matter how temporary, 'imprecise and inadequate'⁶⁰ these reshaping may seem.

⁵⁹ See Keith Moxey's contribution to the 'Questionnaire', op. cit., p. 59.

⁶⁰ See Martin Jay's contribution to the 'Questionnaire', op. cit., p. 44. A similar viewpoint *vis-à-vis* contemporary art is formulated in Helen Molesworth's contribution to the 'Questionnaire', op. cit., p. 54.

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