

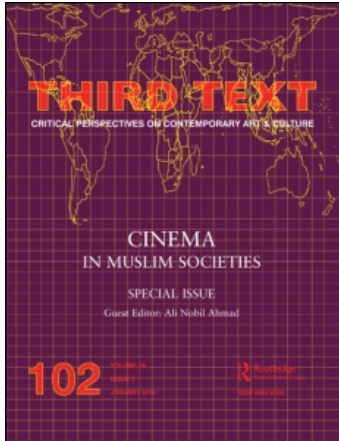
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Imre Szeman; Maria Whiteman

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# The Big Picture

## On the Politics of Contemporary Photography

Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman

If a permanent suspicion now seems to linger around the imperatives and commitments of contemporary art – especially with regard to its political aims and ambitions – the same cannot be said about one segment of the art field: photography. The long struggle waged by photography to be taken seriously as an aesthetic practice on a par with painting can safely be said to be over and done with: photos grace the walls of museums and galleries around the world, and do so without having to engage in the game of artistic legitimacy they were forced to play for much of the twentieth century. Indeed, contemporary photographers are amongst the most esteemed and valued artists working today, with figures such as Edward Burtynsky, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Jeff Wall and others commanding high-dollar figures for their pieces and being the subject of major retrospectives which travel the international system of contemporary art museums. These photographers have also (only a little belatedly) come to be the object of concerted art historical and art theoretical investigation, a development epitomised by Michael Fried's recent book on contemporary photography, the title of which says it all.<sup>1</sup>

One of the surprising things about this aesthetic ascension of photography is that it is taking place at the very same time as photography has exploded as a vernacular practice. The banality of photography, its status as a ubiquitous 'middle-brow art' (in Pierre Bourdieu's memorable phrase) which anyone armed with a Brownie camera could undertake, was perhaps the single greatest issue troubling its status as art form.<sup>2</sup> The artistic techniques required for painting or sculpture require extensive training in art academies (which continue to insist on foundation courses – the training of the eye and hand around pure forms of colour, line, shape, shading, etc – as evidence of their legitimacy as a field). Photographs, on the other hand, could be generated by the simple act of pressing a button on the mechanical apparatus required for their production. Of course, not all photos are created equal. The divide between photojournalism, family snapshots and art photography was managed by an appeal to aesthetic criteria as well as the proper

1. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2008
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1996

deployment of various technical skills in developing and printing, choice of lenses, lighting and so on. This particular patrolling of aesthetic borders was always less certain in photography than in painting, and so likely to be crossed in every direction. Art photography borrowed from the genre of family photos as well as from journalism; pictures by photojournalists could be celebrated in museums; and amateurs could by trial-and-error or sheer accident stumble into the production of sublime pictures. In the digital era, photography has become a more extensive and intensive part of daily life – even more vernacular, even more ubiquitous (if such a thing as a deepening of ubiquity is possible). One might have expected this to have cured photography of its aesthetic pretensions, especially given the concentrated attack on the aesthetic and on the cultural more generally over the past several decades.<sup>3</sup> But this seems not to have happened: the achievements of Burtynsky and Gursky do not seem to be imperilled by Flickr and Facebook; indeed, these two broad modes of photography seem to have surprisingly little to do with one another.

What makes the wide-ranging work of the photographers named above so enticing and attractive to theorists and the public alike is the manner in which it plays with and across an emerging fracture in the aesthetic today. This is a different fracture than that between an art aesthetic and a vernacular one, and one which brings us back to where we started: politics. The aesthetic as a politics by others means – in whatever form this has been theorised, from Peter Bürger's analysis of the failures of the historical avant-garde to the meek politics of Nicholas Bourriaud's participatory aesthetics – has at the outset of the twenty-first century been shaken to its foundations.<sup>4</sup> What remains are theories on the order of Jacques Rancière's suggestive (but problematic) reframing of art as an intervention into the distribution of the sensible and the regime of spectacle society, which restores art to the social in a way which maintains its difference from the spectacle but at a cost to its imagined political power via the aesthetic per se.<sup>5</sup> Even if politics engaged via art has not been completely abandoned, it has certainly become domesticated: the political is now part of the critical vocabulary through which one describes and interprets those museum- and gallery-worthy works in the same way one once used the discourse of beauty. No one expects revolution from art but only that it might hold open some sliver of a different horizon of the imaginary: a visit to the museum doesn't end up in an armed group trip to the Sierra Maestra (and it never did).

But there is today another concatenation of art and politics besides the familiar avant-garde hope of transforming life into art and art into life: activist art. In this case, the specificity of art qua art is suspended; the visual dimension of artworks becomes a support or addendum to a politics established outside of art. Abandoning the exhaustion of avant-garde framings of art and politics, Gerald Raunig argues that we need to understand art and revolutionary politics as distinct activities which overlap at specific historical moments, but which are not reducible to one another. 'Instead of the promises of salvation from an art that saves life', in *Art and Revolution* Raunig tries to understand how 'revolutionary becoming [can] occur in a situation of the mutual overlapping of art and revolution that is limited in space and time'.<sup>6</sup>

3. For an overview of these critiques, see Imre Szeman, 'Culture and Globalization, or, The Humanities in Ruins', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3:2, 2003, pp 91–115.

4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses Du Réel, Paris, 1998. See also Hal Foster's critique of Bourriaud, 'Chat Rooms', in Claire Bishop, ed, *Participation*, MIT Press and Whitechapel, Cambridge–London, 2006, pp 190–195.

5. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, New York, 2004

6. Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, trans Aileen Derieg, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2007, p 204

It is not only activist art that docks into a political movement, but political activism also increasingly makes use of specific methods, skills and techniques that have been conceived and tested in art production and media work.<sup>7</sup>

Art gets to play in the dirt of politics without worrying about the aesthetic dimension. But what is lost in Raunig's account of activist art – and indeed, in the very category itself – is a sense of its specific contribution to politics. Is it mere illustration, a medium for an idea whose genesis is external to it? A visual condensation of political meaning (what in language would be called a slogan)? Or a necessary visual component to a politics which today is always already carried out in circumstances of extreme visuality? When activist art demands that it be taken seriously as art, it betrays its commitment to shelving the aesthetic safety of museums and art institutions; when it works outside these spaces, its claims to being art have to be questioned – not to challenge its politics, but to make sure it is not smuggling an older avant-garde politics into its disavowal of it.

Aesthetics as politics *or* activist art without aesthetics: it is this fracture across which contemporary art photography moves back and forth. It does so both at a formal level and in terms of its content. Formally, there is no attempt to inhibit or disavow the indexical quality of the photo – its indissociable link to the Real which no amount of clever theorisation can elide or sever. Even Wall's photographs, staged and designed for the camera in a manner which continues to be distinct from most photo practice, depends for its effect on its link to reality: indexicality exists even without the blunt ambition to capture life 'as is' in the flow of everydayness. There is little in their form to distinguish the photos of Burtynsky or Gursky from photojournalism; such differences as do exist could be put down simply to differences in style as opposed to any definitive generic distinction. As we suggested above, such connections to reality were once anxiously patrolled in an effort to transform photos into art. This seems no longer to be a worry.

The physical size of the photos of these artists – in Gursky's case, a five-square-metre image constitutes a relatively small piece – has become one of the signal characteristics which position their work outside journalism or vernacular photography and places the image on the same scale as most paintings in major museums. In these big pictures, a difference of form has migrated to a difference in scale, which simultaneously preserves and redefines their content. And what of their content? While it would be crude to read (for example) Burtynsky's images of factory labour in China or Gursky's photographs of stock exchanges and concerts as in some way offering direct representations of our contemporary circumstances (thus suspending allegorical readings or more formal ones which draw attention to their careful composition), a large part of their impact arises from the sense that we see in them the physical evidence and substance of our era. Burtynsky's *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province* (2005) signals its intent to be 'art' through its formal arrangement: row after row of pink-clad workers arranged in a receding series. The splashes of colour – the uniforms of working bodies moving furiously about on the trading floor – in Gursky's *Chicago Board of Trade II* (1999) have a

7. Ibid, p 263

painterly effect, especially when approached from a distance. But the real power of both pieces comes from their almost literal engagement with the complexities of scale and finance that shape contemporary experience. These are aesthetic pieces which operate with activist intent whether or not their creators imagine them as such. They may be viewed primarily in museums (or in books produced by museums), but they engage in a politics that does not have only aesthetic ends in mind. These big pictures are attempts to map *the* big picture, to render visible those zones where power moves and possibilities are both generated and shut down. Taken together, for example, these two photos offer up an instant insight into the financial crisis. The scale of Chinese factories created a discount in the price of goods which helped to mask a thirty-five-year-long stagnation in the wages of Western middle-wage earners (as opposed to middle-class earners, who no longer exist), the very same group which was further drained of money through the easy credit and crisis-prone mortgages packaged together and thrown about as derivatives in the pointillist frenzy of Chicago's trading floor.

Our aim here is not to celebrate a particular form of art practice and to insist that it, finally, provides an answer to the problems of containment and legitimisation which come to plague the politics of contemporary art. It is, however, to point (to borrow Fried's title) to why photography matters as art as never before. For us, it matters less as *art* than as an example of the ways in which a set of practices we continue to call art can matter, even now. It is one thing to read about the scale of contemporary factories and to learn from reportage of sheer numbers about the volume of money sloshing around the world on a daily basis. It is another thing entirely to see it rendered visible – a visibility which is not documentary in an immediate and unproblematic sense, but which generates knowledge of a kind that only an image can manage to do. It is easy enough to forget that people and bodies are required to do the concrete work of producing objects as well as the more abstract labour of moving about the surplus extracted from them: neither are the anonymous processes which that most basic of contemporary experiences – reification – insists that they are. It might seem hopelessly naive to insist on the critical necessity of such a basic form of visualisation, and to imagine that it might sustain and support a politics which aims at reshaping the very fabric of collective experience, freeing the multitudes depicted within them to use their bodies and minds for different purposes. The power of contemporary photography derives not just from the first-order operations of visualisation, but from its unique aesthetic and political motility – its ability to both use and refuse older aesthetic categories and determinations in conjunction with the mechanics of the photo apparatus and the digital flow of networks to provide conceptual maps we would not otherwise have.

Which is not to say that photos alone can do the work of politics. Sticking with the work of Burtynsky and Gursky, one has to say that the visions they offer up of globalisation are not without their problems. There is a danger of their being almost illustrative; the images of these photographers have quickly become identified with globalisation – used, for example, as book cover photos for theoretical and critical texts on the subject – in a way that leads one to worry about their political function. Skyscrapers in cities, stock markets, giant crowds (Gursky), or

deadened environs, recycled waste, oil fields and quarries, Chinese factories (Burtynsky); there is an almost too convenient correspondence between what we know or have come to imagine as globalisation and the images that we are offered of it. The result can be a moralising one which merely confirms what one already suspected: the scale of global processes outstrips anything we might be able to do about it. The result is not knowledge leading to politics, but rather an encounter with art resulting in the comforts of cynical reason – in Slavoj Žižek’s famous formulation, we know what we are doing is wrong, but we do it anyway.<sup>8</sup>

This is where criticism continues to have a role to play with and against art. Within critical discourses on globalisation, it was clear from the beginning of the post-Cold War period that what came to be known as globalisation was always already an economic and political *project* (one more accurately described as neoliberalism) as opposed to a given historical period or process defined and determined by specific economic developments (eg, the rise of China, global trade, new communication technologies, etc). One of the major challenges for knowledge and understanding was how to discuss these developments and to critically engage with globalisation without affirming the script of neoliberalism – without, that is, turning a political project into a given reality. Effective criticism reminds us to remain cautious and to question our enthusiasms and self-certainties; art and criticism can work in conjunction to challenge each other’s blind spots and incomprehension, and in so doing generate approaches that expand our understanding instead of telling us what we already know.

Gursky’s and Burtynsky’s big pictures of globalisation might thus do the opposite of what they intend. But it takes only a shift in valence to see their images in a different way. The critical capacity of photography does not lie where one often imagines it to be – in either the mode of exposé (a journalistic imperative) or insight gained through an aesthetic trauma induced in the viewer (the avant-garde dream once again). It comes instead out of affirmation of what we might hope to hide, deny or reject. Stock markets and Chinese factories are blown up to gigantic proportions so that we might confront them, but also so that in confronting them we wish them away. This is a politics of denial: the idea that the way to go forward is through laments about the wrong turnings we have already taken. But seen from another vantage point, photography’s core indexicality constitutes a demand that we face up to the world as it is and deploy whatever representational means necessary to try to reframe our comprehension of it, in part and in whole, and in a manner that produces different landscapes for those image-makers to come.

What we have in mind for the politics of contemporary photography is an ethos exemplified by Slavoj Žižek’s description of an ecology without Nature. In the final chapter of *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek argues that the ‘ecology of fear’ – our worries about everything from the potentially disastrous outcome of biogenetic experiments to anxieties about the exploitation of Earth’s resources – ‘has every chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism, a new opium for the masses replacing declining religion’.<sup>9</sup> Why might this be this the case? Žižek views the treatment of Nature within most forms of

8. Slavoj Žižek, ‘They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p 29

9. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, New York, 2008, p 439

ecological thinking as fundamentally conservative. Nature is treated as the ultimate form of order that (in the last instance) offers security to human social life. There is also an insistence on the fact that the natural world is complete unto itself and that any change with respect to it 'can only be a change for the worse'.<sup>10</sup> The position he thus argues for is that of 'ecology without nature', since he feels that 'the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on'.<sup>11</sup> This ecology without nature would be one that starts from an acceptance of the fact that:

... 'nature' *qua* the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally throwing its circular motion off the rails, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself 'second nature', its balance is always secondary, an attempt to bring into existence a 'habit' that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the chaos and groundlessness of 'second nature' that any political act that has a hope of radically confronting ecological catastrophe has to take place.

Is it not the task of a political art to do the same? To engage with the mess of life without the comforting ease of dreams of transcendence and salvation? There is no reason why art cannot participate in this kind of politics. That photography matters as art more than ever is because it already does so in powerful and provocative ways.

10. Ibid, p 441

11. Ibid, p 445

12. Ibid, p 442