

**„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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The Ontological Status of Photography

Summary of the PhD Thesis

PhD Supervisor:

Prof. PhD. Rațiu Dan Eugen

PhD Candidate:

Mavropol Andra

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Key concepts: image – photography – ontology – art – apparatus – play – ritual – complicity - social media – post-internet - ready-made – actant – uncreativity

The topic this research approaches is the ontological status of the photographic image, and the main problem is identifying this intrinsic distinctive trait of photography. My hypothesis is that the ontological status of photography is given by the fact that photography has the possibility to re-present and also to construct reality, a fact that influences both the ways in which we relate to images and to reality.

Unlike other types of images, the photographic one resembles reality quite enough for its perception to be mistaken for the perception of reality. But, if we dig deeper, we find out that this perception is culturally determined. Having been considered just a technique at the dawn of its creation, photography evolved until it had the possibility of achieving the status of an artwork. Despite this privilege, because of the technological progress, photography has become a mundane practice of recording the aesthetic experiences of everyday life and also, an outlet for the communication of these experiences.

For the art world, the ontological status of the photographic image is important because, even though the border separating art and everyday life remains rigorous, there is an interaction between the two, that is more frequent than before, and this can be easily observed while browsing the internet. The latter is a space favorable to artists because it offers a wider visibility, actuality, and the possibility to interact with the public. At the same time, art amateurs have the possibility to interact with art works and with artists free of charge, being able to view exhibitions or even the ways in which an artwork is created. However, viewing art online does not represent a similar experience to viewing art offline, in the space destined to host it, but it can serve the purpose of awakening an interest for the offline art, with the obvious exception of artworks that are destined to be viewed online.

The ontological status of the photographic image is important because it helps us understand how we are influenced by images today: the ubiquity of the photographic image determines how we relate to the world – we communicate through images and this way we have the possibility to construct the reality, either as artists or non-artists. How does each of us contribute to the construction of reality? By fragmentary taking photos of things that are interesting to us and excluding the ones that are not consistent with the way we view the world.

At this point, the problem regarding the objectivity of the photographic image is brought to our attention – to what extent can we speak about a faithful reflection of reality? Throughout the research I tried to reason that creativity plays an important part in the creation of the photograph, so the actual *praxis* can be misleading, and the ‘reading’ of the photographic image is a learned habit. By use of photography, common people have the ability of being creative, not just selecting various frames, but by staging them and even by post-processing the image. One can notice a common trend, among artists and non-artists, of creating a certain type of personality online, which is centered around the images one creates and shares on a daily basis. Thus, photography is a significant action in recording aesthetic experiences and even in the construction of such experiences.

An equally important observation is that the way in which we relate to art changes: art is not just photographed in the space in which it resides, in order to have access to the experience later on, but we take photographs of ourselves with art. The issue in this situation would be: what is more important – the experience of art or the experience of taking a photograph of the work of art and sharing it? Does art exist for its own purpose, or in order to be photographed?

My thesis, throughout its four chapters, explores both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ontology theories. The ones that represent the ‘strong’ branch of ontology can be found in the texts of known authors such as W. Benjamin, A. Bazin, V. Flusser, G. Anders, while the ‘weak’ branch can be traced in an effort to determine the aspects that relate to the contexts in which photography can be found, following the texts of artists, art theorists and critics, such as N. Bourriaud.

This research proposes a philosophical perspective on photography, with an interdisciplinary outline, that follows the methodical approach of both philosophy and sociology of art. These are:

- conceptual analysis of the following terms: image, apparatus, clarifying the ways in which the concepts of play and ritual apply to photography, death, the organization of photography, complicity, pragmatic image, ready-made, actant, uncreativity;
- analysis of some contemporary phenomena: the museum of ice-cream, the exhibition Iconoclashes, the relationship between artists and social media;

- comparative analysis: photography and painting, photography and language;
- case study: Francesca Woodman was an artist that used the medium of photography in order to illustrate the staging of her own death, through play and ritual; Andreas Muller-Pohle, a contemporary artist that uses both analogue and digital photography, elaborated his own theories regarding photography starting from Flusser's texts; *3d-maps-minus-3d*, *Iconoclashes* are installations that are based on the process of selection and placing images in a certain order, and *Google DeepDream* illustrates the ways in which artificial intelligence interprets photographs.

My intention was to make use of the correct and relevant concepts from more than one field, such as philosophy, sociology, art, in order to offer a broader and maybe even (more) legitimate perspective on the subject of photography. I think that there is no need for a disagreement between the philosophical discourse and the one regarding photography as art or as everyday practice, and that is why, when deciding to include both of them in a coherent reasoning, one must assume valid information on both ends.

Also, it has been my intention to bring to the foreground the new actors that are responsible for the (post)production of contemporary art, and to highlight their role in photography: the satellites, for example, offer an overview, a different perspective, the computerized algorithms that interpret images, and the internet, the space which grants them visibility. Among the issue regarding the satellites, the question concerning the creation of aesthetic content by the artificial intelligence was brought into attention in the case study about *Google DeepDream*, starting from the idea that art cannot be created by a non-human actor. Thereby, the main purpose of the research was not one of aesthetical nature, namely modes of composition, framing or coloring are not analyzed, but one regarding the ontological, functional and social aspects. The main objective was to analyze the way in which the photographic image exists after the moment in which the world was instantiated inside the limits of the photographic format, be it glass, film or digital sensor.

Having into account that from the perspective of content, it is hard to claim that a photograph is art or not, it is possible that some photographs may change their status from non-art to art. Here it is important to mention that the intervention or appropriation of an artist of a profane object can grant that certain object the status of art. In this aspect, the institutional

theories of art play an important part because they provide an answer to the issue of being-in-the-world-as-art.

In the following paragraphs I will present the results of previous researches and the ways in which these have been included and interpreted throughout my thesis, according to the order of the chapters.

The first chapter focuses on the problem of resemblance with reality of the photographic image and has the purpose of analyzing and questioning the preconceptions related to the 'objectivity' and 'realism' in photography. In this context, I have analyzed photography's relation to 'ritual' and 'game/ play', concepts that seem to define the way in which the photographic image is produced and perceived. Having into consideration that in Romanian there is a single noun ('joc') to describe both 'game' and 'play', I will use both concepts according to context, in this translation. The concept of 'game' points to an activity that is its own purpose. In the case of photography, the game has a purpose that of taking 'good' photos, a process that might imply a choice of the framing, a possible staging of the scene, the interaction with the model, and so on.

In the second chapter, I continued the analysis of 'game/play' and 'ritual' while examining the photographic gesture, and also of the technical issues that contribute more or less to the distortion of the photographic image of the world. The opinions of institutional artists were very important to the study. Andreas Muller-Pohle's contribution, an artist that uses photography as primary medium (both analogue and digital), was very valuable to our study because he provided an insight from two perspectives: as an institutional artist and as theorist. He was remarkably influenced by Flusser when he proposed various 'strategies' of 'staging' a photograph, in order to overcome the apparatus' program. In order to illustrate the applicability of the concepts 'play' and 'ritual', in the last part of the second chapter I did a case study in which I compared Francesca Woodman's works to some of the contemporary photographic practices. Woodman seems to search for photography's specificity in praxis, not theory, and manages to find it in different hypostases.

The third chapter evaluates photography from the perspective of the 'weak' ontology, namely considering its role in everyday life. According to P. Bourdieu, photography was invented in order to consolidate some activities or practices that already existed in society, such

as celebration. Through photography an important event can be recorded, but also along with this, relationships among a social group can be maintained, especially inside the family. Here, the ritualistic side of photography presents itself as another side of the same coin, namely that of consolidation of important events (wedding, baptism, and so on) within a social group, and also of the relationships of that group. But, even though in the past photography was used rarely, in special situations, because of the high costs of production and of the complicated procedure of usage, technological progress has enabled photography's availability, and also it has made it easier to use. Thus, although taking photographs of important events is still applicable, photography is not limited to special events, but it has become a common practice in everyday life. An issue that is still valid is that of being a social index. The apparatus along with necessary materials are important to be taken into consideration in this sense. At the same time, the cameras integrated in the mobile telephones resemble high technology gear, at a much lower cost. Nowadays the aesthetic side of photography seems to be more important than the technical specifications of the gear used, because through photography, the aesthetics of a certain social group can be represented. Class is also important in the construction of the photographic image, but also in its hermeneutics. Communication plays an important part in everyday life and that is why the new means of communication that are dealing with sharing images must be taken into consideration. The 'need' of communicating through images justifies itself through the facility of reading and sharing a photographic image. We take photographs because of photography's availability, and also in order to keep track of the everyday experience, and by sharing these personal experiences online, one can notice that the border between private and public is thinning.

The fourth chapter handles photography's status in the contemporary artistic phenomenon, post-internet. Post-internet art does not deal exclusively with art that can be found online, but with art that is about the internet and the ways in which this medium is used. Here, photography plays an important part, not just because of the possibility of sharing on social networks, but because its availability which makes it ready-to-be-found and to be placed in another context by artists. In this respect, one can bring forward a new interpretation of the concept of creativity. I used case studies again in order to offer pertinent examples from the art world, where the concept of creativity is being replaced by that of selection. Being part of a web, satellites and their image-processing software has been theorized by B. Latour, who uses the

concept ‘actant’ in order to designate human and non-human actors. Post-internet art is responsible for recognizing the aesthetic possibilities that these actants offer. What is problematic in this context is what to call an image – can it be something that was not destined for a human spectator? We might be tempted to deny this supposition, but, we do have to take into account the possibility of image reading and interpretation of artificial intelligence (AI). Thus, an important question in the fourth chapter was photography’s interpretation by the AI, in the case study about *Google DeepDream*.

My hypothesis is that the purpose of photography is becoming more important in everyday aesthetic life, aided by the new technological possibilities, thus contributing to the stimulation of creativity beyond the art world. Although there are usually presented as two separate worlds (everyday aesthetic life and the art world) in which photography is a common factor, both of them emerge from a creative impulse that has the purpose of making one’s relationship with the world visible and accessible. If the democratization of photography brings the democratization of the art world, then anyone would have access to the status of the artist, as long as they have a photographic device and an interest for the abstraction called art. This hypothesis did not flourish from the desire to trivialize photographic art, but a desire to extend its field into everyday life, in order to minimize (but not erase) the border that separates art and life. At the same time, I intended to highlight that photography can be a part of contemporary art following two trajectories: one that follows tradition, and one that submits to the logic of recycling. The first one is related to its initial status, as long as it is submitting to an institution such as the museum to grant itself space of exhibition, and, as such, a place in the art world. The other side can be said to be supported technologically by digitization and by the freedom of exchanging information in cyberspace, where photography becomes raw material for new creations such as mixed-media and installations.

Unlike the previous researches in philosophy, my thesis brings forward technical aspects that influence both creation and our perception of photography. Regarding this technicality, I claim that it has rarely questioned in the resources available in the bibliography, but it is important because it is a part of photography’s ontology. The analysis of technical processes had the purpose of consolidating the theories that did not have a technical approach to photography. For example, some mechanisms and components of the apparatus have been studied only to

provide an empirical explanation to the way in which the photographic apparatus constructs the image of the world, an image that is distorted or bound to errors, such as the parallax.

The study of the ontological status of photography is important because the way in which we relate to the photographic image contributes to a change in our being-in-the-world, because we most often filter reality through the photographic lens and such, what is not included in the frame of the photograph is bound to be forgotten.

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