

Thesis

By

Lucian Wester

Thesis submitted as writing component to the
Master Media Design & Communication Programme,
Piet Zwart Institute,
Willem de Kooning Academy, 2013

Writing Support: Steve Rushton

Tutorial support: David Haines

Course Director: Simon Pummell

Contents

Title page	p. 1		
Contents	p. 3		
Introduction	p. 5		
Chapter 1		Chapter 2	
1 Intro	p. 6	1 Intro	p. 7
2 Classical imitations	p. 6	2 European Avant-garde	p. 7
3 Modernism	p. 6	2.1 De stijl and Piet Mondriaan	p. 9
3.1 Expressionism	p. 8	2.1.1 Mondriaan	p. 11
3.2 Avant-garde in America	p. 8	3 American Avant-garde	p. 13
3.3 Avant-garde in Europe	p. 16	3.1 Clement Greenberg	p. 13
3.3.1 A picture without a camera	p. 16	3.2 Harold Rosenberg	p. 15
3.4 Momentum	p. 20	3.3 Rothko and Gottlieb	p. 17
4 The abstract expressionist	p. 22	3.4 Newman and the Sublime	p. 19
5 The Conceptualist	p. 22	4 Art as autonomous object	p. 21
		4.1 Ad Reinhardt	p. 21
		4.2 Frank Stella	p. 23
		4.4 Joseph Kosuth	p. 25
Chapter 3			
1 Concluding chapter one and two	p. 29		
1.1 Abstract photography	p. 29		
1.2 Index	p. 30		
2 My practice	p.30		
2.1 Photograms	p. 31		
2.2 Projecting camera #1	p. 32		
Conclusion	p. 35		
Bibliography	p.36		

Introduction

In my thesis I will try to connect the origin of photography and that of the abstract arts in relation to my own work. To do so I have written two small histories of both photography and abstract art up onto the late sixties, because that is the time where photography and the fine arts merge into one another. The first chapter describes the history of photography and its relationship to the fine arts, which is primarily painting. The second chapter deals with the origins of abstract art and its ideals and problems. These first two chapters run parallel through the thesis, for they describe the same period of time but from a different perspective, this means that chapter one is on the even pages and chapter two on the odd pages. The third chapter concludes the first two chapters and deals with my personal work in relation to the first two chapters.

The questions that I will investigate within this thesis are: what is an abstract image and what are its origins? How did photography develop during the first hundred years after its invention in relation to the fine arts? In the last chapter the question of how this relates to my work will be essential.

A History of photography

1 Intro

The history of photography and painting has been one of conflict and cross-fertilization between the both media in their relation to art. Photography is held responsible for the crisis in painting during the second half of the 19th century, which eventually leads to the glorious discovery of the abstract painting. In this hard avant-garde environment how did photography position itself? In this period in which painting declared itself to be an autonomous art photography began the struggle to make the same claim.

2 Classical imitations

Photography was officially introduced by Dagere in 1839 in France and was in the first years mainly used as a cheap way of making portraits. As early as around 1850 artist start to copy romanticism with photography, but because photography has its limits in what it can represent, especially in those early years the landscapes that they photographed sometimes were combined by a multiple of negatives. So what appears to be a photograph taken in a single shot was actually a collage of two or more separate images. Some artist photographers would even go so far to compose entire scenes from the bible and other myths. One of these works is *The Two Ways of Life* (Fig.1) by Oscar Rejlander that was combined of over thirty individual negatives and was approximately 80 cm wide. About the same time, 1858 photographer Lake Price published: *A Manual of Photographic Manipulation*.

This mimicking of romanticism was immediately a point of discussion because the photographers argued that photography could educate the public because it was cheap and easy to copy. Sceptics, mostly painters and art dealers, argued that there is no soul in a photograph because it is just a machine recording light and therefore can never bare the same spiritual load as a painting made by a spiritual, sensitive painter. However 'Rejlander argued that the labor involved, combined with the image's inspiration from a Renaissance source and morally uplifting theme, distanced the work from ordinary photography and aligned it with painting.' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.91)

A History of the abstract arts

1 Intro

Art historians like to point out where a style originates so art history can be described in a canon. If abstraction can be described as a style it is Kandinsky who in 1910 discovered abstract painting. And it is with Malevich's 'Black Square' that the truest abstract work of art was created, because it is most rigours proposition. However I am interested in how powerful the idea of abstraction is because even after a hundred years of abstract art it is still very much alive. So there's seems to be more to it than a simple proposition, a simple statement that a picture is flat.

Abstract art didn't emerge out of nowhere; it slowly grew out of modern styles like Cubism, Futurism and so on. And it literally means to simplify: to abstract parts that distract from pure form. It is this pure form or essence that abstract art seems to be looking for that kept it alive for all those years.

2 European Avant-garde

New times call for new artistic representation. The European Avant-gardes were the political avant-gardes; people like Malevich were engaged in the political struggles of their time and chose deliberately sides. Therefore in this section I will speak of the classic, European avant-garde, as opposed to the post-war avant-garde characterized by the American Abstract Expressionist, for instance. The radicalness of someone like Malevich is best quoted: 'imitative art must be destroyed like the imperialist army.' (Malevich, 1920, p.296).

Malevich's revolution was the one of the people; he sees a world in which everybody is equal and this absent of order asked for a new form of representation. Art should have a social meaning and not only be aesthetic pictures for the bourgeois. This naturalistic, academic way of painting naturally became the 'imperialist army' that needed to be destroyed because it represented bourgeois society. Art had to become pure: so ignore the natural world and try to paint the canvas itself, to redirect the viewers attention from the pictorial picture to the object of the painting: a flat plain. They argued that only through a (color) system art can be made that penetrates the objective, or naturalistic, and art can become more philosophical. Even when an artist's



Fig. 1, Oscar Rejlander, *Two ways of life*, 1857

3 Modernism

3.1 Expressionism

Entering the modern age photography turns to Naturalism, a combination of impressionism and romanticism. 'Impressionism, the French art movement of the 1870s-1880s, aimed at capturing a momentary visual imprint of a scene, impressionistic photography attempted to render a personal response to a subject' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.173). Photographers begin to use soft focus lenses through which the artist photographer could emphasize his focus within a picture. (Fig.2) The soft haziness and rural environment in which most of these pictures were taken quickly became very popular within the mostly amateur society of artistic photographers. These later called pictorialist may brought an artistic style to photography but they did not succeed in capturing the historic momentum in which they lived, the story of the avant-garde. Their spiritual ideals bear more similarities to the romantics and expressionists than that of the futurist and cubist at the turn of the century.

3.2 Avant-garde in America (an abstracted photograph)

There were some people that recognized escapism in the Pictorialist method of taking pictures with soft focus and their naturalistic subject matter and that this discards the connection that photography has to science. In the futurist and cubist sense art is combined to cutting-edge science and thereby photography belongs to the new arts that are closer to sciences than

'construction is non-objective, but is based on the inter-relation of colours, his will cannot but be confined between the walls of aesthetic planes, instead of achieving philosophical penetration.' (Malevich, 1919, p.291) So the artist must read philosophy to base him within the discourse of the new world to be able to express these ideas. 'I am only free when my will, basing itself critically and philosophically on that which exists, is able to formulate a basis for new phenomena.' (Malevich 1919 p.292)

2.1 De stijl and Piet Mondriaan

In the Netherlands a group of revolutionary artist like; Piet Mondriaan, Theo van Doesburg and Gerrit Rietveld united under the name De Stijl (the Style). The artist connected to De Stijl were collectively looking for new visual language that could represent modern times in which they living, and they came to something that they called *neoplasticism*. Neo or new is used in this term to distinguish and give an urgency to their project. *Plasticism* refers to plastic art, the materials art is made from, for Mondriaan and Doesburg these where paint, colors and the flat plane of the canvas.

This new plastic art focuses upon the essence of art and the materials or media in which the works are made. Theo van Doesburg argues that in paintings, painters use natural subjects, like people, to create an artistic composition that is self-reflective but hides it behind a natural scene. The painter uses the natural world as a pretext to demonstrate his skilful painting, which makes the painting an empty shell. 'Arms, legs, trees, and landscapes are not unequivocally painterly means. Painterly means are: colours, forms, lines, and planes.' (Doesburg, 1925, p.280) Van Doesburg calls the technique that they use to construct the painting *cancellation*; 'One element cancels out another.' (Doesburg, 1925, p.281), for example a flat plane is cancelled out by a line to make perfect harmony.

Neoplasticism is a translation from the Dutch term *Nieuwe Beelding*. It was interesting for me to read text about these Dutch artist in English because as Charles Harrison and Paul Wood notes: 'It should be noted that the Dutch term *beelding* carries connotations of forming and making absent from the more basically material sense of 'plastic'.' (Harrison and Wood, 1992, p.282) In the Netherlands fine art is called: *Autonom Beeldende Kunst*, which carries the word *Beelding*. The Dutch word *Beeld* literally translates into *image* so the Dutch term that Mondriaan used, *Nieuwe Beelding* has a much closer connotation to the essence of an image than its relation to material from which an image is made. Also as noted by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood the word *Beelding* carries a connotation to the making of an image, or working on images, which makes it less static than *plasticism*.



Fig. 2, Clarence H. White, *Morning*, 1908

the metaphysical arts. That is also why photography should be a fine art for its connection to science, this means that pictures need to be sharp and not have the haziness of the pictorialist focus.

Paul Strant is one of these artists that were inspired by pictorialist conception of expressionism but who turned away from the kitschy soft

2.1.1 Mondriaan

To me, and to the art world in the Netherlands, Mondriaan is the most important figure in De Stijl movement and the Dutch avant-garde. The way Mondriaan's work evolved throughout his whole life is extraordinary, by looking at his oeuvre you can clearly see a narrative from pictorial to the abstract. He started by painting from the natural world and mastered it very young, he went to Paris and became influenced by the avant-gardist movement and gradually his work evolved from naturalistic into the abstract works that we are so familiar with.

With his abstractions Mondriaan focuses on the relationships between lines and colors on the canvas to come to a universal expression that is more pure than art that represents nature. He tries to break the bondage between subject matter and plasticity to make the plastic into a subject matter. 'In painting you must first try to see *composition, color, and line* and not the representation as *representation*. Then you will finally come to feel the subject matter a hindrance.' (Mondriaan, 1919, p.283) What Mondriaan tries to explain here is that the essence of a painting is not the picture that it represents but structures from which it is made, therefore Mondriaan eliminates the subject matter and turns to abstraction. Subject matter is only a layer that covers the truth of a painting and thereby has become a hindrance to experience the essence in paintings.

Through his New Plastic art Mondriaan combines two opposites, the particular and the universal, to come into equilibrium. For Mondriaan this equilibrium is the essence to keep on working, in every painting that he makes he tries to come as close to this as possible. The oppositions in his paintings are of course that of horizontal and vertical lines, and lines versus color planes. He makes these into an *aesthetic equilibrium*. 'Although art is the plastic expression of *our* aesthetic emotion, we cannot therefore conclude that art is only 'the aesthetic expression of our subjective sensations.'" (Mondriaan, 1920, p.287) Through this quote you see immediately the relation with someone like Malevich; searching for a new representation of the times in which they lived. They searched for universal qualities within the medium of painting to be able to communicate to everyone the ideas that they had about painting and life.

These concepts might be better understood by the fact that in the beginning of the 20th century the first structuralist theories about language were developed. These first investigations into linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure were important to the Avant-garde artist because they gave a concept of how language works and how communication is established. Saussure's semiotics theory (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1916) breaks

focus and made abstracted photographs of shadows and buildings. (Fig.3) Strant 'called gum-printing, oil-printing, and handworking of the negative and the print "the expression of an impotent desire to paint."' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.199/200) Paul Strant was highly supported by the most influential photographer at that time in New York: Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz had connections with the major avant-garde artists working in and visiting New York. These avant-garde artists were mostly painters so through these connections to the fine arts Stieglitz tried to elevate the medium of photography match painting. Stieglitz argued that photography, like cubist painting, must search for qualities that are essential to the medium, for example: 'Stieglitz praised Picasso's "antiphotographic" work, meaning that it had renounced the simple vanishing-point perspective imposed by the camera. He advocated that art photography should be similarly antiphotographic, not necessary through abstraction, but by reaching beyond subject-matter for personal and spiritual expression.' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.181). Stieglitz was one of the first to open a gallery that supported photographers like Strant who practised photography as a fine art.

None of the American photographers made abstract photographs or other experiments of making images without a camera, instead they took on a more abstracted view to their subject matter; abstracting reality like Paul Strant. Unlike Europe, America wasn't in a crisis at the beginning of the 20th century and that's why the 'Americans did not identify non-object, or abstract, art with political revolt and social change to the degree that may European experimenters did' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.250). In America the photographers became political/social involvements in a different way Europeans, through the Farm Security Project a number of photographers started to show social disparity in a photojournalistic way. This is a radically different approach to social change and the medium of photography, one being an artistic one and the other a documental one.

The photographic artistic movement in the United States kept on rebelling against the pictorial, which in their view had nothing to do with the photographic image, but tried to imitate painting. To make this statement clear some photographers, like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston gathered together to form a group that they called Group f.64. The f.64 referred to the smallest opening of the lens on their cameras, the aperture that would give a picture the most sharpness. Although it was a movement against pictorialism they actually made a combination of pictorialism, in the sense of expression, and the abstracted photography of Paul Strant.

Some people argue that the photographs by for example Ansel Adams are the first real art photographs that do not copy painting but are highly

language up into the smaller concepts: sign, signifier, signified and referent. The Avant-garde artist took this structuralist method of deconstruction to find what the signs, signifiers and referents for a painting are. They used this method because they wanted to be able to communicate with their audience through their new developed visual language. Mondriaan developed a language of horizontal and vertical lines to create a composition; by doing so he clearly tries to communicate to us through signs and signifiers but the signified and the referent are maybe less clear to us.

3 American Avant-garde

In the 1930s and 40s a lot of the European avant-garde artist fled to the United States because of the Second World War in Europe. This is one of the factors that created in New York a blooming of abstract painting. At the same time art criticism begins to shape the art world something that would help the avant-gardistic movement of the abstract expressionist. Where before art criticism had to do with good taste now it became an avant-gardist project on its own by explaining what the artist involved in the abstract expressionist movement meant with their work.

3.1 Clement Greenberg

Clement Greenberg is one of these critics that gave himself the task of explaining the newly formed art movements and to interpret what they meant. In 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940) he begins by making a historical basis from which the American avant-garde or abstract expressionists emerged. Greenberg claims that there can be one form of art that is dominant for a period in time, for example literature in Europe by the 17th century. This dominant art becomes the prototype for all other art. All other arts will imitate the dominant art form, but at the same time the dominant art tries to absorb and incorporate all the other arts which leads to confusion and eventually to a shift of the dominant art. So in the 17th century Mannerist painting tried to imitate literature: 'All emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred to subject matter. It is no longer a question even of realistic imitation, since that is taken for granted, but of the artist's ability to interpret subject matter for poetic effects and so forth.' (Greenberg, 1940, p.556) This poetic effect is maximized in the Romantic movement of the beginning of the 19th century in which subject matter had to evoke deep existential feelings in the beholder of the painting. As we have seen earlier that against this romanticism the avant-gardes arose, who felt that art had become decadent and they focused upon social struggle of their time and the formal side of painting.



Fig. 3, Paul Strant, *Abstractions, Porch shadows, Connecticut, 1915*

In the end what Greenberg concludes is; what the avant-gardes achieved is that they accepted the boundaries of the medium that they used. 'The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space.' (Greenberg, 1940, p.558) He also gives us the explanation to why the avant-gardes used the square: 'Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical – and simplified, because simplification is also a part of the instinctive accommodation to the medium.' (Greenberg, 1940, p.558)

3.2 Harold Rosenberg

An opposing critic named Harold Rosenberg argued that the abstract expressionist like Pollock and de Kooning didn't so much emphasize the flatness of the picture plain, but that their performance, their action of making the painting is what gave a meaning to their works. So where Greenberg focused on the support structure of painting Rosenberg focused upon the performance of making; so we have a formal approach against a performative one.

Rosenberg argued that a painter had not an image in mind but the confrontation of the artist with the painting became the picture, the picture is the result of this confrontation. The act is the most important thing, therefore abstract expressionist painting is not a purist one; it doesn't have anything to do with aesthetics. The painting produced by an abstract expressionist is directly related to the artist's biography. 'The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.' (Rosenberg, 1952, p.582) Rosenberg claimed. Rosenberg's concept of a painting as a residue of a performance by an artist is radically different than Greenberg's opinion that an abstract painting is a quest to the essence of painting. With his historical overview Greenberg tries to point to a narrative in the history of painting that has led to essentialist form of abstract painting. So for Greenberg Pollock's great achievement is that he laid the canvas on the floor instead it standing on an easel, which created a different perspective to the support structures of a painting. But for Rosenberg Pollock's radical statement is that his performance above the canvas with the paint was frozen in a painting that functioned as an equivalent for his own state of mind. For Pollock his paintings originated out of his subconscious, which meant for him that, there was a deeper truth in them than a picture that was created with a conscious mind.

photographical and artistic in their own terms. One argument supporting this is that up to the 1980s art photography was black and white and based on the printing techniques that Ansel Adams developed during his lifetime. On the other hand photography was not exhibited by the major art museums and supported by art galleries until the late sixties.

3.3 Avant-garde in Europe (an 'abstract' photograph)

In Europe, and especially in Russia after the communist revolution, a lot of artist turned to photography as a medium because it could speak to the masses, which enabled the revolutionist to spread the word of the new world. El Lissitzky was an artist who was deeply involved in creating a new visual language that could communicate the new ideals, that of the communist. He used photography for the mass reproduction and to reshape the everyday life through technology, the artist becomes an engineer.

Aleksandr Rodchenko a European avant-garde artist thought that an artist should discover a medium specificity, something that he called: faktura. He worked in multiple media and made collages which seems to point to a different faktura than that of the American photographers who did not make collages and thought that a single photograph is the essence of photography: straight photography.

Rodchenko also experimented with photographing at different angles, for example 'belly button' style something that had become possible through the invention of a handheld camera in 1923. He made pictures with strange angles, close-ups and multiple exposures to abstract or unfamiliarise photographic reality. From the 1930s the socialist party didn't support the avant-garde artist anymore because they grow decadent in search for faktura and the communist party began to promote Social Realism.

3.3.1 A picture without a camera

Alvin Langdon Coburn is the first photographer that made abstract photographs called Vortographs around 1917. (Fig.4) Inspired by futurism and cubism he created photographs using mirrors, which have very little indexical information in them. 'Coburn experimented with abstraction, building a Vortoscope, a combination of mirrors that produced an image like that of a kaleidoscope, and photographing the result.' (Warner Marien, 2002, p.197) He did this only for one month.

After him dada artist Christian Schad made so called Schadographs, which has a connotation to the term Shadowgraph used by Talbot and to the German word schaden (damaged). These Schadographs were the first abstract photographs made without a camera something we know by the name of a photogram. Which leads to the avant-garde artist László Moholy-Nagy who

3.3 Rothko and Gottlieb

To get a clearer picture of the ideas surrounding the abstract expressionist paintings it is interesting to see what the artist had to say about their work. For, the critical notes by art critics helped the artist to sell their work, literally and figuratively, but they published also their own statements. For example Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko together with Barnett Newman:

1 To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

2 This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.

3 It is our function as artist to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.

4 We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.

5 It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

(Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman, 1943, p.562)

What is interesting in this statement that there is a combination of the thoughts of the two opposing critiques; 'flat forms' and 'expression'. On the one hand they speak of destroying the illusion of the pictorial and at the same time they speak about subject-matter. From a photographer's point of view this seems a paradox, but within the painter's discourse they move the subject-matter from pictorial real to the mind and intellect of the artist. The artist himself becomes subject, not in the same way as the European avant-garde who tried to make an universal language, the abstract expressionists made their own language and within this they thought a something universal will reveal itself. For: 'we do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defence. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is *prima facie* evidence that they carry some communicative power.' (Gottlieb and Rothko, 1943, p.562)

The shift in the subject-matter of the abstract expressionists gave a new élan to the concept of abstraction. Because: 'It was a common assumption

also favoured search to faktura and he thought that it could be light. Moholy-Nagy made photographs of shadows but also camera-less photos that he called: photograms. Although this technique had been used before in the 19th century for scientific purposes it hadn't been used in an artistic context. This picture made without a camera seem to be the most abstract a photograph could get, and yet the object that Moholy-Nagy placed on the paper to create his photograms are in a sense still readable or recognizable.

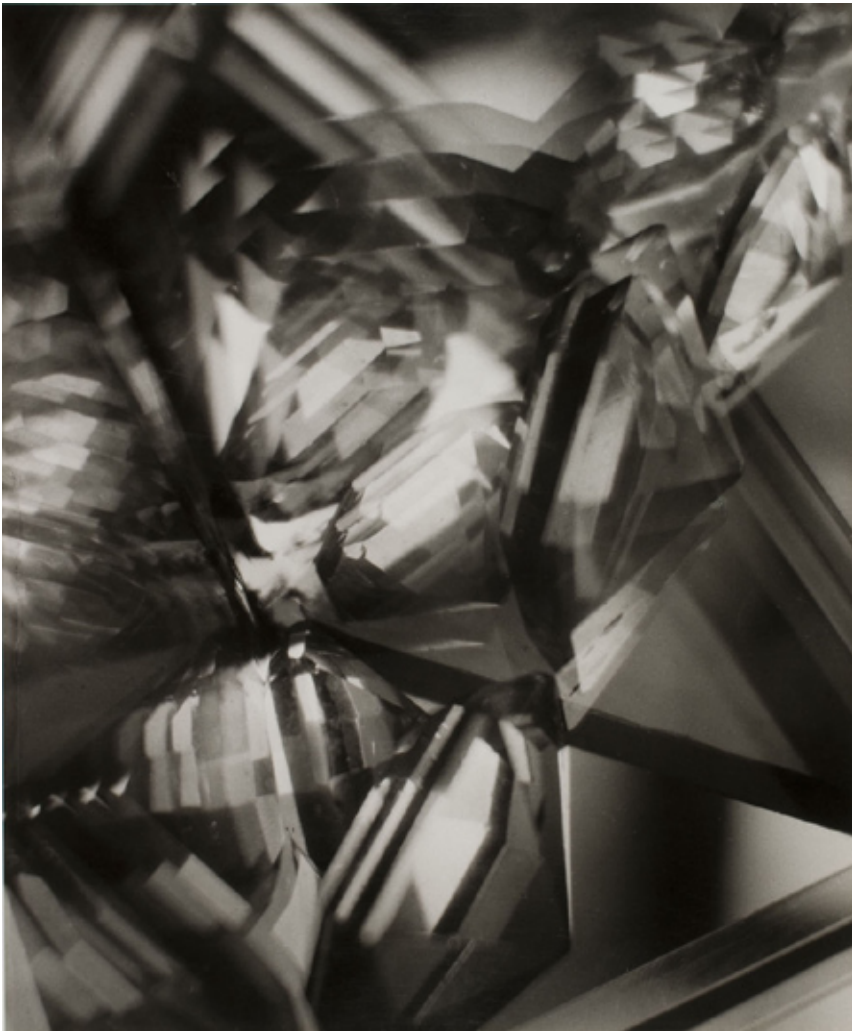


Fig. 4, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Vortograph, 1917

among the American avant-garde painters of the 1940s and 1950s that painting could be a kind of equivalent for an individual person, at least in the sense that it invited the spectator into a form of one-to-one relationship.' (Harrison Wood, 1992, p.565) This idea of work being an equivalent demolishes one of the problems of abstract art; its relation to the pictorial. Because if an abstract painting is only a proposition, a painting is flat, than after Malevich Black Square nothing really changed, but now there is a different relationship; the one with the artist.

3.4 Newman and the Sublime

In 1948 Barnett Newman wrote a text entitled 'The Sublime Is Now'. In this text he describes how art has always been looking for beauty and its relation to a sublime message within these arts. The word sublime describes a paradoxical feeling originating from the mid seventeenth century. 'Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe this contradictory feeling – pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression – was christened or re-christened by the name of the *sublime*.' (Lyotard, 1988, p.92)

Lyotard relies on text from Burke about the sublime, although Lyotard disagrees with Burke on the question if paintings can be sublime. Burke writes that painting can't be sublime because it is bound to visual representation, this was of course in a time before abstraction, however a poet for example can write a sentence that gives the reader the opportunity to associate freely with these words. The reader can generate his or her own feelings and pictures, a painting can't do. For Lyotard paintings can be sublime and generate these sublime feelings.

For Lyotard and Newman the sublime is a moment, hence the title 'The Sublime is now'. Newman's work deals with this moment of conception, a sublime moment that can't be understood. 'Occurrence is the instant which 'happens', which 'comes' unexpectedly but which, once it is there, takes its place in the network of what has happened.' (Lyotard, 1988, p.82) Newman states: 'My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space nor with the image, but with the sensation of time.' (Newman, 1949, p.86) This time is the here and now, something that is emphasised by Newman's titles like 'Be' and 'Here'. Newman 'Thus, when he seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible.' (Lyotard, 1988, p.92/93) 'Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making

3.4 Momentum

After the political orientated avant-garde and Dada movement came the Surrealists, a movement that was inspired by the ideas of Freud's subconscious. In photography and the camera the surrealist recognized a good tool to make visual equivalent of their subconscious writings because photography gives an instant image. One of these Surrealist is Man Ray who invented a technique called solarization, a technique whereby a photographic print is exposed to light while it is being developed, the result is that the whites in a photo become black but the grey remains the same.

The influential photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson was inspired by the Surrealists for their conception that a photograph in a fraction of a second could capture an image of inner truth: 'The decisive moment', 'the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise origination of forms which gave that event its proper expression.' (Cartier-Bresson, 1952, p.258) (Fig.5)



Fig. 5, Henrie Cartier-Bresson, Hyères, 1932

it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.' (Newman, 1948, p.574) So it seems that the individual experience becomes the sublime messages, this individualisation grows in society after the 30s and 40s.

4 Art as autonomous object

In the late 1950s and early 60s the claim of expression in abstract art had become a hegemonic one. Whenever an artist made something abstract it became immediately an expression of deep feelings and subconscious urges. Abstract art seemed to have lost something; it became a window not on the pictorial real but a window to the inner being of its creator, the artist. Abstract art lost the promise of being empty, being something in its self and reflecting its own being.

4.1 Ad Reinhardt

Ad Reinhardt is one of these artists who consider abstraction not to be merely an expression of a subject but as an entity in its self. In 'Art as Art' Reinhardt defines art as something independent from everything else, something that refers only to its self and nothing outside. Therefore art can only be described by what it is not. 'The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else.' (Reinhardt, 1962, p.806) Within Reinhardt's world art is an institution that functions purely on its own and needs to have no connection to anything else, art is autonomous. That's also why an abstract work of art only reflects its own being.

To be able to express these theories about art in works they needed to be accompanied by statements and conceptions about the history of art. Reinhardt describes this history like this: 'The one history of painting progresses from the painting of a variety of ideas with a variety of subjects and objects, to one idea with a variety of subjects and objects, to one subject with a variety of objects, to one object with a variety of subjects, then to one object with one subject, to one object with no subject, and to one subject with no object, then to the idea of no object and no subject and no variety at all. There is nothing less significant in art, nothing more exhausting and immediately exhausted, than 'endless variety.'" (Reinhardt, 1962, p.808)

Reinhardt emphasizes the formalness of art and radicalizes the idea that art is autonomous and reflects only its own being. 'The one meaning in art-as-art, past or present, is art meaning. When an art object is separated from its original time and place and moved into the art museum, it gets emptied and purified of all its meanings except one. A religious object that becomes a work of art in an art museum loses all its religious meanings.' (Reinhardt, 1962, p.807)

4 The abstract expressionist

Photography in the fifties was dominated by romantic personalised photography like that of Minor White. For example Aaron Siskind made abstracted close-up photographs of walls with peeling paint as if they were abstract expressionist paintings. In these close-ups he saw a human inner drama, the wall and the photograph of the wall both were an expression of an individual inner state of mind.

An other artist Lotte Jacobi made what she called photogenics, by exposing photographic paper to light she made paintings with light. (Fig.6) These might be considered true abstract expressionist photographic works; they bare the actions of the artist inside of them, like a Pollock the movement of Jacobi is captured by on the paper.



Fig. 6, Lotte Jacobi, Untitled (Photogenic), 1946-1955

5 The Conceptualist

Although photographers had been searching for what the Russian avant-garde called the faktura of photography the medium did not have a distinct identity when in the sixties and seventies when artists began to use

4.2 Frank Stella

Another artist that took this formal approach to abstraction was Frank Stella. Stella even rebelled/fomalized by letting a friend Carl Andre, write an artist's statement, which stated that: 'He is interested in the necessities of painting. ... His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.' (Andre, 1959, p.201) Stella, the same as Reinhardt, rebelled against the sentiment of that 'In the forties and the fifties, there was a revival of the late-romantic cliché of the artist as instinctive resource of creativity. (de Duve, 1996, p.202) Stella began by using household paint and brushes instead of expansive oil paint and tool to create paintings that were constructed from geometrical shapes and forms in an attempt to demolish his own persona and to create works that had credibility through its being. This meant that 'Harold Rosenberg's concept of 'Action Painting' became suddenly trite and hopelessly romantic, whereas Clement Greenberg's understanding of "American-type Painting" in terms of formal results, historical conventions, and flatness of the medium gained momentum and credibility.' (de Duve, 1996, p201) Greenberg's theory became the template for a generation of artist, called the Minimalist to justify their abstract works.

'The essential norms or conventions of painting are also the limiting conditions with which a marked-up surface must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed.' (Greenberg, 1973, p.202)

Greenberg thought that Stella's work and that of other Minimalist were painting or sculptures that were not successful and therefore bad paintings and sculptures. This had mostly to do with the fact that works by Stella or someone like Donald Judd couldn't be judged as paintings but neither as sculptures, something that in Greenberg's world could not exist. For Greenberg's concept of Modernity is a discipline that is self-critical; every artistic medium must display its own unique nature (specificity), for painting this was its flatness, two-dimensional space. This means that Modernistic painting is specific and minimal art is generic, because it is interdisciplinary and therefore Minimal art is bad art nevertheless bad art is still art. So Stella and the minimalists pushed the boundaries of Greenberg's Modernity to a point where their works become arbitrary objects, but exactly this became an interesting concept to refute Greenberg. Arbitrariness became a central quality of a work of art, something that made it autonomous. As said

it as material to make art. The diverse way in which photography is used; as documentation, scientific research, commercial and artistic material that makes photography into an indistinct medium in opposition to painting that had become a distinctive medium. Within the post-medium condition in which the arts find themselves those days photography was a unique medium to work in because it is used in so many ways, from everyday life to art. So in the sixties pop art begins to use photography from magazines and make it into works like collages that reflect on the consumer society that begins to unfold itself. Other artist began to use photography in a more direct way and for its objective authority that it gained from institution of science and law. This link to everyday life would become a major advantage for photography in comparison to other media. This brings us to conceptualism 'A largely retrospective term, it is applied to an art that wanted to put ideas, investigations and definitions first.' (Campany, 2003, p.17)

Conceptual art can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp and the fact that he shifts the questions relating to art from 'What is beautiful?' to 'What is art?' For example a readymade the Fountain asked the viewer to nominate an everyday object to become an art object by calling it art. This shift towards self-reflection or self-criticism is one that is essential to the practise of the conceptualist movement.

The conceptualists inherited the use of the medium of photography from their teachers of whom were mostly Minimalist. The Minimalist used to photograph their installations in exhibitions as a document of the context of their works; the relation of the work to that of the space. The conceptualist began to use photography in the same documental mode but documented work that was objectless and therefore the documentation became the art object. Photography was to the conceptualist a cheap and easy way to record their ideas in an image; to them it was a kind of non-medium. 'There was no scramble to define its essence and no programme about what it should be.' (Campany, 2003, p.18) The conceptualist where more focussed upon the bigger picture of what art means than the questions surrounding the media used, but above all photography wasn't considered to be an artistic medium but a means to create truthful images.

The post war modernism is mostly concerned with purity of the medium that is used, for painting this is the flatness of the picture plain like in the works of Pollock, Rothko and Newman. For photography this essence might be the fact that it's always representational. 'photography is inherently representational, inherently descriptive.' (Campany, 2003, p.18) Therefore it can never be pure or autonomous.

before Judd's art works are neither paintings nor sculptures and therefore they are generic, they become arbitrary objects. 'What we have is generic art with only logical, not aesthetic, ties to history.' (de Duve, 1996, p.232)

Judd's justifications for his work are based within Greenberg's theory, but he turns the negative connotation of Greenberg's to the arbitral around and diminishes the aesthetic side of an artwork: 'A work needs only to be interesting.' (Judd, 1965, p.239) This radical turn to the reason, which makes bold claims and pointy statements like: 'The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, fomlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness. This is always the end of art.' (Reinhardt, 1962, p.809) would eventually lead to artist like Joseph Kosuth, a conceptualist.

4.4 Joseph Kosuth

Joseph Kosuth wrote an essay entitled 'Art after Philosophy' that basically claims that philosophy is dead and that it will be taken over by art, because they both work with the same materials namely language or linguistics. In the process of going from Minimalism to Conceptualism the art object has vanished and only the concept of art has survived. As we have seen in the first chapter the Conceptualist based themselves in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp who went from the specific (painter) to the generic art (artist). The Conceptualist had to do the same to become an artist. 'You may become an artist without being a painter, but hardly without having been one. As we have seen, this holds true for all minimal and conceptual artist.' (de Duve, 1996, p.252) Almost all Conceptualist and Minimalist artist had a background in either painting or sculpture but moved to 'non-media'.

Conceptual art is generic art; Kosuth states that every artwork should question art at large. 'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art ... That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art.' (Kosuth, 1969, p.245) In quotes like this you immediately see the influence of Greenberg and how his theory was read in a different way than he intended.

For Kosuth a work of art is a proposition, a statement about what art should be: 'Works of art are analytic propositions... One begins to realize that art's "art condition" is a conceptual state ... In other words, the propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character-that is, they do not describe the behaviour of the physical or even mental objects; the express definitions of art, or the formal consequences of definitions of art. Accordingly, we can say that art operates on a logic.' (Kosuth, 1969, p.245)

This eventually leads to: 'A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation

'Within conceptualism photography reflected on itself not by looking inwards to define a special or essential character but by looking outward to reflect on how mass culture understood photography, how it put its descriptive character to use in everyday life.' (Campany, 2003, p.18)

So photography found its modernist ideal in representation, which is the direct opposite of paintings abstraction. The document's value to photography became the most important function in the medium and the reason why artists used photography.

'In some senses that wide gap between art photography and artists using photography can be read as an ideological one: aesthetic conservatism versus radical vanguardism; or formalism versus post-formalism; or a defence of the 'soul' of photography against the claim that it doesn't have one; introversion versus social engagement.' (Campany, 2003, p.19)

of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori' (Kosuth, 1969, p.244). An artwork is a definition of art, a tautology. For Kosuth art is the most important thing that exists and is something that is completely autonomous and therefore can and has to be tautological. For the tautological status of an artwork frees it from any connection to the real world, it creates its own truth and logic.

Chapter 3

Relation to my work

1 Concluding chapter one and two

All three stages of abstract art described in chapter two can be linked to a relationship with the political climate in which they emerged: the European avant-garde where highly involved in the class struggle in the beginning of the last century. The abstract expressionist celebrated the American freedom and individualism in the context of the cold war, in which communism opposed capitalist individualism and the conceptualist tried to get away from the ruling politics and art market to purify it so it would be autonomous. In a modernistic approach to this political relationship we might transform this into subject matter but from a post-modern perspective this is more one layer of the many layers that can be seen in an abstract work of art. It seems to be that art is influenced by what we can call the 'zeitgeist', in hindsight we can point to major change occurred in public opinion and how these were preceded by art movements and artists.

What we also notice is how much artists are influenced by their predecessors, every new artist is supposed to react to the present or historical condition of art. This action-reaction process asks for bold statements that sometimes seem to undermine or over-value the importance of a work of art. Especially in the case of a conceptualist like Kosuth the statement that he makes is such a strong one that it doesn't leave any room for an artwork to exist – works made by Kosuth become illustrations of his tautological art philosophy.

1.1 Abstract photography

As we have seen in the first chapter the combination of the abstract and the photographic image have never been fruitful. One of the reasons seem to be the fact that most of the attempts were heavily influenced by abstract painting, they seemed to be imitating abstract art but lacking the introspective necessity from which abstract painting grew. The difficulty for photography in relation to painting and art in general was the fact that the medium was both a social tool and a visual artistic medium at the same time. For a medium like painting this problem wasn't a problem, through history a painting became an artwork by default, something that Greenberg remarked although he added that this doesn't mean that it is a successful painting. For photography

this meant that it tried to imitate mostly painting or was combined by an artist with painting, the most influential photographers mostly started out as painters before switching, sometimes partially, to photography.

The political emphasis of the European avant-garde artist working with photography also didn't really help to give photography an autonomous status as an art form, it was more an experimental form of visual communication and advertisement.

1.2 Index

It is only after the conceptualists realized their naïve trust in the indexical nature of photography that it became truly accepted as art. The conceptualist brought photographs into the art world, but to them the fact that the medium was not accepted gave it an authority outside the art world and an unladen artistic history that would transfer the emphasis to their conception of art rather than to the medium. This became problematic, because the presence of the medium was always visible. For an artist like Jeff Wall precisely this problem of media presence and the indexical nature of photography became a major subject in his work. By making large staged photographs that appear to be taken in a moment he questions the truthfulness of photography and its indexical nature. It is through artist like Wall that photography became reflective towards its own Modern essence: its indexical nature.

2 My practice

How does this all relate to my work? One of the major concepts in my work regarding photography is the fact that the medium is by default indexical, or what you might call 'blind sight'. To be able to focus upon this I have chosen to work with light and photosensitive paper and in some works with optics. I did this because in my opinion the heart of the medium of photography is more the photosensitive agent reacting with the light than the optic and black box that a camera is. It is through the photosensitive agent that an image made by a camera can be recorded and fixed instead of disappearing. The camera existed before the invention of photography and was being used to help make drawings by hand.

Over the last ten to fifteen years we grew to be intensely suspicious of photography, because through the digitalisation of the medium came the realization that manipulation became more accessible. Through digitalisation we became more aware of the possibilities of manipulation, because almost all forms of manipulation were possible in the analogical era of photography, we were just less familiar with them as we are today. But at the same time these days photography is still the indexical medium that holds up in a court of law as evidence.

This ambivalent relation to photography is something that I try to understand through my work. By stripping the medium to an abstract form that relies on the bare concepts that form the basis on which it functions; light and a photosensitive agent. The forms that the works take also questions the relationship which photography has to the world and to other media in the context of the fine arts.

2.1 Photograms

One of my recent works is a piece consisting of three large color photograms. The three works are all 127cm high and 380cm wide. Each photogram has two colour gradients, paired complementary (red/cyan, green/magenta, blue/yellow), flowing into each other from the sides. The two gradients on one paper are not in the exact same position, there is for example a red gradient that blends into a cyan gradient but they don't overlap each other completely, so both can be seen separate and blended into each other. The works were made in a colour darkroom with a colour projector set an angle of about 30° to the paper. Though this angle one side of the paper was situated closer to the light source than the other end of the paper. One physical property of light is that over a distance in space it will decrease in strength, which produces the photographic paper a gradient. To get two gradients the paper had to be exposed twice and in between reversed in place and the colour filtered light set to be complementary.

What interest me about this work that it both speaks to the abstract and objective (or index) in relation to the medium. Because through their size and abstraction they carry a strong relation to abstract painting, and especially to abstract expressionist colorfield painting like that of Barnett Newman. The works all have a size that will let the viewer experience the reaction of colored light reacting with one another on a photosensitive paper. The works are big enough to fill the viewers whole field of vision, which allows for a deep confrontation with the colors that gradually changes from one color in to the other. The choice of color and composition however reflects a more minimalist approach; the colors are chosen to be the primary colors from the RGB color model and are complimentary paired to create a greyish color where they both meet. The composition has been kept to simple strokes that partially overlap to be able to show gradients separate from and reacting with one another. The historical conflict between abstract expressionism and the minimalism interest me. The question whether a piece of art work is an equivalent of an artist state of mind, the romantic struggle of the artist with the work and the world, or just an autonomous object that simply is. To me the artist biography influences his work, but more in a contextual way and therefore a work of art

has to have autonomy to be able to be.

To be able to create these abstract works I had to change my working method, I had to switch from an observer behind the camera to a more preformative attitude towards my work. I needed to perform certain procedures to be able to capture the image that I wanted on the photosensitive paper and thereby the works become not only an index of the light but also a combination of index, process and action. This change in method creates a second index in the work through that of the performance, performances like that of Newman and the abstract expressionist described by Rosenberg.

In my work there is not a political connotation however over the last couple of years there has been a change in the 'zeitgeist' in relation to the abstract image. Even a capitalist 'realist' like Damien Hirst lately turned to abstract work with his spot paintings. Abstract works have become more relevant because they show us an image with a meaning that lies beyond its appearance. An abstract work in a way transfers meaning to something that isn't or can't be illustrated within an image, which means that this meaning is not a singular one. This multiple, layered meaning or index is what makes a work less political in the modernistic sense of a singular narrative of the last century.

The change in attitude towards the medium of photography is interesting because of its struggle, the social and the artistic use of the medium are sometimes in conflict with each other and that's where my interest are. I am not interested whether an image is a fake; I am more interested in the fact that we decide to call an image a fake, the conflict between real and fake. This conflict can be traced back to the index and its ambivalent nature, what we see is real and at the same time it is not.

2.2 Projecting camera #1

This installation is created out of a camera, a slide projection screen and a light source. The camera functions as a projector to project an image of its self. The shutter of a 35mm SLR-camera is opened and there is a slide where normally the film is. The back is open onto which a light source is pointed that shines light through the slide and the lens onto a projection screen.

With this installation I wanted to turn the function of the camera inside out, by turning the camera into a projector. With this installation we see how optics and the camera can function in a two directions: as a camera and as a projector.

This installation will be surrounded by the color photograms as they have been described above, through this combination the photograms will become less static and their relationship to photography will become clearer. The

other way around the abstraction of the photograms will give the projecting camera autonomy and spaciousness to function as a device on its own.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this thesis is by describing and researching certain historical processes within the discourse of art and photography to make a basis through which to understand my own position. By linking two seemingly opposing forms of images, the indexical and the abstract. I try to understand them both in a different way because each can be the other; an abstract image is an index in the understanding of Rosenberg's action painting. Works made by the Abstract expressionist such as Pollock and Newman can be seen as an index of the artist's performance. Most abstract images focus the viewer's attention to their surface and thereby transferring it to something that is beyond this physical object.

A photograph immediately draws attention to its indexical nature which seems to be more accessible and easier to read but can be opaque as an abstract. For example a Jeff Wall work without context can appear as a normal photograph, it's only afterwards that you know it is composed.

Through my own work I try to investigate these different forms of images and the layers of indexes they carry with them. The first photographic index is the light that created an abstract image on the photosensitive paper and a second index is created through the actions that I needed to perform to create the work. This half automation of indexical registration and physical performance brings together questions surrounding photography and abstract art. Through this thesis I have tried to base myself more firmly in the discourses surrounding the different types of images to which my own work speaks and to understand them better. This will give me a stronger starting point from which I can judge, contextualize and further develop the work.

Bibliography

Harrison, C and Wood, P (1992)
Art in theory 1900-1990,
Oxford Blackwell Publishers

De Duve, T (1996)
Kant After Duchamp,
Cambridge MIT press

Liotard, J F (1988)
The Inhuman,
Stanford University press

Warner Marien, M (2002)
Photography: A Cultural History,
London Laurence King Publishing

Campany, D (2003)
Art and Photography,
London Phaidon press