The End of Art Theory

Criticism and Postmodernity

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Seeing Sense

Although photography is a 'visual medium', it is not a 'purely visual' medium. I am not alluding simply to the fact that we rarely see a photograph *in use* which is not accompanied by writing (albeit this is a highly significant fact), even the uncaptioned 'art' photograph, framed and isolated on the gallery wall, is invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other. It will be objected that this is indistinct and insignificant background noise to our primary act of *seeing*. If I may be excused a physiological analogy, the murmur of the circulation of the blood is even more indistinct, but no less important for that.

I

In a familiar cinematic convention, subjective consciousness – reflection, introspection, memory – is rendered as a disembodied 'voice-over' accompanying an otherwise silent image-track. I am not suggesting that such an interior monologue similarly accompanies our looking at photographs, nor do I wish to claim that in the process of looking at a photograph we mentally translate the image in terms of a redundant verbal description. What I 'have in mind' is better expressed in the image of transparent

coloured inks which have been poured onto the surface of water in a glass container: as the inks spread and sink their boundaries and relations are in constant alternation, and areas which at one moment are distinct from one another may, at the next, overlap. Analogies are of course *only* analogies, I simply wish to stress the fluidity of the phenomenon by contrast with the unavoidable rigidity of some of the schematic descriptions which will follow.

'Photography is a visual medium.' At a strictly physiological level it is quite straightforward what we mean by 'the visual': it is that aspect of our experience which results from light being reflected from objects into our eyes. We do not however *see* our retinal images: as is well known, although we see the world as right-way-up, the image on our retina is inverted; we have two slightly discrepant retinal images, but see only one image; we make mental allowances for the known relative sizes of objects which override the actual relative sizes of their own images on our retina; we also make allowances for perspectival effects such as foreshortening, the foundation of the erroneous popular judgement that such effects in photography are 'distortions'; our eyes operate in scanning movements, and the body is itself generally in motion, such stable objects as we see are therefore *abstracted* from an ongoing phenomenal flux,[1] moreover, attention to such objects 'out there' in the material world is constantly subverted as wilful concentration dissolves into involuntary association, and so on. The detail of these and many other factors as described in the literature of the psychology of perception, cognitive psychology, and related disciplines, is complex, the broad conclusion to be drawn from this work may nevertheless be simply expressed:

> What we see . . . is not a pure and simple coding of the light patterns that are focused on the retina. Somewhere between the retina and the visual cortex the inflowing signals are modified to provide information that is already linked to a learned response . . . Evidently what reaches the visual cortex is evoked by the external world but is hardly a direct or simple replica of it.[2]

The fact that seeing is no simple matter has of course been

acknowledged in visual art for centuries. It is a fact which painting, facing the problem of representing real space in terms of only two dimensions, could not avoid (for its part, sculpture particularly emphasised the imbrication of the visual and the kinesthetic, the extent to which seeing is a muscular and visceral activity). At times the aims of visual art became effectively *identified* with those of a science of seeing; Berenson complained of the Renaissance preoccupation with problems of perspective: 'Our art has a fatal tendency to become science, and we hardly possess a masterpiece which does not bear the marks of having been a battlefield for divided interests'. Across the modern period, at least in the West, it has been very widely assumed that an empirical science of perception can provide not only a necessary but a sufficient account of the material facts upon which visual art practices are based. Thus, in this present century, and particularly in the field of art education, the psychology of perception has become the most readily accepted art-related 'scientific' discipline, the one in which 'visual artists' most readily identify their own concerns (correspondingly, where philosophical theories have been used they have generally had a phenomenological orientation). Certainly such studies in the psychology of appearances are necessary, if only to provide a corrective to the naïve idea of purely retinal vision. But if the explanation of seeing is arrested at this point it serves to support an error of even greater consequence: that ubiquitous belief in 'the visual' as a realm of experience totally separated from, indeed antithetical to, 'the verbal'.

Seeing is not an activity divorced from the rest of consciousness; any account of visual art which is adequate to the facts of our actual experience must allow for the imbrication of the visual with other aspects of thought. In a 1970 overview of extant research, M. J. Horowitz has presented a tripartite model of the dominant modes of thought in terms of 'enactive', 'image', and 'lexical'.[3] *Enactive* thought is muscular and visceral, is prominent in infancy and childhood, and remains a more or less marked feature of adult thinking. For example: on entering my kitchen I found that I had forgotten the purpose of my visit; no word or image came to mind, but my gesture of picking up something with a fork led me to the implement I was seeking. The enactive

may be conjoined with the visual. Albert Einstein reported that, for him: 'The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images . . . [elements] of visual and some of muscular type'.[4] The enactive also merges with the verbal: Horowitz supplies the example of a person who was temporarily unable to find the phrase, 'he likes to pin people down', an expression called to mind only after the speaker's manual gesture of pinning something down. We should also note the findings of psychoanalysis concerning the type of neurotic symptom in which a repressed idea finds expression via the enactive realisation of a verbal metaphor; an example from Freud's case histories – Dora's hysterical vomiting at the repressed recollection of Herr K.'s sexual advances, an idea which 'made her sick'.[5]

Mental *images* are those psychic phenomena which we may assimilate to a sensory order: visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory. For the purposes of this essay, however, I shall use the term 'image' to refer to visual images alone. If I wish to describe, say, an apartment I once lived in, I will base my description on mental images of its rooms and their contents. Such a use of imagery is a familiar part of normal everyday thought. However, not all imaged thought is so orderly and controlled. We may find ourselves making connections between things, on the basis of images, which take us unawares; we may not be conscious of any wilful process by which one image led to another, the connection seems to be made gratuitously and instantaneously. The result of such a 'flash' may be a disturbing idea which we put instantly out of mind, or it may provide a witticism for which we can happily take credit; or more commonly it will seem simply inconsequential. At times, we may deliberately seek the psychic routes which bring these unsolicited interruptions to rational thinking. In the 'day-dream', for example, the basic scenario and its protagonists are consciously chosen, but one's thoughts are then abandoned to an only minimally controlled drift on more or less autonomous currents of associations. The sense of being in control of our mental imagery is, of course, most completely absent in the *dream* itself. Dreams 'come to us' as if from another place, and the flow of their images obeys no rational logic. Freud's study of dreams led him

to identify a particular sort of 'dream logic' radically different from the logic of rational thought: the *dream-work*, the (il)logic of the 'primary processes' of the unconscious. In a certain common misconception, the unconscious is conceived of as a kind of bottomless pit to which has been consigned all that is dark and mysterious in 'human nature'. On the contrary, unconscious processes operate 'in broad daylight'; although they are structurally and qualitatively different from the processes of rational thought and symbolisation enshrined in linguistics and philosophical logic, they are nevertheless an integral part of normal everyday thought processes taken as a whole. The apparent illogicality which so obviously characterises the dream invades and suffuses waking discourse in the form of slips of the tongue, and other involuntary acts, and in jokes. Additionally, and most importantly to this present discussion, the intrusion of the primary processes into rational thought ('secondary processes') governs the mechanisms of visual association.

Freud identifies four mechanisms in the dream-work: 'condensation'; 'displacement'; 'considerations of representability'; and 'secondary revision'. In *condensation*, a process of 'packing into a smaller space' has taken place: 'If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space'.[6] It is this process which provides the general feature of *over-determination*, by which, for any manifest element, there can be a plurality of latent elements (dream-thoughts). By *displacement*, Freud means two related things. First, that process by which individual elements in the manifest dream stand in for elements of the dream-thoughts by virtue of an association, or chain of associations, which link the two. Thus displacement is implicated in the work of condensation: displacements from two or more separate latent elements, along separate associative paths; may eventually reach a point of intersection. The second, related, meaning of the term 'displacement' is that process according to which the manifest dream can have a different 'emotional centre' from the latent thoughts. Something quite trivial may occupy centre stage in the dream, as it were 'receive the emotional spotlight'; what has occurred here is a displacement of feelings and attention from the thing, person, or situ-

ation which is in reality responsible for the arousal of those feelings. It is thus possible for something as inconsequential as, say, an ice-cube to become in a dream the object of a strong feeling.

Of *considerations of representability*, Freud writes:

> imagine that you had undertaken to replace a political leading article in a newspaper by a series of illustrations . . . the people and concrete objects mentioned in the article could be easily represented . . . but you would expect to meet with difficulties when you came to the portrayal of all the abstract words and all those parts of speech which indicate relations between various thoughts.[7]

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud describes the various ways in which the dream deals, in visual terms, with such logical relations as implication, disjunction, contradiction, and so on. We should note a particular role of the verbal in the transition from the abstract to the pictorial: 'bridge words' are those which, in more readily lending themselves to visualisation, provide a means of displacement from the abstract term to its visual representation. Thus, for example, the idea of 'reconciliation' might find visual expression through the intermediary of the expression 'bury the hatchet', which can be more easily transcribed in visual terms. This representational strategy is widely to be found in advertising, which relies extensively on our ability to read images in terms of underlying verbal texts. It may be appreciated that such readings readily occur 'wild', that is to say, where they were not intended.

Secondary revision is the act of ordering, revising, supplementing the contents of the dream so as to make a more intelligible whole out of it. It comes into play when the dreamer is nearing a waking state and/or recounting the dream. Freud had some doubts as to whether this process should properly be considered to belong to the dream-work itself (in an article of 1922 he definitely excludes it). However, it is not important to our purposes here that this be decided; we should note that secondary revision is a process of dramatisation, of narrativisation.

Returning now to Horowitz's schema of types of mental representation, *lexical* thought is 'thinking in words'. It should be stressed however that this is not simply a matter of the silent mental rehearsal of a potentially actualised speech. Lev Vygotsky has identified an *inner* speech fundamentally different in its nature from externally directed communicative speech. Inner speech: 'appears disconnected and incomplete . . . shows a tendency towards an altogether specific form of abbreviation: namely, omitting the subject of a sentence and all words connected with it, while preserving the predicate'.[8] Inner speech in the adult develops out of the 'egocentric speech' (Piaget) of the small child. We should remark that Freud describes the primary processes as preceding the secondary processes in the mental development of the individual; they are preverbal in origin and thus prefer to handle images rather than words, where words *are* handled they are treated as far as possible like images. Thus, when Vygotsky observes that, in inner speech: 'A single word is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in external speech',[9] we may be confident that the reference is to that same centrally important aspect of the primary processes that we encounter in Freud's work as 'condensation'. Freud notes that, in dreams, words and phrases are just meaningful elements among others, accorded no more or less status than are images, and their meanings have no necessary relation to the meanings they would carry in waking speech. Thus Lyotard has spoken of 'word-things', the result of condensation:

> their 'thingness' consists in their 'thickness'; the normal word belongs to a transparent order of language: its meaning is immediate . . . the product of condensation, as the name indicates, is, on the contrary, opaque, dense, it hides its other side, its other sides.[10]

I prefaced my references to Horowitz's compartmentalised model of thought by stressing the fluidity of the actual processes it describes. Horowitz himself writes:

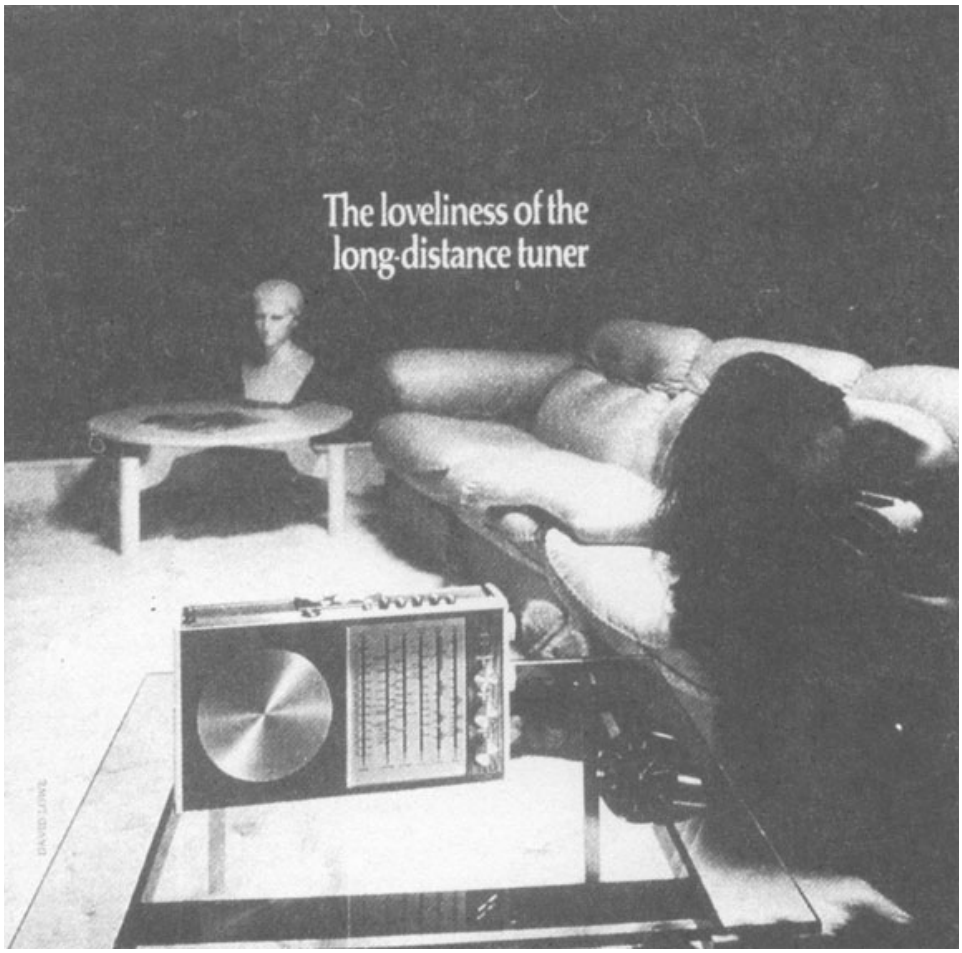
> Normal streams of thought will flow simultaneously in many compartments without clear-cut division between modes of

> representation. Enactions blur into imagery in the form of kinesthetic, somesthetic, and vestibular or visceral images. Image representation blends with words in the form of faint auditory images of words. Words and enactive modes merge through images of speaking.[11]

Inescapably, the *sense* of the things we see is constructed across a complex of exchanges between these various registers of representation. Differing perceptual situations will however tend to elicit differing configurations and emphases of response just as sculpture will tend to prioritise the enactive and kinesthetic suffusion of visual imagery, so photographs predominantly tend to prompt a complex of exchanges between the visual and verbal registers: as I began by observing, the greater part of photographic practice is, *de facto*, 'scripto-visual'; this fact is nowhere more apparent than in advertising, and it may help here to refer to a particular example.

II

The particular conjuncture into which this advertisement was launched, in Britain in the early 1960s, included a best-selling novel by Alan Sillitoe, and a popularly successful film based on this novel – directed by Tony Richardson and featuring Tom Courtenay – which retained the title of the original text: *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. The fact that Tom Courtenay was at that time a prominent emerging young 'star' of British theatre and cinema ensured that the institutional spaces of television, and newspapers and magazines, were also penetrated. During the particular months in which this advertisement appeared therefore, the expression 'the loneliness of the long-distance runner' was transmitted across the apparatuses of publishing, cinema, television, and journalism, to become inscribed in what we might call the 'popular pre-conscious' – those ever-shifting contents which we may reasonably suppose can be called to mind by the majority of individuals in a given society at a particular moment in its history; that which is 'common knowledge'. Two attributes therefore are immediately


The loveliness of the
long-distance tuner

entrained by this content-fragment of the popular pre-conscious which serves the advertisement as *pretext*: success and contemporaneity; additionally, the visual image across which the fragment is inscribed is clearly open to the implication of the erotic. Ambition, contemporaneity, eroticism, together with the substantial primacy of the visual in their inscription: *the day-dream*.

In his 1908 essay, 'The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming', Freud remarks that day-dreams serve one, or both, of two impulses: 'Either they are ambitious wishes, serving to exalt the person creating them, or they are erotic'.[12] To identify these two wishes in all day-dreams is not, of course, to suggest that the manifest contents of such phantasies are themselves stereotyped or unchangeable: 'On the contrary, they fit themselves into the changing impressions of life, alter with the vicissitudes of life; every deep new impression gives them what might be called a "date-stamp"'.[13] As for thinking in pictures, in his 1923 paper, 'The Ego and the Id', Freud remarks that 'in many people this seems to be a favourite method . . . in some ways, too, it approximates more closely to unconscious processes than does thinking in words, and it is unquestionably older than the latter both ontogenetically and phylogenetically'.[14] The child, prior to its acquisition of language, inhabits a model of thought not adapted to external reality but rather aimed at creating an imaginary world in which it seems to gratify its own wishes by hallucinatory objects. The day-dream – the conscious phantasy in which the subject constructs an imaginary scenario for the fulfillment of a wish – is one form of survival of such infantile thinking into adult life.

Ambition, eroticism, contemporaneity. The theme of ambition is obviously central to advertising, as is the erotic (which is, anyhow, latent in all acts of looking). In this particular advertisement the expression, 'the loneliness of the long-distance runner' offers a phantasy identification within a syndrome of success, and with a successful figure – as a certain familiar style of promotional language might have put it: 'Tom Courtenay *is* the long-distance runner', ahead of his competitors, the 'leading man' both in the fiction and in reality. This particular expression at that particular conjuncture brings the ambitious wish up to date. The conjunc-

tion of ambition and eroticism here is economically achieved through a pair of substitutions – a 'v' for an 'n', and a 't' for an 'r' – which tacks the manifest verbal text onto its *pre-text* in the pre-conscious. By this device, the verbal fragment faces onto both manifest and latent contents of the image.

The text says that the tuner is lovely, what it simultaneously *means* (through reference to conventional associations surrounding women) is that the woman is lovely; thus the word 'loveliness' acts as a relay linking the radio to the woman – a movement which facilitates the displacement of an emotional investment ('cathexis') from the one to the other. The woman is 'lovely', she is also 'lonely': the suppressed term here serving as the material absence which nevertheless anchors the meaning of the woman's posture and, beyond, the entire 'mood' of the picture. Apart from the configuration of the woman's pose, the mood is given most predominantly in the way the scene has been lit; it is the sort of lighting popularly referred to as 'intimate' – a word which also takes a sexual sense. The term 'intimate' here is not reached by purely subjective association, the association is conventionally determined to the point that we may consider this lighting effect to belong to the complex of 'considerations of representability' in respect of this term. The suppressed term 'lonely', then, in conjunction with the connotations of the lighting, anchors the particular sort of *narrative* implications of the moment depicted in the image, implications readily linked to the phantasy of seduction, a theme very widely encountered across advertising.

Along the axis woman/radio we encounter a double oscillation between revelation and concealment. First, the visible marks which dictate the reading 'woman' also suggest the reading 'naked' – there is not a single signifier of clothing. However, from the point of view offered by the shot, this additional reading cannot be confirmed; but it nevertheless insists even in the means of concealment: the veil of hair, a time-honoured convention for signifying feminine nudity without *showing* it (see, for example, conventional pictorial representations of Eve, and the verbal text of 'Lady Godiva'). Secondly, while the woman's body is hidden, averted, the radio is completely exposed – lit and positioned to offer itself in precisely that 'full-frontal nudity' denied at the

other terminal of the relay. Through the agency of this oscillation, then, set in motion by the ambiguity of the woman, the cathexis of the *product* is further overdetermined.

This sketch analysis of an advertisement is to indicate how manifest visual and verbal elements engage with each other and with latent registers of phantasy, memory, and knowledge, much as cogs engage gear trains: transmitting, amplifying, transforming, the initial input. Obviously, in the act of looking at such an advertisement we do not conduct the sort of conscious analysis I have just outlined; this is not what I am claiming; I am saying that a substantial part of its *sense* is achieved in the way I have just described, albeit we experience these effects 'in the blink of an eye'. Moreover, and most importantly, such effects are not erased, they become inscribed in memory; Horowitz: 'Perceptions are retained for a short time, in the form of images, which allows continued emotional response and conceptual appraisal. In time, retained images undergo two kinds of transformation: reduction of sensory vividness and *translation of the images into other forms of representation (such as words)*'[15] (my emphasis). It is here that we encounter a general social effect of photographs. The social order is, in a sense, built of blocks of verbal discourse of varying degrees of formal organisation. A significant social effect of a photograph is the product of its imbrication within such discursive formations. It is easily appreciated that advertising activates such formations as, for example, those which concern family life, erotic encounters, competitiveness, and so on. The role of the verbal in advertising will be just as readily conceded – writing is physically integrated into nearly all advertisements. But 'art' photographs are not exempt from such determinations of meaning, determinations which are achieved even where actual writing is absent. I shall take my examples, again, from the period of the 1960s.

Throughout the 1960s in America, in the setting of the growing escalation of, and protest against, the war on Vietnam, blacks and women organised against their own oppression. In 1965 the Watts riots effectively marked the exhaustion of the predominantly Southern black strategy of nonviolent political struggle, and the emergence of the concept of black power. In 1967 the Black Panthers went publicly armed and uniformed in Oakland

and carried their weapons into the California State House in Sacramento. In this same year the national women's peace march in Washington marked the effective inauguration of the Women's Liberation Movement. It is surely reasonable to suppose that the knowledge of events such at these suffused the collective consciousness of Americans in the 1960s. Let us now consider two 'art' photographs of this period.

About a quarter of the way into Lee Friedlander's book *Self Portrait*[16] is a photograph captioned 'Madison, Wisconsin, 1966'. In it, the shadow of the photographer's head falls across a framed portrait photograph of a young black person. The portrait is set in an oval aperture cut in a light coloured mount, an oval now tightly contained within the shadow of the head. Placed in this context the oval is made to serve as the schematic outline of a face, the shadows of Friedlander's ears are stuck absurdly one to each side, but the face which looks out from between the ears is black. Item 109 in the catalogue to the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *New Photography U.S.A.*[17] is an untitled photograph by Gary Winogrand taken in Central Park Zoo in 1967. It shows a young white woman close beside a young black man, each carries a live chimpanzee which is dressed in children's clothing. In the most basic social terms, what are we to make of these images produced at that historical conjuncture?

In everyday social life it is the face which carries the burden of identity; in these terms, to exchange one's face for that of another would be to take the other's place in society. Friedlander's photograph suggests the idea of such an exchange of identities – if I am white it invites me to imagine what it would be like if I were black. In Winogrand's picture my identity and my social position are secure.[18] We are all familiar with expressions of irrational fear of the 'mixed marriage': from the comparitively anodyne punning of the joke about the girl who married a Pole – and had a wooden baby – to the cliché insults of the committed racist, according to whose rhetoric the union of white and black can give issue to monkeys. In terms of these considerations therefore it should be clear that Friedlander's photograph is open to readings couched in terms of social change, to which Winogrand's image is not only closed but hostile.

A final example: the catalogue to a 1976 exhibition of Gary

Winogrand's photographs[19] contains an image in which four women, talking and gesturing amongst themselves, advance towards the camera down a city street. The group of women, who are of varying degrees of middle age, is the most prominent feature in the right-hand half of the image; equally prominent in the left half of the image, visually just 'touching' the women, is a group of huge plastic bags stuffed full of garbage. This photograph is also printed on the cover of the catalogue; the author of the introduction to the catalogue tells us:

> When four aging women gossip their way past four ballooning garbage bags, it earns power for the eye that sees them. If that eye laughs and gloats it condemns the women to nothing more than participation in an eternal joke.

Concluding the montage of aphorisms which is Winogrand's own written contribution to the catalogue, Winogrand states: 'I like to think of photographing as a two-way act of respect. Respect for the medium, by letting it do what it does best, describe. And respect for the subject, by describing it as it is'. But what the world 'is' depends extensively upon how it is *described*: in a culture where the expression 'old bag' is in circulation to describe an aging woman that is precisely what she is in perpetual danger of 'being'. Neither the photographer, nor the medium, nor the subject, are basically responsible for the meaning of this photograph, the meaning is produced, in the act of *looking* at the image, by a way of *talking*.

We cannot choose what we know, and neither can we choose what part of our dormant knowledge will be awakened by the stimulus of an image, reciprocally reactivated and reinforced by it. Regardless of how much we may strain to maintain a 'disinterested' aesthetic mode of apprehension, an appreciation of the 'purely visual', when we look at an image it is instantly and irreversibly integrated and collated with the intricate psychic network of our knowledge. It is the component meanings of this network that an image must *represent*, there is no choice in this. What flexibility there is comes in the way in which these components are assembled (and even here we may have less freedom than we like to believe). To be quite explicit: such

'racism' or 'sexism' as we may ascribe to these or other images is not 'in' the photographs themselves. Such 'isms', *in the sphere of representation*, are a complex of texts, rhetorics, codes, woven into the fabric of the popular pre-conscious. It is these which are the *pre-text* for the 'eternal joke', it is these which pre-construct the photographer's 'intuitive' response to these fragments of the flux of events in the world, producing his or her recognition that there is something 'there' to photograph. *It is neither theoretically necessary nor desirable to make psychologistic assumptions concerning the intentions of the photographer*; it is the preconstituted field of discourse which is the substantial 'author' here, photograph and photographer alike are its products; and, in the act of seeing, so is the viewer. As Roland Barthes has put it:

> The 'I' which approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts, . . . subjectivity is generally thought of as a plenitude with which I encumber the text, but this fake plenitude is only the wash of all the codes which make up the 'I', so that finally, my subjectivity has the generality of sterotypes.[20]

Such a radical displacement of 'the artist' from his or her traditional position of founding centrality in the production of meaning does, of course, run completely counter to the dominant discourse of the art institutions. This discourse itself exercises its own massive determinations on the received sense of art photographs, and it is therefore necessary to give some account of it. The discourse in dominance in art photography is, *de facto*, that of 'modernism'; there has, however, been an inconsistency in the application of a modernist programme to photography.

III

The first paragraph of John Szarkowski's introduction to the catalogue which contains Winogrand's Central Park Zoo picture tells us: 'New pictures derive first of all from old pictures. What an artist brings to his work that is new – special to his own life and his own eyes – is used to challenge and revise his tradition,

as he knows it'.[21] There is a vivid similarity in this passage to the style and content of Clement Greenberg's writing, indeed the criteria for evaluating photographs employed throughout Szarkowski's texts corresponds almost identically to the programme for modernist art laid down by Greenberg. The 1961 essay 'Modernist Painting' is probably Greenberg's most succinct statement of his view of modernism, and may therefore serve here as a convenient checklist.[22] In this essay Greenberg defines modernism as the tendency of an art practice towards self-reference by means of a foregrounding of: the tradition of the practice; the difference of the practice from other (visual arts) practices; the 'cardinal norms' of the practice; the material substrate, or 'medium' of the practice.

In reference to *tradition*, Greenberg states: 'Modernist art continues the past without gap or break, and wherever it may end up it will never cease being intelligible in terms of the past' – Szarkowski's endorsement of this position is quoted above. In respect of *difference*, Greenberg writes: 'Each art had to determine through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. . . . It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium'. Szarkowski says, in an interview: 'I think in photography the formalist approach is . . . concerned with trying to explore the intrinsic or prejudicial capacities of the medium as it is understood at that moment'.[23] Greenberg argues for the destruction of three-dimensional space in painting, 'for flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art'. He argues for a renewed emphasis on colour, 'in the name of the purely and literally optical, . . . against optical experience as revised or modified by tactile associations'. Flatness, the 'purely optical', and other such things as, 'norms of finish and paint texture', belong to what Greenberg calls '*cardinal norms* of the art of painting'. Szarkowski devotes his catalogue introduction to the 1966 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Photographer's Eye*[24] to cataloguing such cardinal norms of photography, which he identifies as: 'The Thing Itself', 'The Detail', 'The Frame', 'Time', and 'Vantage Point'. What is not to be found in Szarkowski's discourse is Greenberg's emphasis on the *medium* defined in terms of material substrate. Greenberg insists on the

materiality of the painted surface as a thing in itself in the interests of an anti-illusionism; to make a comparable insistence in respect of photography would be to undermine its founding attribute, that of illusion; we might further note that it might very well evict the camera itself from the scene, returning photography to, literally, *photo-graphy* – drawing with light. This elision, this unresolved (albeit understandable) failure to complete the journey upon which it has embarked (modernism is *nothing* if not totally internally coherent), marks a contradiction which runs like a fault-line through Szarkowski's discourse: illusion cannot be totally abandoned, but neither can the full consequences of retaining it be accepted.

We should recall that the modernist programme for painting dictated that the art work be a totally autonomous material *object* which made no reference whatsoever to anything beyond its own boundaries: the painted surface itself, its colour, its consistency, its edge, its gesture, was to be the only 'content' of the work. Any form of representation other than self-presentation, in Greenberg's words, 'becomes something to be avoided like a plague'. This impetus is in direct line of descent from the desire of Bell and Fry, early in this century, to free art from concerns 'not peculiarly its own'. Bell, writing in 1913, stated: 'To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form . . . every other sort of representation is irrelevant'; and he complained of those who: 'treat created form as if it were imitated form, a picture as though it were a photograph'.[25] In the same movement in which, in the West, the issue of representation in art became a dead issue, photography became consigned to the far side, the 'wrong' side, of that divide which Cubism had opened up between the nineteenth century and the modern period. Initiatives to recover photography from this remote shore (in the history of which Steiglitz figures so prominently) were therefore unavoidably directed towards securing 'picture' status for photographs. The general programme of modernism showed the way: the *art* of photography is achieved *only* through the most scrupulous attention to those effects which are irreducibly derived from, and specific to, the very functioning of the photographic apparatus itself – representation may be the contingent vulgar flesh of

photography, but its spirit is 'photographic seeing'. Szarkowski is thus able to judge: 'Winogrand . . . is perhaps the most outrageously thoroughgoing formalist that I know. What he is trying to figure out is what that machine will do by putting it to the most extreme tests under the greatest possible pressure'.[26] However, although content in photographs may be ignored, it will not go away. The fear perhaps is that to *speak* of it would be to backslide into Naturalism, that it would necessarily be to abandon the gains of the modernist discourse which has provided art photography in the modern period with its credentials and its programme. On the contrary, it would be to pursue the modernist argument with an increased rigour.

The modernist programme for a given practice is centred upon that which is irreducibly *specific* to the practice; in a sense, that which remains after eliminating the things it is *not*. The initial definition of this specificity is therefore crucial, as all subsequent modes of action and evaluation will depend on it. In a 1964 article in the *New York Review of Books*[27] Greenberg himself is in no doubt as to the locus of the specificity of photography. First, it is *not* modernist painting: 'its triumphs and momuments are historical, anecdotal, reportorial, observational before they are purely pictorial'. But then neither is 'brute information' art, in fact: 'The purely descriptive or informative is almost as great a threat to the art in photography as the purely formal or abstract'. Greenberg concludes:

> The art in photography is literary art before it is anything else . . . The photograph has to tell a story if it is to work as art. And it is in choosing and accosting his story, or subject, that the artist-photographer makes the decisions crucial to his art.

Greenberg, however, offers no suggestion as to how an impression of narrative can be given by a single image. Szarkowski, writing some two years later, can continue to assert: 'photography has never been successful at narrative. It has in fact seldom attempted it'. Photographs, he finds: 'give the sense of the scene, while withholding its narrative meaning'.[28] 'Narrative meaning' here is clearly equated with the sort of factual account of an event which might be sought in a court of law.

Obviously this cannot be derived from a single image alone. But what is this 'sense' which Szarkowski mentions but does not discuss; this 'story' which Greenberg names but cannot explain? Greenberg's equation of 'story' with 'subject' raises more questions than it answers, but they are productive questions – questions raised around the ambivalence of his use of the term 'subject': subject of the photograph (the thing pictured); subject of the story (that which it is 'a tale of'). My purpose here has been to argue that we may only resolve this ambivalence through the introduction of a third term – the *seeing* subject (the individual who looks), and that to introduce *this* subject is, in the same movement, to introduce the social world which constructs, situates, and supports it.

To speak of the 'sense' and 'story' of a photograph is to acknowledge that the reality-effect of a photograph is such that it inescapably implicates a world of activity responsible for, and to, the fragments circumscribed by the frame: a world of causes, of 'before and after', of 'if, then . . .', a *narrated* world. However, the narration of the world that photography achieves is accomplished, not in a linear manner, but in a repetition of 'vertical' readings, in stillness, in a-temporality. Freud remarks that time does not exist in the unconscious, the dream is not the illogical narrative it may appear to be (this is the dramatic product of secondary revision), it is a *rebus* which must be examined element by element – from each element will unfold associative chains leading to a coherent network of unconscious thoughts, thoughts which are extensive by comparison with the dream itself, which is 'laconic'. We encounter the everyday environment of photographs as if in a waking dream, a daydream: taken collectively they seem to add up to no particular logical whole; taken individually their literal content is quickly exhausted – but the photograph too is laconic, its meaning goes beyond its manifest elements. The significance of the photograph goes beyond its literal signification by way of the routes of the primary processes: to use a filmic analogy, we might say that the individual photograph becomes the point of origin of a series of psychic 'pans' and 'dissolves', a succession of metonymies and metaphors which transpose the scene of the photograph to the spaces of the 'other scene' of the unconscious, and also, most

importantly, the scene of the popular pre-conscious: the scene of discourse, of *language*.

E. H. Gombrich has traced the lineage of the belief in the ineffable purity of the visual image. In the *Phaedo*, Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates a doctrine of two worlds: the world of murky imperfection to which our mortal senses have access, and an 'upper world' of perfection and light. Discursive speech is the tangled and inept medium to which we are condemned in the former, while in the latter all things are communicated visually as a pure and unmediated intelligibility which has no need for words. The idea that there are two quite distinct forms of communication, words and images, and that the latter is the more direct, passed via the Neo-Platonists into the Christian tradition. There was now held to be a divine language of *things*, richer than the language of words; those who apprehend the difficult but divine truths enshrined in things do so in a flash, without the need of words and arguments. As Gombrich observes, such traditions, '. . . are of more than antiquarian interest. They still affect the way we talk and think about the art of our own time'.[29] Today, such relics are obstructing our view of photography.