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“It is useless and tedious to represent what exists because nothing that exists satisfies me....
I prefer the monsters of my fantasy to what is positively trivial.”

Baudelaire, *Salon review* (1859)

Is Baudelaire’s position defensible in light of the case lens-based art-forms make to
‘represent what exists’? Or from a contemporary perspective, do the ‘monsters of fantasy’
still allow artists to engage with ‘what exists’ creatively?

In this essay I will be discussing the ways in which photography can be used as a creative
outlet for imagination. Through the texts, *The Work of Art in the age of mechanical
reproduction* and *How to See The World*, I will be defending photography’s place within the
art world in disagreement to Baudelaire’s statement. As evidence to my argument, I am
using a range of photographers including Hilla and Bernd Becher, Tom Pope and Lars
Tunbjörk who use photography as an art form to represent the ‘monsters of fantasy’.

It was through the invention of the Camera Obscura and pinhole camera (Photography
History facts, 2021), that the first model of photography was born.

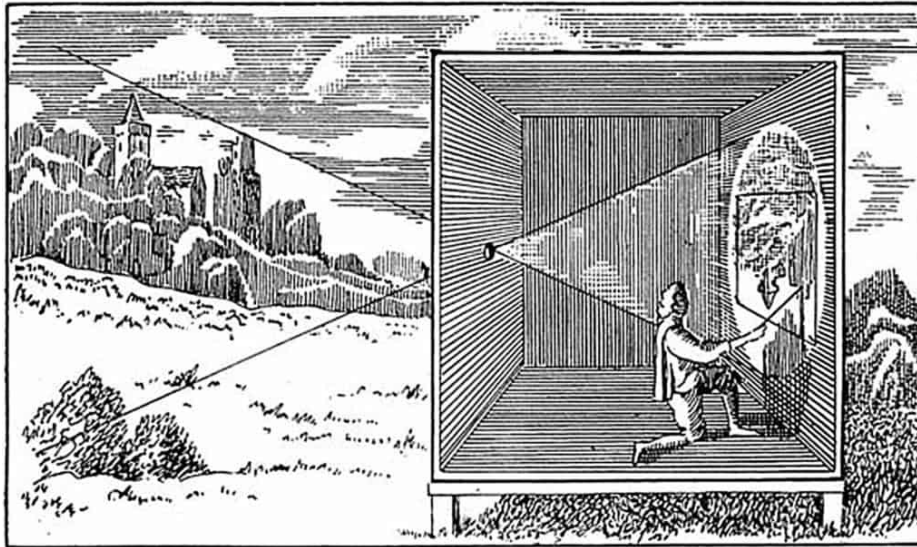


Fig 1

Henry Fox Talbot's Calotype, invented in 1839, became the invention to change the course of photography altogether. Using the knowledge of light refraction from the camera obscura, Fox Talbot created a prototype which created more permanent images than ever before (BBC, 2014). This advancement in photography was a scientific triumph but began to ruffle some feathers in the art world.

Baudelaire saw photography as lesser than other art forms because of its scientific background. Baudelaire famously branded photography as "*the refuge of every would-be painter, every painter too ill-endowed or too lazy to complete his studies,*" (The Met, 2021). It's clear He doubted the artistic ability of photography, deeming it lazy and unsophisticated in comparison to painting. Posing the argument that photography is intrinsically literal and its invention is a break to the link of art and creativity.

However, there are theories that early forms of photography had a role in how paintings were made. *Secret Knowledge*, shows Physicist Charles M. Falco and David Hockney investigating the reality of paintings from the 1400's (Wolfe, Undated). Artists are thought to have used 'concave mirrors or reflective lenses' (Wolfe, Undated) which then caused a projection that could be traced.

Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* is thought to have adapted these methods, as there is more depth in his paintings than had been seen before (Wolfe, Undated).



Fig 2

In the background of the *Arnolfini Portrait* there is a mirror which has a fish-eye style perspective to it, this would have been painted flatly in past paintings. However, in this painting it stands out in the background as it is concave and painted as though the painting itself was a photograph. Leading investigators to question the devices used to make it that way.

It is through the mechanical awakening that we have changed the course of art, with these advancements, art is perceived and created in new ways. This access allows paintings and

photographs to become instant imagery. Which arguably may take away from its authenticity (Larsen, Undated).

In Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin proposed that reproduction of photographs change their context completely:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at a place where it happens to be.

(Benjamin, 2008, p. 221)

Benjamin discusses that the aura of an object can be fully changed by its environment, all objects hold a history which is fixed and contextualised within its materiality.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.

(Benjamin, 2008, p. 221)

It would be silly to argue that photography hasn't evolved throughout time (Green, 1973, p. 40), in the same way that all mechanical specimens change with the advancements of science and new thinkers, photography and key thinkers have too evolved the art world. We are not constrained to the world that we once knew. Consequently, the photography that

Baudelaire bases his statement on is almost the 'tadpole' stage in comparison to the photography that is created today.

Artists Bernd and Hilla Becher were architectural photographers who took very 'matter of fact' pictures during the minimalistic movement (Tate, 2021). Bernd Becher originally studied as a painter, but this media was unsatisfactory for replicating buildings and their architectural form. It was only through Hilla and her passion of photography that Bernd began to represent architecture. Buildings became sculpture in the eyes of Becher (Tate, 2021), each photo was taken in the same weather conditions, when no humans were present, making them into objects without scale. Placing the buildings beside each other emphasises their form.

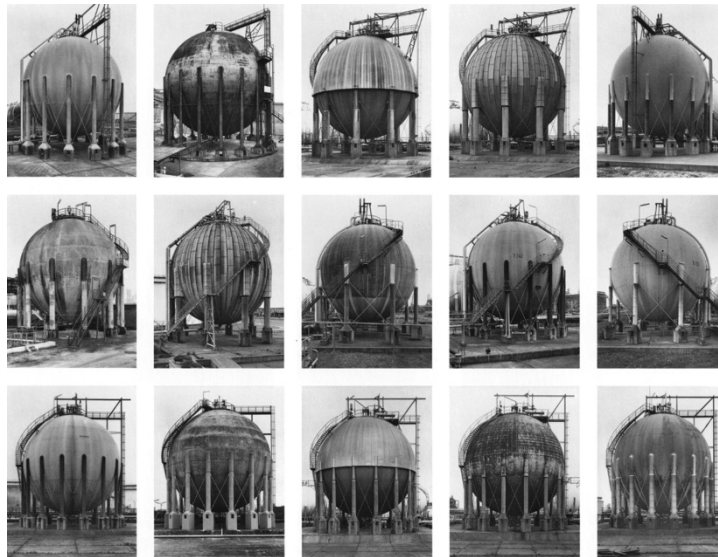


Fig 3

When discussing her work, Hilla Becher said:

By placing several cooling towers side by side something happened, something like tonal music; you don't see what makes the objects different until you bring them together, so subtle are their differences.

(Wilkinson, 2016)



Fig 4

In this case the limitations of painting, became the strengths of photography. The literal could only be imagined and repurposed using elements such as the weather – creating a perfect contrast of black and white. Now, the Bechers are considered some of the best artists of all time. They managed to take the buildings that were in front of them and create a project which responded to the movement of art at the time. In this instance photography allowed the Bechers to use the ‘monsters’ of their creative fantasy as an aid to reimagine what was seemingly mundane.

Today, photography has been used alongside video, performance, and illustration. And despite this, painting and more 'traditional' forms of art practice are still needed in the art world – even if they too have evolved since Baudelaire's time.

Johnathan Green, writer of *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* brands photography in three separate ways:

These differences of object ... class themselves naturally into two groups with a third intermediate between them: I. Educational and scientific such as astronomical, archaeological, and natural history photographs. II. Personal and typological.. the recording of a portrait or place which is of personal interest. III. Pictorial or artistic; in which the object is to obtain a result of intrinsic beauty without reference to it's scientific value or to our knowing or not knowing the place or person represented.

Green describes photography in terms of its uses, photography as commercial, documentary, and personal practice but also outlines the importance of personal interest – which is what convinces a photographer to press the shutter.

Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk blurred these lines for a documentary project based on Offices. Although it may seem that the office is a mundane and uninspiring place, Tunbjörk was able to step back from the space and see it in a new light.



Fig 5

When talking about his work, Lars Tunbjörk said “*I like to take photos like an alien*” (Carroll, 2018, p. 78). Tunbjörk, disassociating with the normality of what his eyes were seeing, engaged with the imagination of his mind. The photos that he ended up creating were beautifully composed, with a range of unique angles. The workers, almost appearing as actors in chaotic movie sets (Carroll, 2018, p.78). This is what makes the insight to the offices so interesting – whether it is familiar to the viewer or not, the set-up of the photos presents a completely different angle to what is expected of a regular office lifestyle.



Fig 6

Artist Tom Pope combines photography with performance (Westall, 2012). Pope uses the camera to document conceptual performances, mostly through freezing a split second in time with the shutter. Mark Westall from *FAD Magazine* interviewed Pope during his *So It Goes* exhibition in George and Jorgen.



Fig 7

Pope discusses that the images and video clips which are in this project, come from the idea of bending the rules, and challenging the borders of what is deemed 'right and wrong' in the public eye. He talks about one video clip, where he is challenged for standing in a public water fountain. A woman approaches and tells him that she can't stop him from standing in the fountain, but he shouldn't be there. Pope then says, "Does that mean that I can stay?" (FADLive, 2012) The outcome is a video piece where the aftermath of the performance is also seen. To Pope, the lasting effect on the public is just as important as the main performance. If it has not challenged their perception of what is 'wrong' then he has not created a successful piece of art (FADLive, 2012).



Fig 8

So It Goes.



Fig 9

So it goes is a perfect example of *The decisive moment* (pg 124, *the art of photography*), a term created by Henri Cartier-Bresson.



Fig 10

The decisive moment is a description of the exact moment that a photographer must foresee before it unfolds – so that when an image is made, it consists of both visual and

emotional elements (Life Library of Photography, 1973, p. 124). These factors cannot be relived or recaptured. “Catrter Bresson... sought to exact meanings and emotions from situations involving not newsmakers but ordinary people” (Life Library of Photography, 1973, p. 124).

Since his project *So it goes*, Tom Pope has experimented with play and chance as creative outcome. Playing in the parlour is “A series of works resulting from participants playing a variety of performative printing games on unexposed cyanotype paper stock at Soho House” (Pope, 2019).



Fig 11

Although it may seem that the photographs made by Tom Pope are ‘literal’ documentations of moments in time, they are evidence for a bigger picture. Each image is conceptually considered, especially in this project. Each piece from the tower fell on the cyanotype fabric it was sitting on and was then left to expose.

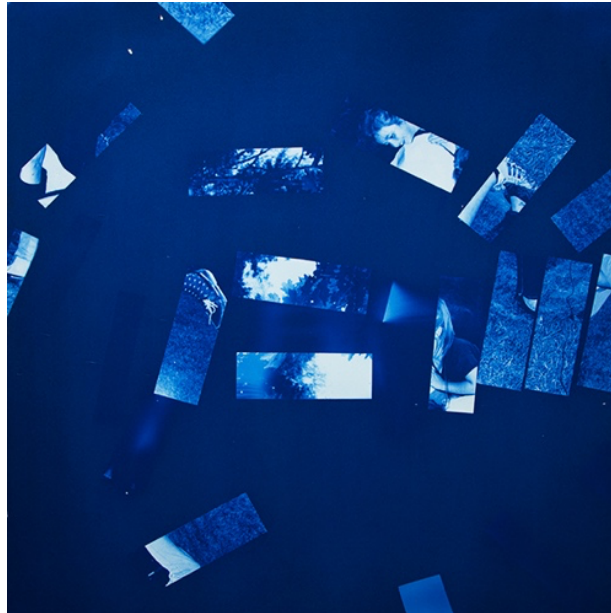


Fig 12

This form of image creation is inventive, using the rules of photography and then bending them to make a series of prints which are far from Baudelaire's statement of photography being "literal".

Photography can also be imagining what we may not be able to see without the help of a camera. Emmet Gowin created a photo using long exposure which showed the trail lines of moths at night. The lines are created with a set exposure time, which is impossible to see with the naked human eye. Therefore, Gowin has looked at the strengths of the camera in comparison to what is "positively trivial" in human limitations. He then used this to the advantage of the dreams he had inside his head. Managing to make something so natural and unappreciated as moths at night, freeze within the constructs of time and place. The outcome is poetic and soft.



Fig 13

Any work of art which represents, not a material object but the mental conception of a material object... represents an idea and not a thing.

(Weaver, 1986, p. 28)

To conclude, I disagree with Baudelaire's statement that photography is 'literal' and 'trivial'. It is not about what we see but how we perceive what is in front of us. This is what makes art subjective and engaging, despite the media of which it is made. Nicolas Mirzeoff discusses this in his book *How to see the world. We do not actually 'see' with our eyes but with our brains* (Mirzeoff, 2015, p. 73). The act of seeing is fully creative, 'Seeing the world is not about how we see but what we make of what we see' (Mirzeoff, 2015, p. 73). There is a relationship between the monsters in our heads and the outcomes that are created, it is only through the act of observing what is around us that we can use photography to reimagine what is around us.

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