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# *Categories of Photography*

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ABSTRACT. In my paper I consider the process of recognising photographs as belonging or not belonging to specific photographic categories. I examine the standard, variable, and contra-standard aesthetic property types suggested by Kendall Walton, and I argue that this system of properties helps us clarify category recognition in case of photographic works as well. I suggest that this recognition is an often-neglected first step in interpreting and appreciating photographs. On the basis of the property types considered I provide some examples for how their careful examination may focus and enrich the interpretation and appreciation of photographic works.

## **I. Introduction**

In his “Categories of Art”<sup>1</sup> Kendall Walton argues that at least some socio-historical contextual information, and at least some knowledge about the intention of the artist are relevant, and even necessary for interpreting and appreciating artworks. This argument was presented in the context of the intentional fallacy debate.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I consider his arguments, but my primary concern here is not to examine arguments from the point of view of the intentional fallacy debate. I will be interested in how the aesthetic property typology suggested by Walton sheds some light on the processes of interpreting and evaluating photographs.

Concentrating on music and the visual arts Walton first asks us to consider if non-perceptible properties may be regarded to be aesthetically relevant. Danto’s arguments<sup>3</sup> about this issue easily come to our mind today,

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<sup>1</sup> Walton, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> See Beardsley 1958, 1982, for instance.

<sup>3</sup> Danto, 1981.

but here we will be interested in Walton's compatible position and framework. He suggests that we need to distinguish three types of aesthetic properties: standard, variable, and contra-standard properties. These properties are properties recognised *by us*, that is, they are based on our knowledge about the artworks in question in the specific socio-historical context of our artworld. The same property may be standard in one context but variable in another. An important question is how to account for what happens when the properties recognised by us place the work in a category that is different from the one intended by the artist and recognised by the artworld in which the work was originally produced and presented.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Standard, Variable, and Contra-Standard Properties**

According to Walton standard properties are the ones that establish the artwork in a given category *for us* (in the socio-historical context of our artworld). On the one hand, this means that we perceive and recognise the work to belong to the category by virtue of perceiving and recognising properties that are standard properties of the category. On the other hand, the lack of a standard property tends to disqualify the work from the given category. For instance, flatness (disregarding the thickness of the paint) and motionlessness are standard categories of paintings. If we perceive three-dimensionality, then we tend to categorise or re-categorise the work as a relief or a sculpture. If we perceive motion, then we tend to categorise or re-categorise the work as animation. Flatness and motionlessness are also standard properties of photographs. Diverging from flatness immediately leads to expressions like "experimental", "conceptual", and the like, and introducing motion means that we re-categorise the work as film or video (or any other kind of photographic moving image).

Variable properties are the ones that are irrelevant from the point of view of belonging or not belonging to a given category. The presence or absence of particular shapes or colours in a painting does not influence the perception and recognition of the work to belong to the category of

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<sup>4</sup> Considering this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. On the role of the artworld in recognition and interpretation see Danto, 1964; Dickie, 1983, for instance.

painting. It is possible, however, that the presence or absence of particular shapes and colours helps us perceive and recognise art historical periods, movements, styles, etc. What is a variable property with respect to one category (e.g. painting) may be a standard or contra-standard (see below) property with respect to another category (e.g. Cubism). Specific types or styles of shapes are certainly not standard categories of paintings, but they are the ones that make us recognise Cubist paintings, for instance.

Contra-standard properties tend to (but as we will see, do not necessarily) disqualify a work from a given category. Artworks may have contra-standard properties in two ways. The lack of a standard property and the presence of a contra-standard feature may both qualify as having a contra-standard property. If flatness is a standard property of paintings for us, then the presence of a three-dimensional object in a painting is a contra-standard property. If having colours (other than black, white, and the shades of grey) is a standard property of paintings (for us), then a black and white painting (having only black, white, and the shades of grey) will be perceived and recognised as having a contra-standard property. If linear narration is a standard property of novels (in a specific art historical context), then a work with a nonlinear narrative has a contra-standard property that at least raises the question of its perception and recognition in the category.

The conscious and deliberate use of contra-standard properties has been an artistic tool for many. Individual artists and movements have often relied on the shock value or provocative artistic communicative effect of contra-standard properties for voicing their disagreement about previously established “rules” (that established and often prescribed what was standard, variable and contra-standard). This has often been one powerful way of changing the received perception, recognition, and interpretation of artworks. (In his “Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art”<sup>5</sup> Noël Carroll provides an excellent account of the processes of questioning and renewing previous sets of artistic standards in various art forms.) Monochrome paintings in black and white, for example, communicate specific meanings; black and white monochromaticity is recognised an interpreted against the background of the general and age-old standard of us-

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<sup>5</sup> Carroll, 1993.

ing a variety of colours in paintings. The “moving paintings” in the magical fantasy world of Harry Potter rely on the very idea that in a magical fantasy world (as opposed to our real world), paintings may have properties that are contra-standard in the real world. In our world motion would disqualify a work from the category of painting (we would most likely re-categorise the work as animation), but in Harry Potter’s world moving paintings are just everyday pieces of furniture.

### **3. Property Types in Photography**

I think that this framework for the three types of properties is highly useful for accounting for the processes of interpreting and appreciating photographs. The reason for this is that (most likely for historical reasons) it is usually assumed that perception and recognition in a given photographic category is evident and uncontested. This however, may not be the case. Although there are some categories where the standards for the category are clear and known (or even explicitly stated in written documents), but in other cases we only have some vague ideas about the categories and their boundaries. For instance, in photojournalism and wild life photography the prohibition of manipulation (of pictorial content) and staging is well known. There is hardly a month passing by without an international scandal about some kind of violation of these rules. On the other hand, we are less certain about standards when it comes to fashion photography, street photography, landscape, etc. We might be especially puzzled about standards in fine art photography.

I suggest that with the help of the aforementioned framework of artistic property types we can better account for the perception and recognition of various (artistic and non-artistic) photography categories as well. Let us first consider black and white photography, and how the property of being black and white influences category perception, recognition and in turn interpretation and appreciation. Then we will examine a specific subgenre of staged fine art photography and conceptual photography.

### **3.1. Two Categories of Black and White Photography**

I think that in case of black and white photography first we need to consider *when* the photograph in question was taken, and this example will highlight how important this piece of (socio-historical or art historical) information is.

Although the technology for colour photography had been available decades earlier, for economic and technological reasons colour photography only became widely available and used in the seventies of the 20th century. Before that time, black and white was the standard. This means that in case of a photograph taken in 1953, for instance, the property of being black and white is taken as a standard property, and hence *the choice of black and white* is not the subject of specific aesthetic interpretation and evaluation. We think that the photographer used black and white film simply because that was the technology available to her.

On the other hand, by 2016 (analogue and digital) colour technology has been widely available for several decades. Colour in photography was established as a standard long ago. Opting for the now contra-standard property of black and white today carries meaning; the choice is to be noticed, and the contra-standard is to be interpreted and evaluated. What was not the subject of interpretation and evaluation sixty years ago became the subject of such interpretation and evaluation by now, because of the shift in what is standard and contra-standard *for us*. In other words, the property of being black and white carries no more meaning than simply being the standard in case of a photography taken in 1953, while today the property of being black and white is the result of a conscious artistic (photographic) choice that prompts interpretation.

### **3.2. Staging the Everyday**

Another example for the importance of property types is the specific kind of staged fine art photography that recreates everyday scenes and situations as if they were stills from a movie.<sup>6</sup> In case of such scenes and situations the standard photographic property would be that the photo-

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Crewdson created a subgenre in fine art photography on the basis of this idea.

graph captures a spontaneous everyday moment. The (visually) recognisable staged recreation, however, results in a non-standard photographic property that will be the subject of interpretation and evaluation, as opposed to spontaneous “captured” shots (or as opposed to staged fashion photographs, for instance). The staged nature of the photograph is highly relevant here as an artistic property, while staging in other photographic genre categories (where it is standard) is not the subject of specific interpretation and evaluation.

### **3.3. Conceptual Photography**

Finally, I would like to examine a specific kind of practice that is often called “conceptual photography”. The general (creative industries and theoretical) use of the term is not very precise, but we can easily clarify how we might use it in photography and art theory contexts. On the one hand, the term is often used to refer to any photographic practice that involves pronounced or profound ideas about the production and/or the communicative content of the photographs. For instance, staged fine art photography (mentioned above as well) is sometimes included in the category of conceptual photography, simply because it often involves such pronounced or profound ideas. On the other hand, the more specific (and theoretically more precise) use of the term refers only to *conceptual art* that happen to use photography as a medium. Kosuth’s ‘*Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*’ [*Water*] is a paradigmatic example of this type of work. The line between the two categories might be thin indeed in some cases, but I think that it has been correctly pointed out by many that the production, interpretation and evaluation processes of conceptual art radically differ from the processes involved in traditional fine art (including traditional fine art photography). I use the term “conceptual photography” here in this more specific theoretical sense, referring only to conceptual art using photography as a medium. My remarks are about this practice, and not about staged or other fine art photography with pronounced or profound ideas about the production and/or the communicative content of the works.<sup>7</sup> Let me further explain this important distinction.

Conceptual art is often regarded as a new art form that is quite distinct

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<sup>7</sup> On conceptual photography see Bátori, 2013, 2014.



from the traditional art forms, such as sculpture or painting. Therefore, recognizing, interpreting, and appreciating works of conceptual art might also be thought to diverge radically from the practices of recognition, interpretation, and appreciation of former, traditional forms of art. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, for instance, argue that the medium of conceptual art is ideas, while the chosen physical medium is merely the means of communicating the ideas of the artist.<sup>8</sup> In other words, as Derek Matravers suggests, works of conceptual art are dematerialized; the physical medium is not the determining, or even a relevant factor in understanding, interpreting, and appreciating these works.<sup>9</sup> According to another formulation of this view by Robert Hopkins, the very conception of a conceptual work of art is itself sufficient for determining its artistic properties, as opposed to works belonging to other art forms, where the execution of the work is also necessary for determining its artistic properties. Hopkins further argues that conceptual art diverges from other art forms by first setting up, and then frustrating our expectation of sensory fulfilment. That is, the perceptible properties of the work are not the aesthetically relevant ones, and our traditional interpretative methods break down if we try to understand and appreciate works of conceptual art by appreciating their perceptible properties.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, by “traditional fine art photography” I mean photographic artworks that cannot be understood, interpreted and appreciated without studying their visual (photographic) properties. By “conceptual photography” I mean artworks that are easily recognized as belonging to the category of conceptual art, merely using the medium of photography. An important aspect of this recognition and categorization is that we can effectively describe conceptual works with words. Consider, for instance, that the conceptual content of Kosuth’s work can be easily described with words, and the specific visual properties of the dictionary entry are quite accidental; many other dictionary entries could have served just as well as the raw material for the work.

Returning now to Walton’s terminology of property types, we can easily see that in case of a photographic work it is a *highly contra-standard* fea-

<sup>8</sup> See Goldie and Schellekens, 2010, for instance.

<sup>9</sup> See Matravers, 2007 and Schellekens, 2007 for arguments about dematerialization.

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, 2007, pp. 58–61.

ture that the recognition, interpretation and appreciation processes of the work *do not necessarily involve* studying their visual (photographic) properties. I propose that it is such a radical contra-standard feature that conceptual photography *is not a photographic practice* at all; it is a conceptual art practice that happens to use the medium of photography. I suggest that studying the visual (photographic) properties is a necessary component of recognising, interpreting and evaluating traditional (non-conceptual) photographic works.

On the basis of these considerations we can identify a very practical problem concerning the practice that works of conceptual art (that use photography merely as their medium) often appear in photography exhibitions *together with* traditional fine art photographic works (for instance, with staged fine art photographs). Many photographers create works in both categories; some of their photographs are traditional fine art photographic works, while others are conceptual works using photography merely as their medium. As a result, photographers themselves often do not draw a clear distinction between conceptual art and traditional fine art photography practices. Because of this, they usually do not find it problematic either, when the two different types of works are mixed and presented together in exhibitions, for instance. However, I think that there is a problem with exhibiting together works belonging to these two distinct categories. Let me explain.

I suggest that conceptual photographs are to be critically distinguished from traditional fine art photographs that cannot be interpreted, evaluated, and appreciated without studying their visual (photographic) properties. When viewers see a body of works (an exhibition or publication, for instance) consisting of both types of photographs they easily assume that the recognition, interpretation and appreciation processes with which the works are to be approached are the same, since they all *appear to be* fine art photographs in the same context (exhibition, publication, etc.). The recognition of conceptual photography as such is a step that is very easily missed in this situation. However, trying to use the same type of interpretive strategies for conceptual photographs that we use for understanding and appreciating traditional fine art photographs would surely mean misunderstanding the conceptual works.

#### 4. Conclusion

I maintain that conceptual photographs do not belong to the category (genre or subgenre) of fine art photography (which is always to be *looked at*, and never sufficient to be *described with words*). As I argued above, if studying its visual (photographic) properties is not a standard (and necessary) requirement for recognising, interpreting and evaluating the work, then (because of this contra-standard interpretative practice) it is not a photographic work, but rather, it is a conceptual work that merely uses the medium of photography. Photography galleries that exhibit traditional fine art photographs and conceptual works in the same exhibitions make a pronounced category mistake, confusing, instead of assisting interpretive and appreciative practices.

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