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Photography, Digital Technology, and Hybrid Art Forms

Claire Anscomb[1]

University of Kent

ABSTRACT. There are a growing number of digital arts connected with photography, however it remains unclear how to identify and appreciate the products of these arts, given the philosophical disagreement that kinds, such as Light Field Camera (LFC) images, attract. To account for the different ways that photography may manifest itself in digital arts, I develop a classificatory framework, based upon Jerrold Levinson's account of "hybrid art forms", in order to distinguish between different types of arts that have evolved or involve, or are influenced by, other arts. Using this framework, I look at a range of examples from contemporary art, including the works of Loretta Lux, Richard Kolker, and Stan Douglas, to demonstrate how to appropriately identify and appreciate the following: arts and hybrid arts, involving photography, that pre-exist the digital age which have evolved to incorporate digital technology; new digital hybrid arts that involve photography; and digital arts that are influenced by photography. In doing so, I aim to establish a framework that will enable viewers to appropriately identify and appreciate future developments in the digital arts.

1. Issues of Identification and Appreciation in the Digital Age

There are a growing number of digital arts connected with photography however, it remains unclear how products of these arts should be identified

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[1] Email: cra9@kent.ac.uk

and appreciated, given the philosophical disagreement that these kinds attract. For instance, in 2012 Lytro released the ground-breaking "Light Field Camera" (LFC). The camera captured the direction of light as it hit the image sensor, from which the light field was reconstructed by software. This technology enabled viewers to refocus and change the viewing angle of LFC-images once taken. Although the images were made using photographic technology, discord exists pertaining to whether the images are photographs and should be appreciated as such. Benovsky (2014) for instance, proposed that, due to their dynamic nature, LFC-images are not photographs but digital sculptures. For Benovsky, a photograph is the result of necessary decisions that the image producer makes regarding framing, aperture, shutter speed, and focal length. These necessary decisions imbue photographs with narrative powers as the compositional techniques enable the image producer to manage the attention of viewers to convey messages (Benovsky 2014, p. 730). As these necessary decisions are made by the viewer of LFC-images, rather than the producer, Benovsky suggested that the images are not photographs but digital sculptures, given the viewers dynamic, self-determined interaction with the work (2014, p. 731). By contrast, due to his permissive "New Theory" of photography, Lopes can categorize LFC-images as photographs. For Lopes, a photograph is a product of mark-making processes, used to produce an image, that took input from a "photographic event", or the registration of light on a photosensitive surface (2016, p. 81). Hence, given that LFC-images originate in a photographic event, which is output in digital mark-making

processes, for Lopes, they are photographs.

Both theorists have different premises for basing their conclusions on, yet both approaches have value, given that viewers do engage with LFC-images dynamically and that digital photographic technology is used to generate the images. Hence, it is not clear that either approach sets the precedent for the appropriate categorization and appreciation of the works. Specifically, if viewers identify LFC-images as either a form of digital sculpture or a form of photography, then they will fail to appreciate how sculptural and photographic practices have been combined in an original practice to afford the viewer a new kind of aesthetic experience. Hence, only by correctly identifying the nature of such digital works, will viewers be able to adequately appreciate them. Furthermore, given that such arts are continually developing, as for instance, in 2018 Lytro discontinued its LFC products and viewing platforms while Apple developed their iPhone cameras and software to enables users to alter the depth of field of images once taken (Conditt 2018), the issue of appropriate identification and appreciation of digital arts connected with photography is particularly pressing. As such, to account for the different ways that photography may be manifested in digital arts, I will develop a classificatory framework, largely based upon Levinson's account of "hybrid art forms" (1990, p. 26-36), to distinguish between different kinds of arts that have evolved or involve, or are influenced by, other arts. In doing so, I will demonstrate how to appropriately identify and appreciate the following: arts and hybrid arts, involving photography, that pre-exist the digital age which have evolved to

incorporate digital technology; new digital hybrid arts that involve photography; and digital arts that are influenced by photography.

2. A Classificatory Framework

In order to develop my classifactory framework, I will first examine Levinson's account of hybrid art forms. Levinson proposed that "an art form is a hybrid one in virtue of its development and origin, in virtue of its emergence out of a field of previously existing artistic activities and concerns, two or more of which it in some sense combines." (1990, p. 27) To account for the different reasons that agents adopt hybridization as an artistic strategy, Levinson identified three types of hybridity: juxtaposition, fusion, and transformation; and distinguished between two sorts of overall effects that hybrid artworks achieve – "integrative" and "disintegrative" (1990, p. 35). Fusion and transformation hybrids instantiate integrative effects as the different arts that form the artwork, in these categories, become indistinguishable, creating a richness and complexity for a new common, artistic end. While juxtaposition hybrids instantiate disintegrative effects as the different arts that constitute the work, in this category, are discernible from one another leading to a lack of cohesion that is necessary for the aesthetic significance of the work as a hybrid. Although juxtaposition hybrids tend towards a disintegrative effect, the whole is the focus of the work rather than the individual constituents. Examples of hybrid arts in this

type include collage, and also "Combines", which were initially created in 1954 by Rauschenberg (Schimmel 2005, p. 211). In this particular hybrid kind, arts are juxtaposed, including sculpture and painting, to elevate the status of the ordinary objects that are incorporated into the works. Additionally, I propose that certain kinds of overpainted photographs are juxtaposition hybrids. For example, since 1989 (Heinzelmann 2008, p. 87), Gerhard Richter has overlaid photographs with abstract painterly interruptions, creating a disintegrative effect, which is crucial to the meaning of the works (Schneede 2008, p. 196).

By contrast, in Levinson's fusion and transformation categories, the different arts form an integrative effect so that "some *essential*, or *defining* feature of one or both arts is challenged, modified, or withdrawn" (1990, p. 33). In the case of hybrid arts in the fusion category:

> …the objects or products of two (or more) arts are brought together in such a way that the individual components to some extent lose their original identities and are present in the hybrid in a form that is significantly different from that assumed in the pure state. (1990, p. 31)

Such hybrid arts include opera, concrete poetry, and cliché verre. Works of cliché verre are created by drawing, etching or painting on transparent supports which are exposed on photosensitive surfaces, thereby synthesizing imaginative manual mark-making techniques with photographic practice, as for example in Frederick Sommer's work *Paracelsus* (1957), to challenge

one of the defining features of photography and depict fictional entities, and to challenge some of the defining features of manual arts that typically exhibit drawn or painterly facture. Additionally, I suggest that particular kinds of overpainted photographs fall into the fusion category. For example, in Pierre et Gilles' practice, photographs taken by Gilles were enlarged and meticulously painted over by Pierre, resulting in an integrated form that idealizes the subject (Turner 1994, p. 54).

Levinson claimed that whilst works in the transformation category are closer to those in the fusion, they differ as the "arts combined do not contribute to the result in roughly the same degree." (1990, p. 32) He used the example of kinetic sculpture to illustrate this, suggesting that "the result could not reasonably be called an instance of dance, even in the extended sense – though of course it might be so *metaphorically*." (1990, p. 33) In this case then, Levinson proposed that dance transformed sculpture. Before continuing, I will suggest some amendments to these categories as, given that Levinson stated the different arts that are hybridized in the transformation category do not contribute to the same degree, prima facie it appears that Levinson expected that the arts combined in the other categories contribute in equal measure. This idea however, is not persuasive considering that, for example, a large painting may juxtapose a small section of collage work, as in many works of cubism (Ades 1986, p. 12). Resultantly, for my framework, I suggest that in all hybrid categories the contribution of different arts is variable. Accordingly, as the premise for Levinson's transformation category was based on the variability of the

degree of contribution from different arts, I propose that the third category contains cases in which one or more, of the central practices of one art have been altered by the incorporation of a central practice (or practices) from another art. To clarify and demonstrate what this entails, I will use the example of an art which in the 19th century was called "Composition Photography" (Talbot 2017, p. 144). This was also termed "Combination Printing" and is an early form of composite photography that was practiced by Pictorialist photographers who sought to blur the boundaries of photographic and painting practice.

In 1869, Henry Peach Robinson published *Pictorial Effect in Photography* in which he encouraged readers to study paintings for their "picture construction, light and shade, emphasis, focus and perspective rendition" (Harker 1989, p. 134), and advocated that photographers take on the conventions of painting. Accordingly, and controversially, Robinson created many combination prints, such as *Sleep* (1867), by combining multiple negatives to create one composite image, constructing the image in a way that reflected the construction of a painting's composition. The results idealized and imaginatively reinterpreted reality, which was a consequence of adopting the principles of painting to transform photography which, as *standardly* practiced entailed exposing one negative to yield an image of one spatiotemporal scene. Considering the norms that govern the common use of the photographic medium is key to appreciating works of composite photography, but so too is the deliberate disruption of the way that photography is standardly practiced by incorporating painterly techniques.

Moreover, reading Robinsons' work in this way undoubtedly enhances the viewer's appreciation of the work as whilst critics objected to visible signs of Robinson's photographic process, such as shadows that were inaccurate, "Robinson expected viewers to take his labour-intensive procedures into account when they looked at his pictures" (Talbot 2017, p. 158). This then, is an example in which one art, photography, has been transformed by another, painting. Treating transformation hybrids this way, I believe, preserves Levinson's initial aim but articulates it without the stipulation that the other hybrid categories equally mix different arts.

My amendment to several of the principles behind Levinson's account does not however, entail any salient changes to the distinction that Levinson made between transformation hybrids and cases where one art has influenced another. Although I have stipulated the conditions for transformation hybrids differently to Levinson, I suggest it must still be the case, as Levinson proposed, that "some *essential* or *defining* feature" of the art is challenged (1990, p. 33). As I outlined in the case of composite photography, the defining feature of photography that is challenged, by adopting painterly techniques, is the depiction of one spatiotemporal scene. Some photographic practices however, have been influenced, but not transformed, by painting. For instance, Jeff Wall's photographic work *Picture for Women* (1979), echoes the composition of Manet's painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881-2) (Campany 2011, p. 5). While, given the foregoing, Wall's work may appear to be a plausible candidate as a transformation hybrid, none of the essential or defining features of

photography have been challenged, because although Wall staged his image for picturesque, dramatic effects, his image was otherwise taken according to standard photographic practice. Wall's work was designed to be hung on a wall, as paintings usually are, but the hang of a photograph however, does not constitute one of its essential or defining features. Instead, Wall's photography was influenced by painting, specifically the mode of picturing, tableau, which Manet reinvigorated through his paintings. Taking painting practice into account, will be of some benefit to appreciating Wall's pictorial aims however, it is not necessary to consider the ways that Wall deviated from photographic practice because rather than challenging any of the essential or defining features of photography, Wall instead adapted photographic practice to reflect a particular mode of picturing that is associated with painting.

As it is beneficial, for appreciative practice, to identify whether a work belongs to a particular hybrid kind, or whether a work was created in one art that has been influenced by another art, it is also beneficial to identify whether a work belongs to an evolved version of a pre-existent art. For instance, the advent of digital photography did not signal a new art, a hybrid art, or even a practice influenced by other arts. Digital photography instead, represented an evolution of photography because the practice of organizing, recording, and reproducing patterns of light from an object, using photo-sensitive mechanisms, to create an image was fundamentally the same as in analogue practice. Although the different materials and methods used in analogue and digital photographic processes may result in the alteration of

some of the defining features of photography, such as the constitution of the image through pixels rather than film grain, this represents an evolution of this defining feature, given that the facture of the photographs surface remains largely imperceptible, due to the use of photographic technology. Digital photography then, represents a development of photography rather than a new art, and only on occasion is the digital nature of the medium salient, as for instance in Thomas Ruff's *jpegs* (2007) series, and to be contemplated in order to adequately appreciate the work.

With this, the classificatory framework, for distinguishing between different types of arts that have evolved or involve, or are influenced, by other arts, is established: *Evolving arts*, are those in which some aspect of a pre-existent practice is developed or expanded on, while the essential or defining features of the art are retained, by incorporating newly developed materials and/or techniques. *Arts that are influenced by other arts*, are those in which the practices of an art are adapted so that the resultant works reflect the properties of other arts. *Hybrid arts* are those in which the essential or defining features of an art (or multiple arts) have been juxtaposed with, or challenged by, other arts.

3. Digital Arts and Photography

Having now developed a classificatory framework that can be adopted to appropriately identify and appreciate digital arts connected with photography, I will examine cases of such arts, that may otherwise prove

problematic, to demonstrate the benefits of using this framework. While it may be tempting to assert that, given the increase in new technological materials and techniques, there are more hybrid arts in the digital age (Maynard 2000, p. 17), it seems that many digital hybrid arts are however, continuations and evolutions of pre-existing arts (Skopik 2003, p. 271) and hybrid arts. For example, Loretta Lux has created digitalized overpainted photographs that, I suggest, like the works of Pierre et Gilles, belong to the fusion hybrid category. To create her digital works, Lux photographed her subjects, usually children, and then digitally erased the background and substituted in one which consisted of her own painting, or photographs that she retouched to appear painterly. She also altered the photographs of the children in subtle ways to produce what she described as "imaginary portraits" (Stoll 2004, p. 70), as she attempted to create "a reality that differs from what I find in memory and imagination" (Stoll 2004, p. 70). Lux's combination of painting, which is associated with the imaginary, and photography, which is associated with memory and reality, aided her intention to represent and explore the qualities that children in general possess, such as awkwardness, rather than the portrayal of a particular child (Hart 2005). Specifically, by utilizing painting to modify one of the defining features of photography, Lux depicted types, rather than particulars. Furthermore, by using photo-editing software, Lux conflated the production and post-production stages of photography to create a synthesized whole that would not be so well integrated had she used analogue techniques. Lux's use of digital technology entails difficulty in discerning one medium

from another, which further distorts the reality, and enhances the meaning, of her work. Taking the digital nature of Lux's work into account aids the viewer's appreciation of it, however this is not a new hybrid practice as there is an established, corresponding practice of literally painting over photographs (Warner Marien 2012, p. 39).

Although Lux's digital overpainted photographs do not belong to a new hybrid art, some hybrid arts are new in virtue of the fact that digital technology has enabled agents to join two pre-existent arts in a new practice, that would not previously have been possible to realize. For example, I propose that it is most appropriate to recognize and to appreciate LFC-images as belonging to a new hybrid art, given that by using digital technology one of the defining features of photography, the static nature of the image, has been challenged by one of the defining features of sculpture, the dynamic nature of the viewer's interaction with the work. Respectively, other new hybrid arts have been developed using techniques that, prior to the digital age, would have been impossible. For example, Richard Kolker, uses computer generated imagery (CGI) to create three-dimensional scenes, which he then "photographs" using a virtual camera, that "follows the same rules as the real one: film size, aperture, shutter speed." (Soutter 2013, p. 107) Given however, that no actual photographic event takes place, the works most plausibly belong to a new hybrid art, that may be called "Virtual Photography", in which digital imaging techniques are used to render virtual scenes, and to simulate the resources and techniques of photography. In this case then, photography has transformed digital imaging.

Photography has however, influenced rather than transformed some digital arts. For example, Stan Douglas created his "Discrete Cosine Transformations" by "reverse engineering" the digital photographic process (Smith 2018, p. 88). Specifically, influenced by the fact that digital cameras transform light into code to produce an image, Douglas created software and hardware that allowed him to produce a code for an image, which he created by entering data for frequencies of amplitude and colour, that was then printed on canvas. Douglas said his process was based on JPEG compression and that he was "manipulating the kinds of harmonic interactions that essentially undergird all digital images." (Smith 2018, p. 88) Given that Douglas harnessed digital imaging technology to create images that were, in some sense, created in accordance with digital photographic practice, these works seem like plausible candidates as transformation hybrids. However, JPEG compression is not an essential or defining feature of digital photography. Moreover, Douglas did not combine two existent arts, but developed a new practice which he designed to break the rules of realism in photography and encourage viewers to "look at images as objects that are in front of them" (Smith 2018, p. 91), by creating images with no referent other than the data entered by an agent, rather than data derived from light waves and input via photosensitive mechanisms. Whilst Douglas' work is clearly influenced by digital photography, he has not created photographs nor hybridized two arts to make these works. Yet it is profitable for viewers to consider how the nature of digital photographic image processing influenced the development of Douglas' practice.

There are some kinds however, that have an uncertain status. For example, "Computational Photography" comprises processes including High Dynamic Range (HDR) imaging, which entails that the "camera takes multiple pictures at different exposure levels and seamlessly stiches them together to produce a composite image that retains optimal detail in both the brightest and the dimmest areas." (Fineman 2012, p. 203) Photographic composites, as I have highlighted, are frequently created by incorporating painterly practices. For example, in the mid-19th century Gustave le Gray combined negatives of the sea and sky to create composites that expressively captured the best light and detail of each (Fineman 2012, p. 203). However, HDR imaging is not closely aligned with this practice, as the premise of HDR imaging is not to compose an image, as one creates the composition for a painting, but to create an image in which all the photographed objects are clearly visible. Although it has been a norm of standard photographic practices, until recently, to capture one spatiotemporal scene in one photographic exposure, HDR is now a standard shooting mode on most smartphones and given the proliferation of photographs taken using these devices, it may become a norm of photography to create composites that reflect different photographic events but that capture a scene literally in its best light. Unlike other kinds of photographic composite imaging, the techniques and practices of HDR imaging do not involve the interpenetration of techniques and practices from other arts. Hence, viewers will not profit from appreciating these works as hybrids, or as photography that has been influenced by the properties of

another art. Instead, HDR imaging may be an evolution of photographic practice.

4. Conclusion

In order to adequately appreciate developing digital arts connected with photography it is important for viewers to distinguish between those that are an evolution of existing photographic arts, digital arts that are influenced by photography, and digital arts that hybridize photography. Some hybrid arts, including "Light Field Photography", are new in virtue of the digital technology that is used to create the works and as with other new and developing hybrid arts, at present these tend to be transformation hybrids, however this is likely to change as digital arts further develop. Thus, what I hope to have established here, is a framework that will enable viewers to appropriately identify and appreciate these future developments in the digital arts.

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