to break up any firm confidence in a single history, and to lead the subject toward a social and political responsibility by means of aesthetic education with photography. Photography has probably been the greatest challenge to subjectivity since the invention of writing.

Hilde Van Gelder

The Theorization of Photography Today: Two Models

One of the many crucial issues regarding the current theorizing of the photograph raised in the roundtable discussion is the question—introduced by James Elkins—of "who gets to speak for photography." From the onset of its history, as he points out, a central interlocutor in the debate on possible ontologies of photography has been the artist or maker of the images herself. Today, it is refreshing and revealing to reread some of these artists' statements. I would like to let three of them speak: Antoine Wiertz, Jeff Wall, and Alan Sekula. Using their comments on what photography is, I will distill two possible models to theorize photography today.

A fine example to start with is a brief yet highly visionary note by the eccentric Belgian painter Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865). In the June 1855 issue of *Le National*, he writes,

> Here is some good news for the future of painting.... A few years [ago], a machine was born, which is the honor of our times and which, every day, amazes our thoughts and frightens our eyes. In a century, this machine will be the brush, the palette, the colours, the address, the custom, the patience, the glance, the touch, the paste, the glaze, the *rope*, the shape, the finished, the represented. In one century there will be no more masons in painting: there will only be architects, that is *painters in the largest possible sense of the word.*[98]

Wiertz thus announces important changes for the discipline of painting, here conceived in the narrow sense of a craftsman-like, manual way of working, that are caused by photography's machinic

eye. Painting will no longer be considered as a traditionally well-defined and circumscribed activity. Instead, Wiertz argues, by the time the twentieth century will have reached its midpoint, painting will have become generic and malleable: *painting at large.*

Wiertz anticipates a model of image making through photography that I here want to define as *absorptive.*[99] Elsewhere I have asserted that certain current uses of photography, such as—among many others—the work of Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, have resulted in a new model of *picture* making.[100] In Gursky's or Struth's pictures, which I understand to be hybrid, composite images, photography has subjected painting to a modus phenomenon, in which—paradoxically—the osmotic effect has not been in favor of photography but of an enlargement of what now can be understood as painting.[101] Painting thus has been able to "absorb" photography in the sense that it succeeds in using the camera and the printing paper as tools for its own sake, as a colorful, painterly "medium"—here understood in Greenbergian essentialist terms of the instruments and carrier that are needed to make a painting—that replaces the brush, paint, and canvas. Struth's or Gursky's *tableaux,* a term one often encounters in the literature on the artists, can be considered as painted by the machine, as Wiertz had it—with the camera's eye. It is in this sense that they give birth to an enlarged concept of painting, where painting is not to be considered so much as specifically "pictorial" but rather as generically "pictural."[102]

From that conclusion, I want to argue against Jeff Wall's deduction that it is thanks to the "conceptual" deadlock of the late 1960s that photography has found its own definition as an autonomous Modernist art. According to Wall, photography is intrinsically characterised by its ability to depict a certain reality.[103] Wall's concept of "depiction" is what other authors have called, borrowing from Peirce, photography's iconicity. Wall argues that it is due to this inherent bond with its depictive character that photography finds its essential medium specificity and autonomy. But why do

contemporary critics keep on returning to the question of the essence of the photographic medium without agreeing on the answer—as the roundtable has amply made clear? Why does one, when reading about Wall's own photographic images or those of the above-mentioned artists, so often encounter the terms "tableaux" or "pictures" rather than "photographs"?[104] Why does Wall himself discern photography's depictive character as the only possible future for the "Western Picture" (capitals used in the original) or the "*tableau*" (italics in original), and not for the "photograph"?[105]

The formal conventions employed by this renewed kind of auratic art, in the Benjaminian sense of that term, are for example large-scale formats, technologically sophisticated color prints, and limited editions (often limited to "editions" of one). This has nothing to do with previously known photographic practices, but a great deal to do with the history of monumental painting. In Wall's case, the subject matter or iconographic contents of his pictures is so reminiscent of the figurative tradition of painting that it is not an overstatement to call it "history painting reassessed."[106] And when Thomas Struth photographs important history paintings in his series of *Museum Photographs* (1989–1992) or when he tries to redefine various genres of landscape painting in his *Landschaften* (1991–1993), there is no doubt that, through photography, he is experimenting with the borders of the painterly discipline and what can be included in its genres as they traditionally have been defined.

In the absorptive, pictural model of using the camera and the photo paper, photography is not an autonomous art that has found its own medium specificity. It is rather a "means," as Joel Snyder argues in the roundtable discussion, or a modus element that first and foremost serves to reinvent a long-gone figurative painterly tradition and finds that new life in the hybrid discipline of picture making or painting at large.[107] Why now would one have to question such practices? There can certainly be nothing wrong in experimenting with the limits of what can be regarded as painting

at a certain point in time. Yet, I believe that there are problems in respect to the possible meanings of these images. Regarding Wall's work, Rosalind Krauss has already argued that it flirts with pastiche in part because it disguises what it really does.[108] And even if one cannot say that this was always part of the above-discussed artists' intentions, one finds that the retrospective interests of their artistic enterprises load their images with a poetic-nostalgic effect that makes them lose a great deal of their critical potential.

It is the very capacity to offer a subtle critique that is probably photography's greatest tool, and it is a dimension that often remains largely un(der)explored in the absorptive, pictural way of working. Here lies a second track photography can follow. In this model, which I want to call *intervening*, photography generates artistic images that occupy a privileged position in uttering metaphorically layered critical reflections on the social and economical reality that surrounds us, without succumbing to plain political statements. Elsewhere I have thus defined Alan Sekula's way of working and contrasted his working method with Jeff Wall's, in a comparison between Sekula's *Dismal Science #50* (1989–1992) and Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind*.[109]

In several trailblazing essays, Alan Sekula stresses that, even if two photographs depict a similar reality (for instance, a landscape), their connotations can differ radically. As such, in contrast to Wall, Sekula insists that one cannot conclude anything substantial from the "ground zero" finding that a photo, however "banal," always depicts a reality. An image only obtains meaning in a certain culturally and ideologically determined context. Much more important and fundamental than its depictive power to (re)present reality is photography's causal relationship to it—or what has been theorized, again borrowing Peirce's terminology, as photography's indexicality.[110] Wall's argumentation somehow "forgets," obscures, or blurs indexicality, focusing on the iconic. But a photo is not simply iconic; it is, one can say, indexically iconic or iconic through and throughout its indexicality.[111] It is

true that a photo is always or almost always a stylistically "realistic" image, because it is a reproduction of reality. Yet, this is only so thanks to the fact that the photo is able to physically or indexically record that reality in a highly depictive way.

Indexicality is here conceived in terms of a cause-effect relationship.[112] The photo is a material, tangible form of communication between the image and the reality it visually displays. The photo digs its critical potential out of this privileged relationship to reality; it really has to say something about it because it arises out of it. There, I believe, lie the strength and potential of photography today. Photography in the intervening model testifies to an attitude, an artistic way of approaching reality, whereby the artwork is not only the result of a committed process of investigation but also an actual, personally experienced record of it. In this search for the deliverance of visual information about the reality surrounding us, photography does appear to be a medium. "Medium" here is no longer to be understood in modernist, autonomist terms of self-definition but in terms of a method that researches reality rather than aspiring to reinvent an updated realist style. Method does not aim to find reality's "essence"; it has boundaries and limits as a technique and aspires to do, at best, what it can do: critically reflect on reality. In the intervening model, photography is employed in an analytic way. The photographic image is a critical inscription of a reality it aspires to fathom. In the pictural model, on the other hand, the photographic images absorb the information about the reality they reveal into a synthetic totality with an all too often freestanding narrative dimension.

This said, one finds, when looking systematically at contemporary photographic production, that most images make intermediary cases. In the tableaux of Struth or Gursky themselves, or in the work of Jean-Marc Bustamante, for example, one encounters images that certainly do not totally give in to the poetic discourse of the pictural. The greatest danger for the intervening model, on the other hand, is hovering toward the all too overtly political. The

biggest challenge for photography today therefore appears to be to find a way to discover that narrow operative margin where the photo can position itself in between the poetic and the political.

David Campany

A Few Remarks on the Lens, the Shutter, and the Light-Sensitive Surface

What is it that gives rise to the wish or the need to define something? It happens when we are attracted to it, or when we find it threatening, or when it is new to us, or when it is disappearing from us. Photography attracts definition, or *definitions,* because it fits all of these criteria, often all at once. It has done so for quite a while now. The Art Seminar demonstrates fairly comprehensively that photography eludes definition. It also shows that the more elusive it is, the greater the wish to pursue it. Photography has not been caught, and what emerges here is a fascinating account of why this might be. In what follows I will make a response to this state of affairs by looking at different approaches to the problem. For the sake of brevity, I will confine myself to thinking in the first instance to the *camera.*

Looking back at the many discussions of photography and its apparatus, I have noticed that the character of the argument tends to change depending upon which part is being considered. The camera, which is just one part of the apparatus, is itself made up of what we may think of as three distinct parts: the lens, the shutter, and the light-sensitive surface. When the lens is the center of attention, it is usually in relation to the depiction of space and the conventions of realism determined by theories of perspective and optics. Here we are in the realm of resemblance and iconicity. When the shutter is invoked—and it is not invoked much in this book—it is in relation to time and duration. When the light-sensitive surface is invoked—it dominates in this book—it is usually in relation to the question of indexicality, contiguity, and touch. To me this seems as reasonable as it is complex.

At different historical points and in different contexts, we can see that the emphasis on each component part of the photographic apparatus has varied. For example, think of how, between the mid-1920s and the mid-1970s, the shutter seemed to play a very active part in popular and more serious thinking about what photography is. The celebrated "decisive moment," in which the lens cuts out a bit of space and the shutter cuts out a bit of time, was thought be as close to the essence of the medium as you could get. It loomed large in popular and artistic accounts of what photography was or could be. Looking back, however, over the intervening half century, we can see that era was in part prompted as much by other media as by photography's autonomous search for its own essence. Cinema, a mass medium by the 1920s, had the moving image but it also created a new relation to still images. Photography began to pursue this stillness as "arrestedness." It mastered and monopolized arrestedness roughly until video intruded as a mass form to become widespread by the 1970s, with its portability, dispersal, and capacity to be readily fragmented. At that point the decisive moment, with its active shutter, began to wane with a new understanding of the medium. Photo reportage of "events," in its applied and artistic guises, receded. These days few people speak of the moment, decisive or otherwise, being unique to photography or definitive of it. The moment still haunts photography, of course, which is partly why so much staged photography in art since the mid-1970s renounced the decisive moment the better to explore what such a moment was or is. The early work of Cindy Sherman and much of the work of Jeff Wall come to mind in this regard. Both of them began in earnest in the late 1970s. Today contemporary photographic artists seem to prefer the stoicism of the lens to the ecstasy of the shutter. That seems to be what this now relatively slow medium is for them.[113]

So photography has always had a shutter in one form or another, but its status, its understanding, has experienced a rise and fall. Likewise, we could think of the various points at which