Depth of Field

In recent years, the topic of abstraction has returned to photography. Curator Christopher Bedford discusses this resurgence of interest with artists Walead Beshty, Liz Deschenes and Eileen Quinlan.

CHRISTOPHER BEDFORD I think we can all agree that within the field of photography, abstraction has emerged in the past few years as one of a few de rigueur topics. Several recent exhibitions have drawn attention to the most prominent practitioners, but neither these exhibitions nor related writings have suggested critical taxonomies to help us think analytically about the variety of conceptual interests driving artists to investigate the applications of abstraction in photography. Instead, exhibitions—many of them visually dazzling—have been based on simple visual parity, implying relationships between works that in many cases don’t exist. Some artists have used photography as a way to create abstractions that function in a documentary sense, as very literal records of specific physical conditions. Can each of you comment on this as a strategy in your work and, more broadly, as a strain within abstract photography?

WALEAD BESHTY I wouldn’t use the word abstract to describe my work, especially the work that the term is usually associated with. I consider those works, the photograms or X-ray photographs, to be literal, meaning that they aren’t abstractions of a particular subject matter, but are concrete manifestations of a specific set of conditions.

I resist the term abstraction because it is a false delimiter, and tends to stop certain fundamental questions from being asked.

In contemporary art, abstraction is used as a shorthand for a certain set of formal traits, the absence of figuration being one, but as a category it lacks any real solidity, unless it’s used as a proper name for a particular historical movement. Abstraction tends to describe the way an object is approached and our expectations of it, rather than anything inherent, lending these assumptions an air of concreteness. I resist the term because it is a false delimiter, and tends to stop certain fundamental
questions from being asked. Claiming abstraction, in anything but a naive sense, seems a melancholic negation of the Utopian arguments that abstraction, as an agglomeration of historical movements, implies (i.e. a site of unfettered subjectivity, transcendental meaning, or the proposition of a materialist revolutionary project within art), because it reduces these arguments to a set of formal similarities.

Eileen Quinlan, *Fahrenheit #18* (2009), detail, chromogenic print

Technically, whatever might be called ‘documentary’ is also an abstraction (which is the case for any representation), because whatever the term is applied to is thus proposed as an aesthetic model of a social phenomenon; meaning that documents are – by definition – about something that they are separate from. ‘Documentary’ also implies a certification by the state, an authority that operates by mandate, and the documentary mode reifies this type of authoritative voice, again obscuring some fundamental questions. The law is, of course, an abstraction par excellence.

Regardless of the appearance of what either term is used to describe, what unites documentary and abstraction is that they imply that the object is separate from the phenomena it is proposed to depict, that it must stand apart to have meaning, and its material condition, its ideological function, becomes secondary if acknowledged at all. I’m more interested in thinking of objects as part of an active system, seeing the political or social meaning of an object as inseparable from its material existence and going from there. Terms like ‘documentary’ or ‘abstraction’ aren’t really useful for me as anything more than historical or methodological curiosities.
EILEEN QUINLAN The first abstract photos – still-lives, really – I created were titled ‘Smoke & Mirrors’ which allowed me to telegraph their subject matter as both stubborn fact and sleight of hand. The imperfections they bore (settling dust, a scratch on the surface of a mirror) and an undeniably photographic rendering of the smoke that curled its way toward the heat of a modeling lamp, were necessary in order to tether them to the things in front of the lens, away from a painterly or subjective reading. The fact that these images, and the ones I continue to fashion under other names, are never manipulated in the darkroom or digitally continues to reinforce their possible status as documents of real events in the studio.

I’m interested in the mechanics of presenting images, a sudden bracing encounter with the clumsy hand of the artist, attempting to adjust the veil.

I can’t speak for other artists dealing with the issue, but they must feel a similar anxiety in the face of appearing to create only abstractions. I flirt with a kind of refusal, but hope to stay on the right side of the question through an accretion of implied meanings, rather than, as Walead put it, an evacuation of it.

LIZ DESCHENES There have been many exhibitions, of late, that have brought together the words ‘photography’ and ‘abstraction’. All photographic images are simultaneously representational and abstract, constructions that have gone through a series of translations and manipulations – either mechanically, digitally, or both. There are as many perspectives as there are practitioners, objectives and approaches to grappling with the medium.
For several years, my work has taken on self-reflexivity in photography. It became clear to me that historically these concerns have always existed, but the discussion of it as a phenomenon or practice was not evident. While explicitly narrative photography was the dominant mode of expression and exhibition in the late 1990s, in 2000 I curated a show at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, entitled ‘Photography about Photography’, that focused on 13 contemporary artists and revealed a wide array of medium-specific concerns. My own work has been thoroughly invested in photography – in its history, its ongoing, complicated relationship to other practices and their histories.

CB In an effort to inch towards a less trans-historical, more specific understanding of abstraction’s currency for photographers working today I’d like to turn away from photography and towards painting for a moment. In her recent study of Robert Ryman, Used Paint (2009), Suzanne P. Hudson proposes a new understanding of Ryman’s work through John Dewey’s conception of ‘Here is the organic relation of pragmatism or learning by doing’. Dewey wrote theory and practice. [One learns] not simply [by] doing things, but [by] getting also the idea of what he does; getting from the start some intellectual conception that enters into his practice and enriches it; while every idea finds, directly or indirectly, some application in experience and has some effect upon life.’Dewey’s formulation of a self-sustaining, practice-based inquiry seems relevant in varying measure to each of you and might even be seen as a way to think through much more broadly the materialist/pragmatist impulse so prevalent in photography today.

WB I suppose this makes sense, since contemporary debates about photography seem stuck in decades-old discussions of the politics of representation, which, in struggling with the instrumentalization of aesthetics, dead-ended in an existential divide between signifier and signified. In what has become the dominant theoretical cliché about photography, this line of thinking asserts that the only meaning a photograph can hope to achieve is a display of its own failure to have a stable meaning, that death and absence are their only inherent qualities. Instead of accepting contingency as a mundane condition of photographic meaning, and the source of its power as a relational tool, contingency as hollowness becomes photography's identity, a melancholic ontology that encourages poetic musings that masquerade as aesthetic theory.
A learning-by-doing model offers one way around this impasse by placing the emphasis on active processes, instead of on the relative truthfulness of competing representations and the lack of an absolute measure by which to evaluate truthfulness. But rather than stopping with the model of the individual artist in the studio, Dewey's idea seems most useful when it's applied to the larger social field of production (as many after him have, say Claude Lévi-Strauss or Michel de Certeau); opening up the possibility of treating the pragmatics of social space as a dynamic and active context for production.

Politics in art usually gets reduced to the revelatory, representing something that is going on somewhere else, and usually reiterates problematic relations of power and subordination, speaking to the viewer in a borrowed tongue – that of institutional power – that limits the viewer to the role of receiver. But there is the fundamental political question of the site of reception that is left unaddressed, and at worst obscured, by this sort of work, specifically whether politicized aesthetics can be proposed in a manner that doesn’t perpetuate the top-down assertion of aesthetic meaning. I don't mean addressing it by condemning institutions or art production as corrupt – this is too easy – but in a way that treats the social realities of the site of reception as a condition of contemporary production, both acknowledging it, and also proposing modifications to it through active, rather than passive relationships to an audience. All of the meanings attached to objects are a sort of learning-by-doing, a navigation of the varied forces at work. I think it is important to acknowledge these forces, not treat them as secrets.

All photographs are simultaneously representational and abstract, constructions that have gone through a series of translations and manipulations.

To go back to the abstraction and documentary question, Hito Steyerl linked the two eloquently when she wrote that with documentary images, ‘the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes.’ I take her comment to mean that as
representations become increasingly embedded in the circumstances they depict, the more thought and effort they require to be legible, and that this legibility has the potential to alter or intervene in our relationship to daily life. Considered in this way, there is a possibility to challenge and, hopefully, shift the symbolic order that makes these expressions unrecognizable in conventional terms, and as a result, the false solidity of categorical delimiters we use to understand aesthetics will have to be altered, and vulgar concreteness, as a problem confronting the politics of aesthetics, can be destabilized.

LD To a minor degree, materiality was present in my curatorial project, and has been in the background of my photographs. However, process is more of a means to an end. I am significantly more invested in what these pursuits can communicate about photography, and the particular way the medium has been positioned and historicized. In regards to Dewey, learning-by-doing, or exhibiting and lecturing would apply to those practicalities and potential discoveries. These activities have allowed me to have a clearer perspective on my concerns and possible directions for the work.

EQ On the question of learning-by-doing, it’s a fair enough characterization of the way I work. I oscillate between an experimental, subjective, and even (gulp) intuitive studio process, where I shoot with very little structure, bound only by a limited set of materials and a more considered editing and installing process, where I shape and make sense of the mass of fragmentary images that are generated in the studio. This is the moment when I try to grapple with the actual site and experience of viewership, and the greater context of the world in which my photographs circulate. I’m deeply suspicious of occupying the mythic role of masterful artist, or of medium channeling an elusive muse, but I also recognize that art-making cannot be totally controlled. The output of my studio activities can look like other art (Suprematism, Constructivism, Surrealism) or it can resemble commercial photography (perfume advertisements, abstract stock, album covers). I don’t privilege most compositions/iterations as good or bad, I recognize that they are almost always interchangeable. My selections satisfy the different aims of each installation, sometimes to demystify the circumstances of the making of the images, and other times to conceal it – sometimes to force an engagement with each picture as such, and other times to create surrogates, almost without content, that can be configured into larger pictures on the wall. While some photos are seductive, even beautiful, others frustrate with a not-quite-there-ness. This creates for me an interesting tension, foregrounding questions of taste, of what constitutes success in the eye of the viewer.

Ultimately I’m interested in presenting people with both an opportunity for contemplation and an alienation effect that can interrupt it – an awareness of the mechanics of presenting and consuming images, or a sudden bracing encounter with the clumsy hand of the artist, attempting to adjust the veil. These aims are ambitious (though certainly not original), but they allow me to produce, despite my anxiety around the value and meaning of the whole endeavour. Sometimes I’m leading the work, and other times I’m being led by it.

CB I began this discussion by gesturing towards a need to develop a more specific understanding of the various registers of abstraction within photographic practice. That question grew in large part out of a desire, shared by us all, I think, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the interrelated concrete and ideological relationships that exist between the appearance of certain non-representational works and the conditions under which those works are produced and shown. What seems to have emerged is an understanding of non-representational image making in photography today as a mode of production that is deeply conscious of the ‘social realities of the site of reception’, to quote Walead, as well as the specific conditions of the site of production, since it is those conditions that determine the formal characteristics of the work.

A thorough ‘formal’ investigation of such works, then, naturally enfolds conception, production and form, and mandates an understanding of all three phases as mutually constitutive and, ultimately, physically indivisible. This model, it seems to me, has only a coincidental relationship to shared formal vocabularies, and everything to do with process as a means of connecting with social realities/conditions. Does this seem to you all a fair summation?

WB I still respond negatively to the separation that terms like photography and abstraction imply, and I really don’t find the conventional meaning of either all that useful. Perhaps it’s a matter of denaturalizing the terms, allowing them to describe specific processes. I agree with Liz that processes or procedures are only significant as means to an end, and for me the end should never mythologize or exoticize the means; this is what I’m most wary of, treating convention, or naturalized authority, as a mystical fact. I try to limit my work to procedures that are mundane, available, and almost dumb. I think of the processes and production of my work as parasitic, using expansive structures, say FedEx, or airport security, or the supposed transparency of technological images, to produce outcomes they weren’t intended for.
I don't have a particular attachment to photography *per se*, but I return to it because it remains the dominant mode through which images circulate, and the widespread rituals involved in its traffic and dissemination raise the stakes on the vague critical tools available for its discussion. I see photography as an umbrella term for a set of operations, which are actually quite distinct, with their own histories, applications, and implications. It’s an expression of Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of a ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ when such disciplines – like photography, sculpture or abstraction – are assumed to have meaning beyond that of institutional classifications; I don’t think etymological or ontological dissection could ever lend them the specificity they are assumed to have. Sure the categories have histories as part of organizational structures, but on their own they are anaemic, hollow. On the other hand, objects, how they traffic, how they dialectically construct our movement through the world via our participation can be discussed in specific terms. We negotiate our roles within expansive dominant structures on a daily basis, and I try to produce my work with an awareness of that, to use restrictions as generative tools.

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Walead Beshty is based in Los Angeles, USA where he is Associate Professor at Art Center College of Design’s Graduate Fine Art Department. His solo exhibition, ‘Legibility on Color Backgrounds’ at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C. will run until 13 September. His project ‘12.25˚’ will open at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio on 16 September, and his work will be included in ‘New Photography 2009’ at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. His first solo exhibition in the UK will open in October at Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

Liz Deschenes lives in New York, USA. Her work was recently included in the inaugural exhibition of the Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago, and ‘Colour Chart’, which travelled to Tate Liverpool, UK from MoMA, New York. She will have a show in October at Sutton Lane, Paris, France.

Eileen Quinlan lives and works in New York, USA. Her work was recently shown at Krobath, Vienna, Austria and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA. In 2010 she will have a solo show at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.