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### During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism

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**Publication date**  
2012

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

van Winkel, C. H. (2012). *During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism*. Valiz uitgeverij.

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## 6. After the Dilettantes: Photography as Conceptual Art Form

Contemporary art is a generic art: it is neither determined nor defined by the use of a specific medium or technique. Since the 1960s an artist is no longer essentially a painter or a sculptor but simply a visual artist.<sup>370</sup> This so-called “post-medium condition” is the root of the visual indeterminacy of art and the source of the fundamental freedom of its practitioners.<sup>371</sup> Any new work of art determines for itself, as a one-off hypothesis or proposition, what its “material” is, what conditions it wants to meet, and how its intended audience should relate to it.

The post-medium condition does not imply that the choice of a medium is entirely arbitrary or without meaning. Media come and go: there are old media and new media, strong ones and weak ones, dominant and marginal ones, each with their own ideological or “political” complexion. The choice of a medium thus affects the artist’s relationship to art as a whole.

Photography occupies a special place within this diffuse spectrum of media and disciplines. Today, photography has the status of the most general, most neutral medium available to visual artists; a medium that has none of the slightly archaic connotations of disciplines such as painting. Paradoxically, the generic character of contemporary art appears to be embodied in this one specific medium. For the generic artist, photography is, aesthetically, like a neutral zone: under all circumstances it is a correct and legitimate option to make a photographic work.

Photography is therefore a medium to which special characteristics are attributed, albeit implicitly. Within the autonomous domain of art it acts like a medium without history – being always of the “here and now” – and

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<sup>370</sup> Thierry De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>371</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea”. *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London/New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

without limitations. In contrast to painting and sculpture which, unless accompanied by an explicit critical claim, tend to be eyed suspiciously in progressive art circles, it seems that artists need not justify their choice for photography. Photography is deployed as an entirely transparent medium, offering no resistance to the realisation or communication of an idea. Its products are in a sense faceless and anonymous, unburdened by a personal signature or obtrusive artistic temperament. In contemporary art, photography has become the ultimate *formule de politesse*.

In 1960 photography did not yet possess this privileged position within visual art. Its current status derives in part from the central role it played in the practice of conceptual artists.

In retrospect, several works by John Baldessari, Jan Dibbets and Gilbert & George may be interpreted as concise allegories of the process of making art. In each case the camera has taken over part of the artist's job. Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line* (1975), Dibbets' *12 Photographs with Different Shutter Speeds* (1971) and Gilbert & George's 16-part *Photo-Piece* (1971) could be said to deal with three "classic" aesthetic problems – respectively: line, contrast, and the figure-ground relationship. Baldessari threw three orange balls in the air and photographed them at the moment when they approximately formed a straight line; he printed the most successful of his thirty-six attempts. Dibbets focussed his camera on a houseplant in front of a window and took twelve identical photographs with an increasingly short exposure time. The photographic prints, in three rows of four, display a gradual progression from overexposed (white) through contrasty to underexposed (black). Gilbert & George took sixteen photographs of themselves as "living sculptures", partly hidden by bushes; they arranged them in individual frames, forming a mosaic-like pattern on the wall.

These three works from the heyday of conceptual art show how artists used photography to demystify artishood. The medium was an instrument for eliminating the artistic will – the ambition to make an "interesting" image. The process of drawing a line, combining light and dark components, and integrating the visual motif with the background is

mechanised by contracting it out to an unthinking and, in a sense, “blind” machine that is able to produce some kind of picture under any circumstances. The visionary powers and particular skills attributed to the artist are made to disappear behind a veil of detachment and irony. Furthermore, conceptual artists made no attempt to exploit the full technical potential of the photographic medium. On the contrary: these works represent not only a deconstruction of the expressive artistic gesture – a form of deskilling – but also a denial of the classical values of the photographer’s craft. The artists opted for an arbitrary effect rather than making the careful choices – optimal exposure time, optimal framing, the “decisive moment” – that distinguish a successful photograph from a failed one, and the work of a professional from an amateur snapshot.<sup>372</sup>

Conceptual art was concerned with the decisions that are taken in the artistic process and the authority on which these decisions are supposedly based. The camera figured as a device to which specific decisions could be delegated, either entirely or in part, apparently or in reality. For this reason it was important to admit no trace of photographic craftsmanship: a technically perfect photograph would suggest, after all, that the maker had mastered his tools and could achieve whatever effect he wanted. The interest of conceptual artists in the photographic medium was thus related to the fact that the competence of the visual artist had not yet colonised the domain of photography. They saw the medium as a non-medium, a tool that was neutral and not ideologically overdetermined in the way that painting and sculpture were. Photography offered artists a discursive space, a way to import ideas, phenomena and cognitive models into the realm of art without automatically sublimating or aestheticising them. According to some commentators photography could even be seen as a “paradigm” for the critical, self-reflective art practice of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>373</sup> Drawing an analogy with Marcel Duchamp’s *objet trouvé*, one

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<sup>372</sup> The use of the terms dilettante or amateur in this essay refers neither to the nineteenth-century pioneers nor to those who take “serious” photographs as a hobby, but to the photographic activities of the general public.

<sup>373</sup> Jeff Wall, “Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art”, in: cat. *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 254.

might speak of a “found medium”, a medium that artists chose precisely *because* they felt no particular bond with it. Baldessari said in 1976: “I have no particular allegiance to photography, other than that it’s quick.”<sup>374</sup>

For conceptual artists, the dilettante use of photography was a means of sidestepping professional criteria of artistic quality. “It became a subversive creative act for a talented and skilled artist to imitate a person of limited abilities”, wrote Jeff Wall in 1995.

The act of renunciation required for a skilled artist to enact this mimesis, and construct works as models of its consequences, is a scandal typical of avant-garde desire, the desire to occupy the threshold of the aesthetic, its vanishing-point.<sup>375</sup>

Artists wished to reduce artishood to its intellectual kernel and so could no longer call upon any sort of craftsmanship.

The technical deficiencies of conceptual photographic work are very real. Referring to Ed Ruscha’s artist’s book *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, Wall wrote:

the majority [of the pictures] seem to take pleasure in a rigorous display of generic lapses: improper relation of lenses to subject distances, insensitivity to time of day and quality of light, excessively functional cropping, with abrupt excisions of peripheral objects, lack of attention to the specific character of the moment being depicted – all in all a hilarious performance, an almost sinister mimicry of the way “people” make images of the dwellings with which they are involved.<sup>376</sup>

*Some Los Angeles Apartments* is one of a series of small printed books that Ruscha began making in the early 1960s. It was produced according to a simple pattern. Each page features a single photograph of a building accompanied by a caption giving the address (618 N. LOS ROBLOS; 6051 ROMAINE). The buildings appear to have been selected randomly: apart from their location in Los Angeles it is not clear what they have in common.

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<sup>374</sup> James Hugunin, “A Talk with Baldessari”, *The Dumb Ox* 1:2 (1976), 11-12. Reprinted in: David Company, ed., *Art and Photography* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 227.

<sup>375</sup> Wall, “Marks of Indifference”, 265.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

The pictures are devoid of photographic interest. Ruscha is not concerned with the kind of intensification of the image that has made Walker Evans and Lee Friedlander famous. Man's alienation from his domestic environment is not allayed, but rather embodied in or extended to the relationship between the artist and his medium.<sup>377</sup>

The unprofessional quality of these photographs was intended. According to Jeff Wall, Ruscha's "amateurism" is grounded in an adopted persona: the artist has assumed the guise of an imaginary person who, without plan or artistic intention, takes pictures of his home but in so doing is unable to transcend the socio-economic conditions of the urban landscape. Ruscha's photographic books, the first of which appeared in 1963 under the title *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, have been made, as it were, by a "phantom producer".

Only an idiot would take pictures of nothing but the filling stations, and the existence of a book of just those pictures is a kind of proof of the existence of such a person. But the person, the asocial cipher who cannot connect with the others around him, is an abstraction, a phantom conjured up by the construction, the structure of the product said to be by his hand.<sup>378</sup>

It should come as no surprise that by the mid-1970s the subversive strategies of conceptual art had lost much of their power. Imitating amateur photography was no longer a credible option, perhaps because so many artists had already pursued this strategy. A comparison between the agendas of Documenta 5 (1972) and Documenta 6 (1977) gives some indication of the speed with which this devaluation occurred. Documenta 5 introduced the medium of photography in the context of visual art, showing works by conceptual artists including John Baldessari, Hamish Fulton, Douglas Huebler and Ed Ruscha. Photography was presented as a means to casually record a process, proposition or idea. The amateur aesthetic prevailed. Five years later, at the time of Documenta 6, the institutional and

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<sup>377</sup> Jeff Wall describes it as follows: "The pictures are, as reductivist works, models of our actual relations with their subjects, rather than dramatized representations that transfigure those relations by making it impossible for us to have such relations with them." Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

commercial emancipation of photography in Europe had advanced so far that the conceptual approach could no longer be supported.<sup>379</sup> The dilettantism of conceptual artists hindered the further acceptance of the photographic *métier*. On this point the curators of Documenta 6 distanced themselves explicitly from their predecessors. They felt that the intellectual framework of conceptual art had been exhausted.<sup>380</sup> In their opinion photography had moved beyond the limitations of conceptual art. Documenta 6 presented the cutting edge photographic art of the day explicitly as an inquiry into the codes of the photographic image and the photographic process. And so the conceptual indifference to the technical and aesthetic qualities of the medium gave way to an analytical approach. Conceptual photographic works by Ger van Elk, Joseph Kosuth, Gilbert & George and Les Levine were presented side by side with the work of other artists and photographers in a section of the exhibition entitled *Reflexion und Ausweitung des Mediums: Vorgang – Prozeß – Zeit – Raum* (*Reflection on and Expansion of the Medium: Procedure – Process – Time – Space*). In their introduction, the curators wrote of a “new relationship between visual art and photography”; the photographic process would result in a work that contained a “statement” about photography as medium.<sup>381</sup>

The work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, exhibited at Documenta 5 and again at Documenta 6, played an important role in this shift in the theory and practice of art photography. From 1969 onward, the art world had quite naturally adopted the work of the Bechers as a form of conceptual art. Konrad Fischer, the Düsseldorf-based gallerist, included the Bechers in the exhibition *Konzeption / Conception* (Leverkusen 1969) and facilitated their participation in Documenta 5 (1972), which he co-organised.<sup>382</sup> Shortly

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<sup>379</sup> Stephan Gronert, “Alternative Pictures: Conceptual Art and the Artistic Emancipation of Photography in Europe”, in cat. *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2003), 89-90.

<sup>380</sup> Evelyn Weiss, “Einführung in die Abteilung Photographie”, in cat. *Documenta 6* (Kassel 1977), vol. 2, 7. See also Gronert, “Alternative Pictures”, 90.

<sup>381</sup> Weiss, “Einführung in die Abteilung Photographie”, 8.

<sup>382</sup> Gronert, “Alternative Pictures”, 96. Judging from the title of the 1968 exhibition *Bouwen voor de industrie in de 19de en 20ste eeuw. Een fotografische dokumentatie* (Building for the Industry in the 19th and 20th Centuries. A

thereafter, however, their work was seen as exemplifying the serious and professional approach that was to oust the dilettantism and irony of conceptual photography. Thanks to Bernd and Hilla Becher, photography seemed able to transcend the technical limitations of early conceptual art. At the same time, they also helped to create a framework within which the medium could be recognised and appreciated as a serious “conceptual art form”. The work of the Bechers functioned in its own terms on both sides of the watershed and thus made the necessary transition conceivable and acceptable.

In their photographic documentation of factories and industrial sites, there was never any trace of an amateurish approach to the medium. Indeed, Hilla Becher had been trained as a professional photographer. Their carefully considered use of the technical potential of photography served to document both the structural characteristics and the details of large industrial objects in a manner that enabled them to create an inventory and to draw typological comparisons.

It is partly due to the recognition of Bernd and Hilla Becher as visual artists that the photographic *métier* acquired the conceptual aura that it has retained to this day. Initially it was not their intention to produce art, but *exactly that* made their work interesting in the context of art with a “non-art look”. In the mid-1970s the work of the Bechers formed an ideal lever to break the impasse around conceptual photography that resulted from the obsolescence of the amateur aesthetic.

A comparison of their series of *Coal Bunkers* with Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* makes clear how the Bechers were able to function credibly within the field of conceptual art and simultaneously work outside it. What these works have in common is a deadpan restriction to a single (architectural) motif, a lack of commentary and a serial presentation method. For the rest, the differences could not be more overwhelming. Ruscha was clearly not interested in constructing a typology of North American petrol stations. He simply recorded what he saw on the road, with the predetermined number twenty-six in mind; his photographic method

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Photographic Document) the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven exhibited the Bechers’ work from a non-artistic, architectural/historical perspective.

was indifferent and casual.<sup>383</sup> By contrast the Bechers opted for a disciplined and labour-intensive approach. Through their technical consistency – choice of lens, camera position and angle of view – they managed to represent the coal bunkers in an identical fashion: frontally, with the horizon at the same height and against an even grey sky. The Bechers amply demonstrated precisely those technical skills that Ruscha, according to Jeff Wall, was lacking. But in their strict methodology and their emphasis on objectivity and standard procedures, they also distanced themselves from Henri Cartier-Bresson’s creed of the “decisive moment”, which had long been the norm in professional photography.<sup>384</sup> It is this aspect that shows their evident affinity with forms of conceptual art.

There is little point in determining a set of objective criteria in order to define “conceptual art” and to decide which artists and photographers belong to the movement and which do not. “Conceptual” is not a label that functions outside history; its meaning and application have been subject to changes that parallel the changes in art production itself. The oeuvre of Bernd and Hilla Becher marks an important turning point in this discursive history. In the contemporary context it is common for Bernd Becher to be referred to as “a conceptual artist who works exclusively with photography”,<sup>385</sup> even if the Bechers themselves did not view their work as art until the late 1970s – several years after the decline of conceptual art.<sup>386</sup>

The success of some of Bernd Becher’s photography students at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf can be seen as the next step in the art world’s appropriation of professional, technically perfect photography. Whereas the Bechers started to make large prints relatively late in their career – a

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<sup>383</sup> “The first book came out of a play with words. The title came before I even thought about the pictures. I like the word ‘gasoline’ and I like the specific quality of ‘twenty-six’.” Ed Ruscha, in: John Coplans, “Concerning ‘Various Small Fires’: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications”, *Artforum* 3:5 (February 1965), 25. Quoted in: Melanie Mariño, “Almost Not Photography”, in: Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67.

<sup>384</sup> Gronert, “Alternative Pictures”, 89. Cf. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

<sup>385</sup> Hripsimé Visser, “Fotografie/Photography”, in: cat. *Aanwinsten / Acquisitions 1993-2003*, ed. Jan van Adrichem et al. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2006), 87.

<sup>386</sup> See Gronert, “Alternative Pictures”, 88-89.

necessity brought about by exhibitions of their work in art museums<sup>387</sup> – Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky have opted for the production of large, colourful “museum pieces” right from the outset. This decision does not seem to have affected the conceptual prestige of their work.

The photographic portraits and landscapes with which Struth, Ruff and their colleagues from the Düsseldorf School have achieved recognition since the 1980s are generally interpreted as examples of a critical and detached approach to the photographic medium. “What we have before us in a Ruff exhibition”, a critic wrote in 1991, “is a collection of individually distinct but essentially interchangeable objects, which aim to simulate and critique the traditional functions of photography.”<sup>388</sup> This interpretation of Ruff’s work is supported by an often-quoted interview from 1988 in which the artist presented himself as a sceptical photographer. He says about his portrait series :

I consciously imitate conventional photography. ... It is an imitation of conventional photography and looks conventional.<sup>389</sup>

In the interview Ruff states that he does not believe in photography and that his photographs are meant to document this lack of faith. In his opinion “photography can only reproduce the surface of things.”<sup>390</sup> His portraits are supposed to demonstrate the impossibility of representing someone’s personality through photographs. In this respect, the large format is more than simply an opportunistic choice: it introduces a critical distance to the imagery being imitated; according to some observers it effectively “problematizes” the conventional character of Ruff’s photographs.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> According to Hilla Becher in an interview on the DVD *Contacts: The Greatest Photographers Reveal the Secrets Behind Their Pictures*, vol. 3: *Conceptual Photography* (Arte Video, 2005).

<sup>388</sup> Marc Freidus, “Lack of Faith. On Thomas Ruff”, *Parkett* 28 (1991), 68.

<sup>389</sup> Cat. *Binationale. German Art of the Late 80s* (Düsseldorf/Boston: Städtische Kunsthalle and Museum of Fine Arts: 1988), 260.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> Norman Bryson and Trevor Fairbrother, “Thomas Ruff: Spectacle and Surveillance”, *Parkett* 28 (1991), 93.

If his series *Häuser* (1987-1991) also contains a statement about photography, it is because the banality of the buildings represented – apartment blocks, offices and factories – infects the photographic medium. Unlike Ed Ruscha in his photographic books of the 1960s, Ruff imitates not the amateur but the professional photographer. The artist has said of this series that he intended to “remake” the architectural photography of the Bauhaus period and the decades immediately following the Second World War. Reproducing this historical mode of representation was more important for him than accurately rendering specific buildings. For this reason, in *Haus nr 1 I* certain elements such as a tree and a traffic sign have been erased.<sup>392</sup>

Thomas Struth does not share Ruff’s scepticism towards photography. In an interview in 1990 he referred to photography as a communicative and analytical medium, which he apparently uses with confidence. Nonetheless, his relation to the medium is detached. In the same interview he did his best to trivialise or even deny the technical aspects of the photographic *métier*:

For me, making a photograph is mostly an intellectual process of understanding people or cities and their historical and phenomenological connections. At that point the photo is almost made, and all that remains is the mechanical process. I could also write a text, but as I don’t write, I use the language of photographs.

Struth explicitly says that the history and conventions of photography are too limiting as a context for his work:

I don’t just work with the history of photography, my work refers to the phenomena of the world in which I live now.

Neither is he interested in the differences between particular media:

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<sup>392</sup> Cat. *Thomas Ruff: 1979 to the Present*, ed. M. Winzen (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 2002), 191.

I am uninterested in whether it's painting, literature, photography, film or some other medium.<sup>393</sup>

By not attaching himself to a single medium, Struth consciously sides with the position of visual artists. In effect, as “an artist who uses photography”, he claims that the post-medium condition is applicable to his own work. This said, his mastery of the photographic medium and thus the technical quality of his work are without question. The fact that his public does not generally experience this as a contradiction demonstrates once again the extent to which photography has been integrated into the domain of visual art.

Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth adopt opposite positions in relation to the photographic medium. As an artist, Ruff is preoccupied with a critical exploration of the conventions of photography. This meta-analysis is the true subject of his practice; *what* he photographs is in a certain sense incidental and exchangeable. Struth, by contrast, is not interested in the medium itself. He employs photography as a useful instrument in an intellectual engagement with “the world in which we live”. While completely contrary, these approaches have a common element: they distance themselves from the attitude of the professional photographer, the narrow-minded specialist who is married to his medium. It is this latter point that gives each of their oeuvres a place in the world of visual art and explains why, despite their fundamentally different perspectives, they can both be experienced as conceptual.

Whereas conceptual photographic work of the 1960s and early 1970s promoted notions of deskilling and dilettantism, today a professional embrace of the photographic *métier* is no longer at odds with the priorities of a critical and conceptual artistic practice.

As stated above, deskilling and dilettantism were not goals in and of themselves, but a means to demystify artistic practice. It seems clear by now that this operation failed: since the mid-70s the art world has successfully neutralised the eroding of its qualitative criteria by conceptual art. Exactly

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<sup>393</sup> “Interview between Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Thomas Struth”, in: cat. *Portraits – Thomas Struth* (Paris: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1990), 32-33.

the opposite has occurred: the instrument of the dilettantes – photography – has been incorporated within visual art. The paradox is that the potential demystification of art through the conceptual use of photography has made the medium acceptable within the domain of visual art. The suggestion that photography could undermine the bourgeois concept of art was sufficient to give the medium a definitive place in art. But the promised revolt has never materialised.

Photoconceptualism led the way toward the complete acceptance of photography as art – autonomous, bourgeois, collectable art – by virtue of insisting that this medium might be privileged to be the negation of that whole idea. In being that negation, the last barriers were broken.<sup>394</sup>

Photography has become an institution within contemporary art, but an institution with a friendly face: it is nondogmatic and accessible, light-footed and moderate, secular and engaged. It presents itself as the medium of the mind – a medium pre-eminently suitable for the discreet and effective recording of an idea. In a photographic work, the concept, the process and the end product all have an equal artistic weight. Photography has acquired the aura of an enlightened medium, and it is for this reason that artists with a “conceptual way of thinking and working” readily opt for it.<sup>395</sup> A work such as *Blue Ridge* by Elspeth Diederix (2000) exemplifies this tendency. It presents itself as subtle and tasteful, intelligently designed and carefully executed. It is the artist observing the world and allowing us to see the world through her eyes. *Blue Ridge* wants to be called imaginative, honest and sensual – a demonstration of artistic clarity and professionalism. Its only remaining problem is that there are no grounds for objecting to it.

The fact that the genealogy of art photography is marked by several noteworthy breaches cannot be read from a work such as this. That is at most fodder for historians.

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<sup>394</sup> Wall, ““Marks of Indifference””, 252.

<sup>395</sup> Visser, “Fotografie/Photography”, 87.