

[Type here]

Redefining Photography

Di Sun

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life

In the Herron School of Art and Design

Indiana University

May 2014

Redefining Photography

By Di Sun

Master of Fine Art

Herron School of Art and Design

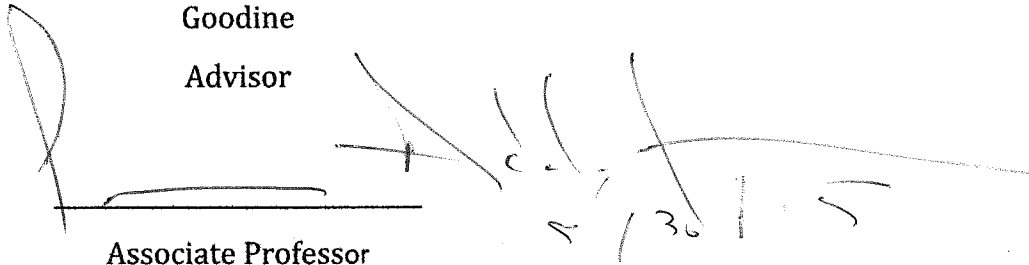
IUPUI Indiana University

Chancellor's Professor

Linda Adele

Goodine

Advisor

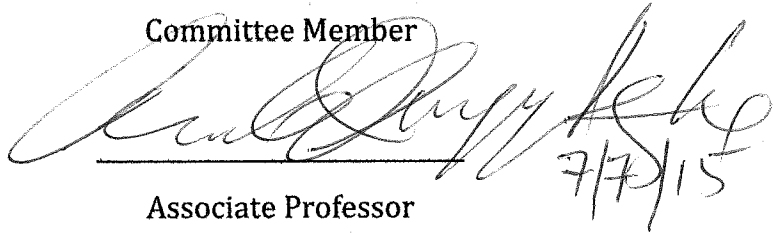


Handwritten signature of Linda Adele Goodine, dated 5/13/15.

Associate Professor

Anila Quayyum Aghaor

Committee Member

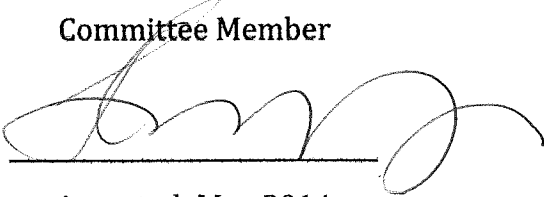


Handwritten signature of Anila Quayyum Aghaor, dated 7/7/15.

Associate Professor

Youngbok Hong

Committee Member



Handwritten signature of Youngbok Hong.

Accepted: May 2014



Handwritten signature of Valerie Eickmeier.

Professor Valerie Eickmeier

Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

May 15, 2015

[Type here]

The eye is a menace to clear sight. The laying bare of oneself is obscene. Art begins with getting rid of nature. My work allows me to think how social differences and everyday life in a globalized world shape the culture of the contemporary world. My intention is to isolate basic elements of the photographic image and put it in a space with only the audience. Thus, the relationship between audience and my work becomes critical. In an imaged-based world, I question if an image is capable of carrying this complexity. In today's world, everything exists as a photograph. What we see every day becomes image first; and then in turn shapes our memory, beliefs, and personality, defining who we are.

I encountered western painting in a very early age. I was forced to learn old Chinese art and literature at that time too, but I didn't like it. Perhaps every child would be against forced learning, because there is an "anti-freedom" in this sort of thing—and this tension exists in my art even today:

"Anti-art" ... "Anti-politics" ... "Anti-power" ...

On the other hand, I saw many western paintings in my fine art textbook. They are more colorful than Chinese traditional paintings, which are dull black and white only. Among those western paintings, there was one stand-out. It looked like a shot at very low angle on a rainy day. There were several cars parked on the side of the street; we could see the reflections on the surface of water, and the sky was far, far, away.

It was a famous realism painting instead of a photograph, and it was the artist's intention to challenge these two mediums along with audiences' perception. But to me,

[Type here]

a child at that time, that painting was the first impetus for me toward art. It was sad and beautiful.

“Every work of art is the child of its age. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. (Concerning The Spiritual in Art pg10)”

Then the question is—is this still true today? Or in other words, what’s the meaning behind contemporary art making?

If we look at back about 100 years ago, Dada was born in the chaos of WWI and minimalist art was born in a post-war and relatively gentle era. Dadaists used “chaos art” to attack art and the world built by the “geniuses.” Great artists are capable of making art that is immortal. Then what is immortal? Or why is immortality important? De Stijl believes geometry shapes and primary colors stay immortal. He paints everything into squares and rectangles with primary colors.

“That avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating -- the fact itself -- calls for neither approval nor disapproval. It is true that this culture contains within itself some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome. The lines quoted from Yeats referred to Byzantium, which is very close to Alexandria; and in a sense this imitation of imitating is a superior sort of Alexandrianism. But there is one most important difference: the avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still. And this, precisely, is what justifies the avant-garde's methods and makes them necessary. The necessity lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order. To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like "formalism," "purism," "ivory tower" and so forth is either dull or dishonest. This is not to say, however, that it

[Type here]

is to the social advantage of the avant-garde that it is what it is. Quite the opposite (Kitsch and Avant-Garde)”

Greenberg brought up that “pure” art comes from the medium itself in his break through essay 1939. He summarized work by many great masters and determined that the unique characteristics in the medium make a painting which stays unique, even when the work itself ages.

To me, I do want make artwork that seizes time, because life itself is too fragile to be remembered. Even in today’s world, we are facing so many problems—hunger, race, and war. Just imagine if people from different backgrounds and from different races stand in front of the same artwork, background is not important anymore and identity is not important anymore either. Only the relationship between the individual and universe is left. Therefore, making something beyond everything, even time, could be fascinating. I believe that the answer is hidden in the medium itself.

“If painting has nothing to narrate and no story to tell, something is happening all the same, which defines functioning of the painting. (Francis Bacon: The Logic of sensation pg13)”

Deleuze separates painting from storytelling. To me, photography is like a language, and grammars equals the process of making a picture. I am able to communicate with audiences through language “photography.” Photography is everywhere, and because it is everywhere, many of its characteristics are buried in the flow of images.

In the past several decades, photography played a big role in the contemporary art world. Clearly, it’s not a coincidence. Especially in the 70’s, a group of photographers

[Type here]

from different geographic locations made images purposely for museum exhibitions. But straight photography is always the backbone of photography. Look at those works made by Robert Frank, Walker Evans, Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and other great masters.

Straight photography has a relatively longer history than “exhibition” photography. Berlin “dadasopher” Hausmann in his first lengthy treatise wrote, “Dada is the perfect good willed malice, alongside straight photography, the sole justified, figurative form of expression and balance in ordinary life... Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada, pg87)” Although Hausmann was not directly commenting on photography, his comment on straight photography is “on point.”

However, fine art photographers really took over the scene in the past 40 or so years. The newly arisen creativity showed in expanded possibilities of photography as medium itself. But author Richard Grusin claims that it is difficult to know clearly about what a medium is unless we compare it to the other mediums. For photography in particular, its comparable mediums include painting, film, or even sculpture. Through these comparisons, the uniqueness of the photography medium would speak for itself. For instance, its sister, “art” cinema—audiences knows that it is inside this “experiencing machine,” but labors trying to forget it. “Abortion not conviction means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not modernist. (Art and objecthood, pg164)”

As a strategy, I express photographs in many other mediums to question what a photograph is. My work articulates my photographs as objects of sculpture, film,

[Type here]

painting, installation, and static flat images. "Each answer remains in force as an answer only as long as it is rooted in questioning. (The Origin of the work of Art, pg185)

A major part of my work is to study the fundamentals of photography through photography, video, installation, and sculpture. The study of a photograph is always a starting point. A photograph is an object, which carries chemicals or pixels. And the wrinkles on the paper are as important as the content information. I take a photograph, and then deconstruct it, stripping it until the basic elements are left. These generated elements are still capable of triggering emotions in viewers. The action of "seeing" is critical to my work. "Seeing" is one of many ways a human perceives the world. But what we see doesn't mean it is "the truth." Human history is a history of finding the truth. My work forces spectators to rethink the essence of existence. In these works, I continue to discover the "truth" of photography and explore how an image shapes our perception in a way that everyone could not avoid.

[Type here]

2X4 Developed as a Photograph

“In today’s world, everything existing ends in a photograph. “On Photography, pg45”



We don’t realize a photograph is an object until we lose it or burn it. When we couldn’t find a family photograph, we finally noticed “the thing” was lost. This is also true when we burn something, the substance of the object comes out.

[Type here]

O'Doherty pointed out in the article, "Flatness and objecthood usually find their first official text in Maurice Denis's famous statement in 1890, that before a picture is subject matter, it is first of all a surface covered with lines and colors. (Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, pg22) "

Critics believed a photograph was an object as early as 1890. As the subject matter gradually dominated the meaning of a photograph, Jeff Wall pushed the large-scale photograph as art as never before, in the 1970's. In the 1980's, with Cindy Sherman, Sugimoto, Thomas Demand, and Andreas Gursky, art photography reached its peak as an art medium. No matter what the context, what camera format, there is one thing always important in their work—subject matter. The conclusion drawn is that photography was born to describe something else.

But a photograph can express itself only, and it is more obvious if photography exists in another medium. Therefore, I made a cyanotype print on the surface of a 2x4. The wood panel absorbed chemicals very well after exposing in the sun for one hour, and washed away by water, the dark blue emerged. Technically, the 2x4 was developed just like a fiber-based photograph.

[Type here]

Summer Interior after Edward Hopper



This Hopper painting remade into a photograph was a breakthrough work in my two-year MFA study. Painting as the dominant art medium has lasted for centuries. The historical relationship between photography and painting was mentioned by so many people. I love to draw, but I don't know how. When I was a kid, I used to take drawing lessons. The teacher taught us many times how to draw a figure, and among them we drew Chairman Mao the most. However, no matter how hard I tried to draw his face, I couldn't draw it vividly. I rolled up the drafts of drawings with Chairman Mao's broken faces and tossed them in the trashcan. I decided to quit drawing when I was nine years old.

This work was made in the summer of 2014. Edward Hopper's famous painting "Summer Interior" inspired it. For me, this is an important painting, historically and

[Type here]

psychologically. Because all famous paintings seem modern to me, I tried to make them combine with the times in which we live. Why not?

I put my feelings in the painting, making the work more aggressive, and I tried to establish a space in the work to prove human emotions and psychology are important to me.

Red is the color I like, because it represents different things. Red is passion; red is also violence. Red is even the symbol of communism. But in this particular work, red is sad. It covered the space with mystery

Rothko

It is a series of photographs capturing the light from the enlarger in a darkroom.

Rothko's projects engage with the darkroom printing process and a digital camera. I chose a different way to approach the digital camera, putting the sensor of a digital camera directly into the light from the enlarger in the darkroom. The light was directly transformed into digital information, still capable of showing the color of the light.

Greenberg states that "pure" art should be only inspired by the medium itself. These big color fields are very much like Rothko's abstract paintings, which trigger viewers' emotions. The conversations between "digital versus tradition," "fact versus fiction," and "modernism versus contemporary" are the core of this project.

[Type here]



The Landscape We Used to See

The Landscape We Used to See Project is at the same time familiar and strange. The outline of the image is easy to see—one can quickly recognize the clouds, the mountain, and the river standing out against the background—but as with memory, our imagination must supply the rest.

This is the goal of my current series; to present the viewer with a partial landscape and invite them to compose the rest themselves. In this way the images become at once universal and deeply personal. Each viewer must invest their own experience, their own subconscious into the work to make it whole. If viewers look close up you can tell the image seems not quite “real.” This feeling, along with the personal connection each

[Type here]

viewer builds with the images, speaks to the truth hidden behind everyday observation—a sense of what is “reality” and what is “virtual.”



Red Pixel

“The more stuff in it, the busier work of art, the worse it is. More is less. Less is more.
(Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt) ”

At first, photography was invented to record the world. A photograph often tells truth, fact. But I strongly feel that photography moves from fact to fiction in today’s world. Under the influence of pop culture and disguise of the Internet, it is getting harder and harder to get close to fact. A pixel is the basic element of a RGB image. A RGB image is the most common format of picture we see all the time, much more often than the

[Type here]

prints in museums. But what are we really seeing? What is the meaning of one single pixel?



Furthermore, this “red pixel” is a found object. I didn’t make it; it was found in my studio two years ago. Marcel Duchamp examines the aesthetic of a ready-made object this way: “This Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered the ready-mades I sought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them; I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”

The red square sat in my studio getting ready for exhibition. Just sitting there, as not-art, gathering meaning and dust. Finally, I followed my impulses and realized the thing it was before. Red Square, the historical center of communism, all color and strong

[Type here]

emotions, ideas of perfection/modernism, and Donald Judd, of all things. It ties an invisible ribbon between itself and the red photograph that holds my show together. The tin square in my studio was initially a non-functional, albeit a pretty little object that had no clear place anywhere. I changed this object to make it into a different thing. A thing that sports an emphatically red glossy exterior, not as a poser, but as a monastic assertion of its interior self. It is now undeniably an artwork, but in a way that also plainly states its former and continual self as a plain old tin red square. It's far better than it was, but not in a way that forgets itself, and in a way that even values what it used to be. The object is still the same but the meaning of it has changed dramatically since my research about this medium has gotten deeper. I think it plays a important role in my thesis exhibition because it became more of me.

[Type here]

Work Sites

Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Univ of California Press, 1999. Print

Barbara Rose. *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. New York: Viking Press, 1975. Print

Clement Greenberg. *Kitsch and Avant-Garde*. *Parisian Review*. 1939. Essay

Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Univ of Minnesota Press; 1 edition, 2005. Print

Heidegger. *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Piero Ruju, 2008. Print.

Michael Fried. *Art and Objecthood*. University of Chicago Press, 1998. Print

Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada. *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*. UMI Research Press, 1989. Print

Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. Picador; 1st edition, 2001. Print

Wassily Kandinsky. *Wassily Kandinsky: Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010. Print

[Type here]