

On Photography and Consecutive Matters

JAI McKENZIE and AMANDA WILLIAMS

On 30 August 2010, at 21:25, Amanda Williams wrote:

A thought came to me tonight ... while I was preparing for our dialogue and attempting to find the right words to set us off and pay homage to Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton; that I should, at least in form, return to the source and begin as Andre did with a proposition:

‘what derives from the case photography well-known and used by the Greeks of Periclean Athens?’¹

Did the Ancient Athenians invent photography? Well perhaps they did! Elaborating thankfully, Andre cites the case of Phidias—the Athenian sculptor charged with impiety for producing a life-like self-portrait—as one possible example of photographic process. Then passing the typewriter to Frampton asks ‘what is photography in a culture or civilisation?’

Despite advances in photographic technology, I suspect the proposition is still completely relevant today, if not more relevant?

On 31 August 2010, at 8:24, Jai McKenzie wrote:

Andre’s comments raise two interesting questions; What is photography? And, what place does photography have in society?

Also, I am intrigued by the thought that between 438-436BC the Athenians used photography. This urges me to consider where the invention of photography begins? Does it begin with the most basic understanding of visual perception and the role of light within those mechanisms? With the observation of the ‘bleaching’ effects of the sun? The camera obscura? Johann Heinrich Schulze and his understanding that silver nitrate darkened when exposed to light? Or, even Daguerre and Niépce who were acknowledged as the inventors of photography in 1839?

1. Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, 12 *Dialogues 1962-1963*, edited and annotated by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1980).

It seems that an understanding of what photography is depends on one's definition of the invention. So, perhaps we should turn to Daguerre for a vital clue in all of this, he claimed, at the invention of the Daguerreotype² that 'I have seized the light.'³

I see what he means, as light is the fundamental aspect of the invention, it endures regardless of technological advance. So, Andre is correct, in a sense, as much as we may turn to the Athenians for the origins of Western culture and democracy we may also turn to them for the origin of photography. By 438BC the Athenians understood light in terms of the first atomic theory. The 'Atomist' Democritus hypothesised that all things including light are composed of minute, invisible, indestructible particles of pure matter or 'atoms', which move forever in empty space. Democritus considered the universe a consequence of these whirling atoms. This initial philosophical understanding of light was an important beginning for photography.

If we think of photography in these terms, that it has and always will be composed of light, then perhaps photography is not as susceptible to technological change as it is to cultural change? What is photography in a culture or civilisation? I will be blunt and reductive; photography is what it is used for.

What is it being used for today and why do you use it?

On 2 September 2010, at 12:45, Amanda Williams wrote:

Photography is what it is used for ... What a philosophical declaration, manifesto-like in its scope. This really seems to assign photography a verb-like status. Photography becomes an action or rather an interaction; a performance, determined and driven by the user.

Thinking about the implications of this, the idea that one might create through photography rather than with photography, brings to mind a central motif used by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media*,⁴ that of the light bulb. McLuhan highlights the inherent emptiness of the light bulb in terms of content, and its latent capacity for transformation. When

2. Edgar Allan Poe points out in his essay *The Daguerreotype* (1840), that the correct spelling is Daguerreotype, and 'pronounced as if written Dagairraioteep.' in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, trans. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn: Leete's Island Books, 1980).

3. Daguerre cited in Melissa Miles, 'Focus on the Sun: The Demand for New Myths of Light in Contemporary Australian Photography,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 2008/2009. 222.

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Edited by W. Terrence Gordon. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003).

activated, the light bulb emits a powerful force illuminating the darkness and therefore, widening the scope of human perception and interaction.

So, what is photography being used for today? The obvious answer in this context is—illumination. Photography facilitates the illumination of everything and nothing.

I use photography to reveal certain truths and investigate the relationship between technology and the human psyche. Borrowing from Jean-Louis Baudry,⁵ I am interested in uncovering and exposing photography's technological means as a way of facilitating its demystification. Recently, I have been using lens-less, automated actions whereby the resulting images are not 'processed' through my eyes rather they exist as examples of sightless vision, mechanised perception. I use photography to demystify this process of illumination.

How do you use photography? I have in mind the work for your upcoming show. Although it is not strictly photographic how might it relate to photography? Could it still be considered photographic in some way? Does it even matter?



Amanda Williams, 3:2 *The Golden Ratio* (research scan), 2010, digital file.

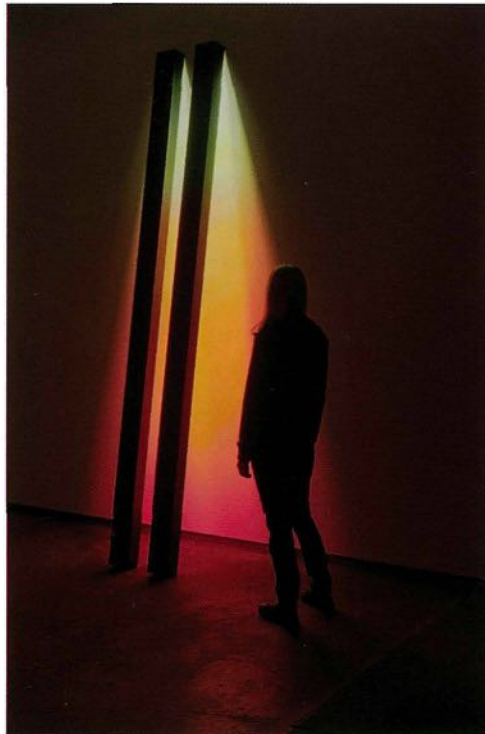
5. Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', in Gerald Mast/Marshall Cohen/Leo Baudry (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism. Introductory Readings* (New York/Oxford, 1992).

On 2 September 2010, at 21:30, Jai McKenzie wrote:

As I read your email, I am just a week away from my show at Firstdraft gallery. I always find it difficult to discuss new work, especially before the opening, but for now I can say that I made *Superstructure* with an understanding of a particular architectural legacy. Initially this may seem disparate to photography but on closer examination it shares some interesting connections. My research for this work began with a growing interest in the photographic collages of Superstudio⁶ and Buckminster Fuller. They proposed large circumscribing forms intended to encase or disrupt urban spaces to enable holistic systems for living, connection and growth. These structures were never realised but Superstudio's photographic collages started a specific trajectory in my thinking. Their visualisations, while remaining as propositions, created a tension between what exists and what does not, but might. This maintains an interesting connection for photography today. In some sense, it is not only about what is activated but also what is latent and possible.

6. Recently, while online I discovered a fragment of a film that formed part of Superstudio's project *Architettura interplanetaria* (Interplanetary architecture), 1972, a body of work which also consists of photomontages and a storyboard. In the film Superstudio claims that architecture occupies a relationship between space and time, us and others. I think this is also an important aspect of the connection between photography and architecture. To extend this and the connection with the void further *Architettura interplanetaria* is useful; the work functions as a proposition for us to imagine a world made of real and assembled images, it activates the possibility for the construction of an 'immediate future'. This is something I was thinking about when developing my recent work.

The project *Architettura interplanetaria* was first presented in 'Superstudio presenta l'Architettura interplanetaria', *Cassabella* no. 364. April, (1972). 46—48.



Jai McKenzie, *Superstructure*, 2010, steel, fluorescent lights, lighting gels.
Photo: Michael Myers

I think you have come to the heart of the matter with your discussion of McLuhan, and your claim that 'photography facilitates the illumination of everything and nothing' is interesting to me. This signals that you see photography operating as a paradox where the photograph simultaneously represents all and nothing, and as such, it is a void space. Not as ominous at it first seems, as the void is always full of possibility.

And, so, you ask 'is it photography?', 'Does it even matter?'

No. I don't think it matters, not to me anyway. Some people seem to linger on these notions of medium specificity; I believe that grouping work by medium provides ill fitting categories for contemporary practice. But, I also acknowledge that there are relevant discussions to be had about the medium of photography.

On 13 September 2010, at 14:35, Amanda Williams wrote:

I concede 'does it even matter' was a leading question as this is an area of enquiry I am particularly interested in. Although medium specificity is somewhat tired as a framework for the reception of contemporary practice, it would seem that there has been a reconsideration of that debate by artists, a return to the role of medium in this so-called post-medium age.⁷ Emma White's practice for example, appears to focus on what the medium of photography signals today. She does this by re-situating the photographic process. It could be said that she is working through photography via sculpture – reinterpreting the medium. Perhaps this is a return to medium via material as process? And perhaps this is why photography and architecture seem to share so many fundamental constituents. Architecture functions like any other ocular technology in its organisation of perception, centering and de-centering vision; it produces images material and mental, which as you indicated, lead us towards an understanding of the void as the site of pure potentiality.

7. For a greater examination of the 'specificity' of the post-medium condition see: Rosalind E. Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*. (MIT Press, Cambridge MA. 2010).



Emma White, *Found and made* (detail) 2010, polymer clay. Photo: the artist.

It is useful here to turn to the Sanskrit term Sunyata (often simplistically translated into English as void). In Eastern philosophy and Buddhism, Sunyata is not simply a descriptive term for emptiness, nothingness or a void state; it is a conceptual premise and a coveted state of mind. It represents a framework for understanding the true nature of reality.

I discovered recently that Roland Barthes had developed an interest in Buddhism after his mother died.⁸ So impassioned was his interest, he left the final words of *Camera Lucida* (La chambre claire) to the Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa, by placing a quote on the back cover:

Marpa was very moved when his son was killed, and one of his disciples said: 'You have always told us that all is illusion. Is it not so with the death of your son, is not that an illusion?' And Marpa replied: 'Indeed, but the death of my son is a super-illusion.

Chogyam Trungpa, *Practice of the Tibetan Way*.

8. See, Jay Prosser, 'Buddha Barthes: What Barthes Saw in Photography (That He Didn't in Literature),' *Literature and Theology* 18, no. 2 (2004): 211–22. Here Prosser outlines the way Barthes engages with Buddhism and argues that the punctum is equivalent to the concept of Sunyata in Zen Buddhism.

Ironically, when Barthes' text was translated posthumously into English in 1981, the quote was lost. It disappeared somehow in that procedural void of semiotic exchange. A super-illusion indeed.