Stillness: Articulating Space Within The Still Image: Positioning Photography Now That It Is "Dead"

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Abstract
Have the rumours about the death of Photography been greatly exaggerated? The 1996 "Photography is Dead Long Live Photography" exhibition at the MCA, re-stated photography as a fine art practice apart, and distinct, from whatever role it was playing in the then 'new' media. Increasing access to new technologies for image capture, manipulation, distribution and viewing mean that photography is more pervasive than ever.

Yet the job of representation is moving from the world of the photographic to the data set environment of 3D modelling. This move serves to highlight the failings of the photographic image.

What is the position of photography now that the 'burden of representation' is being lifted (Tagg 1998)? Are there parallels between the intersection of painting and photography, and the collision of photography and 'new' media? How good is photography at rendering the world and subsequently how strong is the indexical link that was supposed to make photography real?

Drawing on Barthes, Maynard, Krause, Merleau-Ponty and Deutsch this paper will use space to test the photographic representation of the world. Further it will argue that the articulation of space is a subject for further photographic investigation, and that space without time is stillness.

3D computer modelling is doing to photography what the introduction of photography did to painting. The exploration of picture space without reference to time is one possible response. This paper will argue that space without time is stillness.

This paper will start from an assumption that, just as there are many spaces, there are many times that correspond to those spaces. If I look at a picture I can see and share the space that picture is in, and experience the time that the picture is in that space. If I consider what the picture is of, especially if it is a photograph, I can imagine the time when the picture was made and a time when I might have been associated with the subject of the picture. This is an imagined time and space that is nested within the time that I look at the picture. A third time corresponds to picture space, the space that the picture depicts. It is this third time, picture time, that is the subject of this paper.

I find myself looking at an on-line forum dedicated to 3D computer modelling and as I look at the renders, 3D models of rooms, cars, beauty queens and orcs, I am conscious of their status as objects in the world (CGSociety 2002-2006). This is an awkward moment since I know that on one level these things are not real. They are just code; they aren't an indexical link to a referent about which I can say with Barthesian confidence "this was" (Barthes 1984). And yet in the forum the creators of these and similar objects measure their successes by how closely the rendering of the object approaches a photographic reality.

The object is a data set. The data set can be interpreted in ways that correspond to a handling of the object. It can also be handled more directly through a haptic interface. The object occupies space in cyberspace and can be rendered into real space using rapid prototyping processes. The rendered prototype is an object in itself as well as a render of the data set object.

The modelling process can be divided into two parts. The first is the model itself. The model is built as a series of points joined by triangular patches which together form polygons that describe the topography/shape of the object. The wire frame model is the data set that makes the object. We can rotate the object and move sub objects in relation to one another. The object can be posed or placed into a setting that might itself be a model, an illustration or a photograph. At this stage the object has form but is not visible except as polygons. The second part of the process is the rendering and it is here that we find the greatest overlap with the photographic. To render the object the modeller has to describe not just the object but its illumination. It is as if the object is to be photographed. To photograph, for example a tea cup, the photographer needs to decide on the quality of the light source. Is the light soft or hard? Is it light from a window on an overcast day? Is there more than one light source? What is the spectral energy output of the light source?

Light has direction and a position in space, so with the introduction of lighting, there is automatically a space as bounded by the object, the light source/s and the position or point of view of the camera. This enables decisions about the relationship, in space, between the object, the light source and the observer. Where is the light in relation to the object and the viewer of the object?

In making the tea cup photograph these lighting decisions will be dependent in part on the desired effect and in part on the qualities that are attached to the surface of the object. In a 3D model of a tea cup it is at the rendering stage that the surface qualities of the model are defined. Texture, reflectance, colour, sub surface light scattering, all need to be addressed.

A Cup Of A Hot Tea, Copyright Victor Burkatsky

If the process of rendering a 3D model of a tea cup deals with the same problems as the process of photographing a tea cup we shouldn't be surprised since both tea cups are objects and the images that are produced are traces of the objects. The modeller/photographer sets up lights and the camera/computer records the effect of those lights on the object and the point of view.

Suppose that we were to make a 3D model of Roland Barthes' mother's imaginary childhood friend, Steve. We could render Steve using the same lights as those that illuminate Barthes' mother. We can model a garden and put Steve in it. We could show the print of that render to Roland. In one hand he has a picture of his mother as a child in a winter garden, in the other a picture of Steve, also in a winter garden. There is no question of authenticity since we know that Steve is imaginary, and Roland will authenticate his mother's photograph based on resemblance and providence. We know what Roland Barthes makes of his mother's picture: it is a sign without a code that says "this was", but what of Steve's picture?

The moment that is recorded in the mother photograph can never be revisited except as an act of imagination prompted by that recording. The mother gets older, she changes, hence the past tense.

Whilst it is conceivable to apply an ageing algorithm to the model Steve, unless we make a new model, the original Steve will be the original object. That is the object to which the ageing algorithm has been applied. We can't say that Steve “was”. Instead we can say Steve “is”. The render is an instance of the object, not the object. The render is a picture of Steve, not Steve, just as the picture of Barthes’ mother is not Barthes’ mother. We can use it in the same way we use a photograph. It can remind us of the object or when we were last in the presence of the object. It can be used as an illustration of the object or to illustrate another concept that is not about Steve but that Steve may represent (Maynard 1997). The picture of Steve could well provoke the same sense of mortality. We will age and die but Steve won’t. This might be the same for all fictional characters (e.g. Pooh doesn’t age but Christopher Robin does; he grows up and goes to school and stops coming to the Hundred Acre Wood (Milne 1928)), but Steve is an object, not a character.

The render of the object is for all intents and purposes a photograph of the object, Steve. We can photograph Steve from a number of points of view including those that contain a view of the position from which we make the first render. This is different to the photograph of Barthes’ mother. There is an “aura” to that photo; it is a link to a moment that is gone (Benjamin c1968.). It isn’t so much a single moment that the photograph refers to; it is an indication of a series of moments. That moment was one of many. The mother didn’t pop in and out of existence just for that photograph. The photograph is a record of not so much a moment as a continuum. Furthermore not only does the photograph say that Barthes’ mother and the garden were, but also that the photographer was. It is an index to a series of events each one of them as important as any other in the chain of events that result in the creation of the object that is the photograph. Barthes could just as easily have felt an overwhelming sense of dismay that the chemical fixer that fixed the plate and the paper was poured into a drain (as it most likely was), from where it travelled to a water way and killed things. A photograph is not just a record of the subject; it is a record of photography itself.

The 3D computer model is an object and the render is a photograph of the object. It is a record of a series of decisions and printing processes that lead to the material picture. I don’t have to print the rendered object. I can leave it in virtual space, and it is here that the computer model represents reality better than the photograph. A photograph is very good at recording tones and textures but is poor at showing space. Space for the photographic image is an abstraction. Three dimensions are mapped onto a flat two dimensional surface. We don’t perceive the world that way (Barry 1977).

A photograph as made by a camera is not an analogue of perception; rather it is a map of the retinal image. The perception is what happens next. We perceive the world over time, from moment to moment and from a series of viewpoints. A camera records an abstraction of reality that is mapped onto a flat surface from a single viewpoint at a single moment (ABC Radio National 2000). Looking at the world through photography is like looking with one eye shut and the other eye blinking.

A 3D model is open to investigation of space in a way that approximates our experience more closely than does a photograph with its single point of view. Barthes is free to examine Steve in a way that more closely approximates examining the real world. He can, using the metaphor of the picture frame as window, walk up to the window, open it and step into the picture space.

However Steve is a data set whereas Barthes’ mother was a real person. When we make the imaginary Steve, we aren’t making a representation of the world. Steve is a fiction. In order for the 3D model to equal the photograph in terms of its ability to represent reality there must be a reality that includes Steve as more than a fiction. If we can model Steve we can model a real person.

This is in fact what happens. Almost any object you care to mention has been modelled. There

aren't nearly as many models as there are photographs. Models take a long time to make, but there is an increasing number of subjects both imaginary and real. The fascination with 3D modelling seems to lie in the details; it isn't about broad strokes but careful observation. Modellers like texture, light and shade, reflectance, form.... just like photographers.

Since *The Pencil Of Nature* (Talbot 1844 and 1846) the link between the photographed world and the photograph has been assumed, nature has drawn itself, and the photograph has been able to say that this was. The camera and the photographic process have been the primary means of representing the world. In representation there has been an emphasis on resemblance at the expense of experience. This has been the thrust of the European process of picture making from the first experiments in optical perspective up until the initial stirrings of modernism and the impressionist experiments. I don't think that it is a coincidence that, just as machines and processes were developed that enabled nature and everything else to "draw itself", the subject of European painting changed from that which is seen, to the experience of seeing. The notion of authenticity that is attached to photographs stems from their being a trace of the thing that is photographed. The rendered image of the 3D model is a trace of the model which is, in the case of a model that replicates reality, itself a trace.

So if modellers are starting to represent the world as an extended form of photography, what about photography? The last time that it was declared dead it obviously wasn't. There is no question that people will keep taking snaps and that there will remain a place for the skills and processes of photography, wet and digital. If anyone is uncertain then consider printmaking, where processes that have been industrially obsolete for hundreds of years are still practised and held in high esteem. The language of photography continues to be used in the rendered 3D model. This again shouldn't come as a surprise. The render is a print of a data set that is analogous to the data set contained within a photographic negative. Photography is modelling, modelling is photography.

Painting when faced with the same issue embraced modernism and adopted different ways of seeing. The resemblance to the subject became less important, the act of viewing/experiencing the subject became primary. A series of experiments, the isms and schisms of modernism, led to a shift in the field/figure dichotomy in favour of the field (Krauss 1993).

So what of photography, especially fine art photography? The subject of photography has for a long time been photography itself. The questions of what a photograph should look like and its status as an art object have fuelled debates amongst photographers. Pictorialism vs. f64 is an ongoing debate, the split seeming to fall along commercial vs. fine art lines. Digital photography enables the original data set to be manipulated, both as interpretations and fabrications that question photography's claim to authenticity. One possible answer lies in the photographic response to space.

Photographically, depth in space is dealt with as an abstraction. The optical perspective provides depth cues. Convergence, overlapping comparative size, atmospheric, distortions of known shapes such as wheels, are all depth cues, or clues, that enable us to perform an act of imagination in which we visualise the imagery in the photograph as if we were to move our view through ninety degrees and so see the depicted depth as width or height (Merleau_Ponty 1945).

We move through space and time, photographing an imagined reality of space. What if that were different? Suppose I was to photograph reality as space without time? Space without time doesn't admit the possibility of movement. There is no reference to a just before or just after. This is stillness. This isn't stillness as a lack of movement or of a frozen moment. A water droplet photographically frozen, just as it separates from a tap, is not stillness. It is sampled movement or

fragmented movement (Nagel 2001). If the fragments are reassembled the movement is also reassembled, just like a motion picture. Space without time is the objects that define space all at once without reference to their temporal relationships. Stillness is space without time. Time without space is not still; the arrow of time still applies even in a zero plus one dimensional construct. Objects age whether they move or not (Prigogine 1996).

If I was to photograph space, what precisely would I photograph? Space is real; we experience it. Space follows predictable rules (Deutsch 1997). We use space to organise and separate perceptual events that occupy the same time. The inverse of this is also true in that we use time to separate perceptual events that occupy the same space. Yet space is *not thing*. It is a not object. We can talk about objects in terms of their attributes. We can describe objects according to their behaviours and their effects on other objects. We can't talk about space in that way. Space is defined by the perceptual events or objects in it. Without objects we can't reference space'.
A single shutter release is not going to photograph space without time. It may, if it is short, freeze movement. A long shutter time will record the passage of time through movement. Neither are stillness. A photograph without time will paradoxically take more time to make. I won't take the photograph; I will make it. I will revisit the photographic canvas over time and arrange photographic objects on that canvas. The photograph will be a trace of the time I spend making the photograph. The objects will be a trace of the objects that delineate a space. The photograph, by abandoning optical perspective will more closely match our non visual experience of space. The temporally de-contextualised objects will be stillness.

The previous two paragraphs are a plan for making a photograph that approximates the experience of being in the world. The process and procedures, particularly the canvas being a trace of the time spent making the photograph feel un-photographic. Moving pixels around in a digital image editing application, feels more like drawing or painting than photography. There is an instant feedback and opportunity to edit what was done earlier, whilst retaining latter stages, that is absent in traditional photographic practice. There is still a direct link to the referent and the process, and that is photographic.

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When old technologies are replaced they have the opportunity to pursue other interests. By

acknowledging that 3D modelling, in treating space in depth as more than an abstraction, provides a more complete representation of the world, we can reconfigure the photographic process to render not the representation of space but an experience of space. Removing time is one way to do this. By removing time we approach the truly still image.

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Biographical Notes

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