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AN EXAMINATION OF CAMERA-BASED IMAGES IN THE VISUAL ARTS

By

Elysia Ann Borowy

A THESIS

Submitted to
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in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF CAMERA-BASED IMAGES IN THE VISUAL ARTS

BY

Elysia Ann Borowy

This thesis endeavors to look chronologically and critically at certain art practices that rely heavily on photography. As such, it does not juxtapose painting against photography for formal and stylistic comparison, nor does it attempt to trace specific links between the visual arts and photography. Shifts in art practices and criticism resulted in new bodies of art work and a new thread of criticism; these approaches and shifts in art work and criticism will be explored. The current inquiry involves both critics and artists, the artists often utilizing images from film and/or popular culture. This examination of art practices using photographic technologies begins in the late 1960s, when the distinctions between high art and mass culture, fine art and kitsch became blurred.

This thesis will examine a selection of critics, theorists and artists who discuss photographic technologies and/or processes. This paper will also show how photography facilitated the collapse of barriers between high art and mass culture, art and kitsch, fine art and photography, and when photography witnessed a renewed interest.

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I wish to acknowledge the help of several individuals in the writing of this thesis; my thesis committee chair Professor Phylis Floyd, the members of my thesis committee; Professor Ray Silverman, Professor Laura Cloud, and Professor William Vincent. I also would like to thank Susan DeChant who gave me constructive criticism and friendly advice.

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Chapter One - Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to look chronologically and critically at certain art practices that rely heavily on photography. As such, it does not juxtapose painting against photography for formal and stylistic comparison, nor does it attempt to trace specific links between the visual arts and photography. Shifts in art practices and criticism resulted in new bodies of art work and a new thread of criticism; these approaches and shifts in art work and criticism will be explored. The current inquiry involves both critics and artists, artists who often utilize images from film and/or popular culture. This examination of art practices using photographic technologies begins in the late 1960s, when the distinctions between high art and mass culture, fine art and kitsch became blurred, and when photography experienced an upsurge in interest.

Today, photography has attained a prominence in the art world that is unprecedented in its 150 years of existence. As the medium of photography has become increasingly allied with the issues and concerns of the visual arts as a whole, it has broadly expanded from its traditional role as a functional tool. Artists wanting to explore areas outside the functionality of the camera discovered possibilities which expanded photography's scope as an art form. This shift from a documentary mode to more overtly experimental,

personal, and ideational forms has had a major influence on contemporary art. Equally significant, the photographic image has been incorporated into the ongoing discourse of the visual arts and the existing patterns of criticism. This focus on photography as an art form did not come about abruptly; it evolved in tandem with the development of the medium itself.[1] The integration of photography with other visual arts has advanced to the point that it no longer seems appropriate to distinguish photography as a category separate from fine art.

There have been several major studies concerning visual culture in which camera-based images have become the common coin of representation by artists. *Image World,* a much-discussed exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, November 8, 1989, to February 18, 1990. The essay by Marvin Heiferman and Lisa Phillips with John G. Hanhardt as the chief editor, entitled "Image World: Art and Media Culture,"[2] focuses on work that confronts the superabundance of images in a world dominated by camera-based images. The exhibition itself attempts to examine contemporary culture and the role of photography in the overall arena of art, widening its aesthetic territory while making photography's representational functions a central topic.

Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946, a critical text and exhibition written by Andy Grundberg and Kathleen

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[1]Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (New York: Oxford, 1997), pg. 33

McCarthy Gauss, published in 1988, examines the enormous influence photographic imagery has had on the more traditional visual arts of painting, sculpture, drawing, and printing. This exhibition charts the emergence of photography as a significant contemporary art form from the end of World War II. Grundberg focuses specifically on Pop Art and the art of the 1980s and the influence of postmodern theory in the visual arts. Much of his essay was adapted from his previous essay "The Crisis of the Real," published in *Views*, the quarterly journal of the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University.

Another visual study and exhibition, *After Art: Rethinking 150 years of Photography*, with essays by Andy Grundberg and Chris Bruce looks at contemporary art practices in photography. Andy Grunberg's essay "Photography - Beside Itself,"[3] examines photographic images that are created by artists who respond to magazines, newspapers, family photo-albums and the like, all of which partake in the codes of representation embodied by the medium of photography.

This thesis will examine key critics/theorists who discuss photographic technologies, and select artists who use photographic processes; it will explore the acceptance of these artistic forms into the fine art arena during the late 1960s through the early 1980s. During this period,

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[2]Marvin Heiferman and Lisa Phillips, "Image World: Art and Media Culture," in *Image World*, eds. John Hanhardt. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), pg. 57-94.

photography gained prominence, but questions continued concerning its legitimacy as an art form.[4] This paper will show how photography facilitated the collapse of barriers between high art and mass culture, art and kitsch, fine art and photography.[5]

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[3]Andy Grundberg, "Photography - Beside Itself" in *After Art Rethinking 150 years of Photography,* eds. Chris Bruce. (The University of Washington Press Seattle, 1994) pg. 9 -18.

[4]John Szarkowski, "A Different Kind of Art" in *The New York Times Magazine,* April 13, 1975 pg. 67

[5]In 1939, Clement Greenberg wrote an essay entitled "Avant-garde and Kitsch" to clarify the difference between high and low art, their social origins and effects. Greenberg pointed out their different ideological purposes: high (authentic) culture to serve the cultivated, kitsch - a synthetic art, a simulacrum of culture - to satisfy the masses. Greenberg noted that kitsch, because it was mechanically produced, quickly became "an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be," and that "(its) enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself." Sensing the power of kitsch, he warned that it could contaminate high art. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch (1939)" in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) pg. 11

Chapter Two - An Examination of Key Critics and Theorists

Four critics and theorists who exemplify different perspectives on many complex issues regarding photography will be examined. Each critic offers a different perspective, or reflects varied schools of criticism, yet each explores photography and the impact of photography on culture, and new art practices that grew out of an image-dominated society. Many critics argue that because meaning is determined by context and because photography is based in reality, it has the potential to recreate an altered reality. This view contrasts that of formalist critics (the prime example being John Szarkowski, particularly his early writings) who identify and value photography according to its supposed fundamental characteristics as a medium - a Greenbergian formalist approach[6]. Some of the characteristics discussed were photography's objective character and its ability to, above all other media, achieve "true realism." Photography is thereby caught up in a struggle between those who identify it as a cultural phenomena and those who locate its value in its form. The critics discussed in this paper

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[6]Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting - 1961," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology,* eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. (London: Harper & Row, 1982), pg. 5

include: Robert Smithson, John Szarkowski, Susan Sontag, and Douglas Crimp.

Robert Smithson

Robert Smithson is not only an Earthwork artist, best known for his work the "Spiral Jetty" (1970), but he is also a theorist. In his writings, which he began publishing in the mid-1960s, Smithson mounts a persistent attack against the traditional categories usually applied to the fine arts - such as painting, sculpture, and photography.[7] From 1965 to 1973, Smithson published about twenty essays in major art magazines such as *Arts Magazine* and *Artforum.*[8] The importance of these writings has been recognized by art critic Craig Owens.[9]

Smithson writes about the effects of an image-based society on the culture at large, as well as the effects that photography has had on him personally, both as an artist and a viewer of visual art. In 1969, Smithson began writing critically about the effects of photography. In "Fragments of a Conversation" (1969), he states that "Photography squares everything. Every kind of random view is caught in a rectangular format, so that the romantic idea of going to the beyond, of the infinite is checked by this so that things

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[7]Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards - Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pg. 7
[8]These writings have been collected in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson.*
[9]Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* no. 10 (Fall 1979): 121-130

become measured."[10] Smithson shares in a formalist approach, he sees the format of the photograph itself to be the only medium which can achieve "true realism."

In a published discussion with contemporaries Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim in 1970, Smithson states, "Photographs steal away the spirit of the work, and one day the photograph is going to become even more important than it is now - there'll be a heightened respect for photographers."[11] In his essay, "Art Through the Camera's Eye,"[12] published in 1971, Smithson investigates the phenomenology of seeing photographs and film. This essay is his most critical and focused essay about photography. It is the only essay in which he discusses in detail the impact of photography and film on art making. Although Smithson had always had an awareness of the way mechanical reproduction could be used in his own work, especially in his Earthworks, film and photography were beginning to take on a greater role in his work. This is reflected in his essay "Art Through the Camera's Eye.[13]

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[10]Robert Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson,* ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pg. 171

[11]Robert Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson,* ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pg. 168

[12]Robert Smithson, "Art Through the Camera's Eye," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings,* ed. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: University of California Press), pg. 371

[13]Robert Smithson made a film while the "Spiral Jetty" was being built. The last shot of Smithson's film shows the editing room for the film itself; on the wall is a large photograph of the "Spiral Jetty" in Utah, emphasizing the fact that the work becomes available to us only through media.

Smithson realizes that much of his work will only be available for viewing through media. He articulates the characteristics of this medium and its impact on the viewer's perspective: being immobilized, doing nothing but looking, and consequently, tending to distance oneself temporarily from the outside world - in short a displacement of first hand reality which invites emotional detachment. He writes: "There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds. As an artist who has been lost in this wilderness of mechanical reproduction for many years, I do not know which world to start with."[14] Smithson views the camera as an apparatus with "mechanical eyes, ready to devour anything in sight,"[15] and as "lenses of the unlimited reproduction, like mirrors they may be scorned for their power to duplicate our individual experiences."[16] Smithson discounts photography's ability to capture personal expression and discards it as a superficial interest because of its ability to "devour" anything in its path without alteration. Yet, Smithson is sympathetic to those who invented photography and how this invention affected the process of art making, as well as the impact it has had on viewing practices.

At times, it seems that Smithson sees no real difference between film and photography, blending the two together. In his *Artforum* essay, "A Cinematic Atopia," written in 1971,

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[14]Robert Smithson, pg. 371
[15]Robert Smithson, pg. 371
[16]Robert Smithson, pg. 371

Smithson investigates the circumstances surrounding the act of watching films. He makes this comment on the power of film and photography to lull its viewer into a state of passivity:

> The ultimate filmgoer would be a captive sloth. Sitting constantly in a movie house, among the flickering shadows, his perception would take on a kind of sluggishness. He would be the hermit dwelling among the else-wheres, foregoing the salvation of reality. Films would follow films, until the action of each one would drown in a vast reservoir of pure perception.[17]

Smithson views postwar film and photography as a system that "eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back to together again."[18] What Smithson is discussing is a state where the viewer is totally immersed in the experience of viewing. This state of total immersion is what Smithson at times embraces and at other times criticizes. He states that film and photography square everything off, but at the same time have the potential to capture the viewer and bring him or her "to a state of stupefaction,"[19] a state of image overload.

In "A Cinematic Atopia," Smithson concentrates not so much on the images on the screen, as on the effects of cinematic gazing:

> Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one

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[17]Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson,* ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pg. 105.
[18]Robert A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson: PhotoWorks* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), pg. 27
[19]Robert Smithson, pg. 106

> is sitting. The luminous screen spreads a murky light through-out the darkness. Making a film is one thing, viewing a film another. Impressed, mute, still the viewer sits. The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen.[20]

Smithson suggests that the result of watching so many films and viewing so many photographs creates new viewing practices because of the rapid production of new images. Smithson sees this accumulation of images as having an impact on viewing practices, as it has the potential to move away from conventional processes of seeing art. It is in this statement that Smithson hints at how the public seeks a new visual experience, in this case in the movie theater, not in the gallery or museum.[21]

Smithson's writings and analysis of the photographic effect is beginning to be recognized for its historical position in twentieth century art.[22] His critical texts articulate a transition from work driven by a formal investigation, to Earthworks and multi-media, in a manner that displays an explicit intention to redefine the premises on which art practice can be predicated and interpreted.

John Szarkowski

John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, from 1962 to 1991, is considered one of the most notable explicators of the

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[20]Robert Smithson, pg. 107
[21]Robert Smithson, pg. 108

photographic medium and aesthetic.[23] According to both Smithson and Szarkowski, photography is the best vehicle to capture an image quickly, and it is the best method to describe in precise terms complex visual ideas that once took a painter much longer to accomplish.[24] Under his leadership at the Museum of Modern Art, Szarkowski set out to establish photography as a legitimate art form and to rescue the medium from a purely descriptive and informational function.

His essay, "A Different Kind of Art," published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in 1975, is an attempt to examine beliefs surrounding photography's place in, and acceptance within, the fine arts, as well as to articulate the collapse of modernist ideals surrounding what constitutes fine art. Confronted by new issues of an image-based society, Szarkowski leaned away from using a series of technical and thematic modes for inquiry. For example, landscape and portrait as thematic choices and technical and formal categories such as, clear/blurry, close-up/distant, and pure/impure.

Szarkowski was trained as an art historian, and is considered by other art critics to be instrumental in introducing critical and art historical rhetoric into the discussion of the photographic medium. Henry Sayre, in his book, *The Object of Performance*, writes that Szarkowski is

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[22]Gary Shapiro, pg. 153
[23]Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), pg. 43
[24]John Szarkowski, "A Different Kind of Art" in *The New York Times Magazine*, April 13, 1975 pg. 66

responsible for the formalization of photography, especially regarding its compositional principles. Sayre also states that Szarkowski helped liberate photography from a purely documentary style and content.[25]

In his early work, Szarkowski wrote about photography's relationship to modernist formalism. Formalism was already well established as a method of discussing art through the advocacy of critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's basic argument is well known: in the modern era the traditional functions of art have been usurped (by photography among other things). To survive, art has had to establish its value as an irreplaceable vehicle of heightened experience within an otherwise alienating culture. Each art medium must determine, through a rigorous self-examination of its own operations and effects, those specific qualities unique to itself. Although prefigured in earlier writings, this argument is most convincingly outlined in Greenberg's 1961 essay "Modernist Painting."

> The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence...The arts could save themselves from (a) leveling down (to the level of entertainment) only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity. Each art had to effect this demonstration on its own account. What has to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also each particular art. Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself...It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art

[25]Henry M. Sayre, pg. 43

> coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium.[26]

Greenberg sought to render the history of modernism as a continual search for each art form's fundamental, irreducible essence. Szarkowski's best known attempt to articulate this approach at the level of curatorial practice is his 1966 exhibition "The Photographer's Eye." In his own words, "'The Photographer's Eye' was an attempt to try to define certain issues, certain fundamental issues, that might begin to offer the armature for a credible vocabulary that really has to do with photography."[27] In "The Photographer's Eye," Szarkowski identifies five "concepts" that he claims are peculiar to photography; specifically "The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point." Photographs were displayed in groups according to their presumed engagement with these "concepts," resulting in a kind of modernist history of photographic picture-making remarkably reminiscent of that propagated by Greenberg.

Later in his career, Szarkowski takes a different stance towards photography. He addresses the plurality of art forms that were documented by photography, such as Earthworks and Happenings. Szarkowski states:

> Some contemporary artists who began (at least nominally) as painters, and who have in recent years worked their way through a succession of nonpictorial art forms

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[26]Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting - 1961," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology,* eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. (London: Harper & Row, 1982), pg. 5

[27]John Szarkowski, as quoted in Maren Stange, "Photography and the Institution: Szarkowski at the Modern," in Jerome Liebling, ed., *Photography: Current Perspectives* (Massachusetts Review 1978), pg. 69

> (happenings, conceptual art, earthworks, systems art, etc.) have demonstrated a quick appreciation of the idea of photography as a technique particularly well-suited to record the infinite variegation of human experience.[28]

The truly "different" art was not photography per se, but the plurality of art forms and mediums and the intersecting of those diverse mediums and forms that photography facilitated. With statements like these, it is clear that Szarkowski sees photography as a cultural phenomenon. He no longer limits his discussions to photography's inherent nature as a unique medium and its formalist stylistic aesthetic principles.

While everyone can pick up a camera and capture a picture on film, Szarkowski states, "that everyone can do it, and must now explore the more difficult fact that some do it better and with better reason, than others."[29] Szarkowski also suggests that what should be given our fullest attention is not the luscious prints and clever technique, but original perception and intelligence in describing a visual idea. Szarkowski also adds that "the distinction is, of course, not always obvious."[30] This is where Szarkowski hints at a total change in aesthetics that photography stimulated.

Photography facilitated the breakdown of strict definitions of art. These definitions emphasized what was distinctly modern, art that once stressed painterliness, and personal expression - but now, with the use of photographic processes, they accentuate the dialogue of television,

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[28]John Szarkowski, pg. 66
[29]John Szarkowski, pg. 65
[30]John Szarkowski, pg. 65

advertising, and the ideology of ordinary life in a critical and formal inquiry.[31] The traditional fine arts rely on the distinction between authentic and fake, between original and copy, between good taste and bad taste; the media blur, if not outright abolish, these distinctions. Szarkowski states that artists who use camera-based images have been influenced by Duchamp and others that "the act of art need not be married to the crafting of fine objects, and have been quick to realize that a photograph can be a work of art without being a beautiful object."[32] According to Szarkowski, this breakdown in the definitions of traditional fine arts makes photography a perfect tool for visual exploration because it has the ability to describe "a particular cone of space during a specific parcel of time,"[33] and makes for a "rather clumsy one for realizing the inventions of pure imagination."[34]

Susan Sontag

The implications of photography's impact in the world of aesthetics were also advanced by cultural philosopher Susan Sontag in a series of essays that resulted in her book, *On Photography,* published in 1977. Sontag also furthered the renewed interest in photography with her essays focusing on the problems that photography posed, both aesthetic and

[31]John Szarkowski, pg. 65
[32]John Szarkowski, pg. 65
[33]John Szarkowski, pg. 65

moral. Sontag states in her book that "all art aspires to the condition of photography."[35] Photography's plausibility has long rested on the uniqueness of its relationship to reality, a relationship regarded as fundamental to its function as a system of representation. Szarkowski and Sontag both embrace the fact that the most important aesthetic developments of the 1970s will probably turn out to be the art establishment's acceptance of photography.[36] Sontag writes,

> as most works of art (including photographs) are now known from photographic copies, photography - and the art activities derived from the model of photography, and the mode of taste derived from photographic taste - has decisively transformed the traditional fine arts and the traditional norms of taste, including the very idea of the work of art. ...Finally, photographs have become so much the leading visual experience that we now have works of art which are produced in order to be photographed. In much of conceptual art, in Chiristo's packaging of the landscape, in the earthworks of Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson, the artist's work is known principally by the photographic report of it in galleries and museums; sometimes the size is such that it can *only* be known in a photograph (or from an airplane). The photograph is not, even ostensibly, meant to lead us back to an original experience.[37]

This acceptance and inquiry into photography is reiterated by the popular success of Sontag's book itself.

Sontag suggests that the past decade's interest in photography can be traced to its ability to be read in terms

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[34]John Szarkowski, pg. 65

[35]Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), pg. 149

[36]John Szarkowski wrote about increasingly role of photography in his essay "A Different Kind of Art," and Susan Sontag wrote about the acceptance of photography in her book *On Photography*. The last chapter in her book, "Image World" highlights this issues.

[37]Susan Sontag, pg. 147-148

of both presence and absence.[38] Sontag writes that "a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."[39] She states that photography presents itself both as a formalist art object and as a presence signifying the virtual absence of some other experience. She also suggests that non-artists can capture the present (the once ephemeral experience) with a camera, and can exhibit their photographs in a slide show or family photo-album, both devices of a new artistic discourse. Sontag wrote, "All photographs are *memento mori*" and "to take a photograph is to participate in another person's or thing's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Faithfully and accurately slicing out a moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."[40] Sontag sees photography as the crux of this action, the instantaneous moment between present and past.

The last essay in Sontag's book is titled "The Image World." Her unyielding and repeated complaint about photography is that it displaces and thus alters first-hand, direct experience. She states, "photography is the reality; the real object is often experienced as a letdown. Photographs make normative an experience of art that is mediated, second-hand, intense in a different way."[41] One consequence, for Sontag, is that we have become restrained by the "image world,"[42] adopting the manner of collectors,

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[38]Susan Sontag, pg. 15
[39]Suan Sontag, pg. 16
[40]Susan Sontag, pg. 15
[41]Susan Sontag, pg. 147
[42]Susan Sontag, pg. 155

collecting images as moments, rather than experiencing them. She states, "despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and invites emotional detachment."[43] Ironically, her complaint was written at just the moment when artists were recognizing the difference between photographic reality and reality itself and experimenting with how to exploit that difference. The result was work that makes the difference visually clear and as an outcome, invites the viewer to critically examine the ways in which photographs, whether commercial, documentary, or historical, contribute to shaping our perceptions.

Sontag views the still photograph as an object, cheap to produce and easy to exhibit. And, in the case of the Polaroid camera, which in some fashion revives the principle of the Daguerreotype camera, each print is a unique object which enlarges "our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe...the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads - as an anthology of images."[44] Sontag pinpoints how photography aestheticizes reality and thus treats everything as an object. In this discussion Sontag also regards photography as a democratic medium available and open to everyone, thus making the transcendence from low art to high art more significant than ever before.

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[43]Susan Sontag, pg. 111
[44]Susan Sontag, pg. 3

Sontag concludes in her last chapter "Image World," that camera-based images and their dissemination through the media has changed the nature of contemporary life. As a culture, we have witnessed the encroachment of advertising, magazines, film, and TV; our collective sense of reality owes as much to the media as it does to the direct observation of events and other natural phenomena. Sontag goes even further by saying camera-based images produced by the media has also changed the nature of art. Artists have had to confront the fact that this new visual practice has in some ways surpassed art's power to communicate, and artists now have to address mass media's increasing presence. This directs attention somewhat away from aesthetics to the nature of representation itself as the principal problem. Sontag states that first-hand direct experience is mediated by images and the issue of how meaning is constructed through them has become central. She points out that artists have also had to recognize that as our relationship to the visual world changes so has the role we assign to art.

Douglas Crimp

Douglas Crimp, an art critic who also explored and wrote about the history of photography, including its functions and uses within culture, organized a major exhibition of photography, entitled "Pictures," at the *Artists Space* in New York in 1977. This show featured young artists Sherrie

Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith, Jack Goldstein, and Troy Brauntuch, all of whom used photographic and filmic imagery in their work.[45] The show sought to establish an aesthetic and a renewed interest in photography. Crimp also explores the effects of representation in the exhibition. He states in the catalogue,

> To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures first hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it. It therefore becomes imperative to understand the picture itself, not in order to uncover a lost reality but to determine how a picture becomes a signifying structure on its own accord.[46]

Looking at how "pictures" were transformed into real objects by TV, advertising, photography, and the cinema became the overriding line of inquiry Crimp investigates in this landmark exhibition.

In 1979, Crimp published an expanded version of his catalogue essay in the art journal, *October*. "Pictures"[47] was an important article that introduced concepts such as "postmodernism" and its relationship to photography to a sophisticated art audience. This was the first time Crimp had used the word - "postmodernism" in print. As a result, the new sensibility Crimp discovered here was to be cited over

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[45]Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Artists Space, 1977), pg. 3

[46]Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Artists Space, 1977), pg. 3

[47]In this revised essay published a year and a half later, Crimp also discusses the work of Cindy Sherman.

and over as critics established the meaning of the word.[48]

Crimp writes:

> Although the examples discussed and illustrated here are very few, necessitated by the newness and relative obscurity of this work, I think it is safe to say that what I am outlining is a predominate sensibility among the current generation of younger artists, or at least that group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation.[49]

Also, in this exhibition Crimp attempts to redefine the notion of originality as a myth, showing that notions concerning "genius" are merely mystifications inflicted by modernist values. He feels that photographs are important precisely because they evade the "aura" of rare, handmade, and thus valuable, artwork.[50]

In 1980, Crimp published the article, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." In this essay, Crimp discusses the work of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince. By this time, this group of artists were showing at the Metro Pictures Gallery, the Soho gallery which was the exclusive showcase for art which had a photographic dimension. Metro Pictures Gallery is home to Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and other cutting edge artists who prioritize such new media as video, photography, and installation work.

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[48]It should be noted that five years earlier, in "Other Criteria," Leo Steinberg had used the term "postmodernism" to distinguish the new character of contemporary art, (in his case - Robert Rauschenberg's use of photography,) from the formalist model of "pure" painting; in *Pictures*, Crimp also sought to theorize this difference. The new work exhibited could not be measured in terms of style or medium; it cut across too many forms. Rather it was marked by a new conception of picturing.

[49]Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), pg. 75

During the period when these artists were establishing themselves, in the early 1980s, Metro Pictures was a significant force in instituting this change in aesthetic. Sherman's work concerned an infinite cast of characters based on 1950's Hollywood B films. Levine's work consisted of rephotographing unaltered images by recognized fine art photographers such as Edward Weston, and showing them as her own work. Prince was also rephotographing, but advertising images were his focus.

Crimp's critical writings of this group were twofold - to give their work a solid and unifying theoretical foundation which was more contextual analysis, and to deal with the photographic aesthetic of their art specifically. Crimp states, in reference to these three artists - Levine, Sherman, and Prince - in particular:

> A group of young artists working with photography have addressed photography's claim to originality, showing these claims for the fiction they are, showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen. Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, stolen. In their work the original can not be located, is always deferred, even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy.[51]

In their works, Crimp demonstrates that the photographic was about copying and about reproduction; these artists do not claim unique expressions or originality. With this in mind, Sherman's work for Crimp shows that

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[50]Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (winter 1980):pg. 102

[51]Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (winter 1980):pg. 98

> the supposed autonomous and unitary self out of which those other directors would create their fictions is in itself nothing other than a discontinuous series of representations, copies, fakes... herself is therefore understood as contingent upon the possibilities proved by the culture in which Sherman participates, not by some inner impulse.[52]

By including Levine and her work, Crimp comments on the impossibility of an "original" in regards to representation, since "it is only in the absence of the original that representation takes place. And representation takes place because it is always already there in the world *as* representation."[53] Crimp also includes Richard Prince in his analysis, whose accomplishment in rephotographing ads taken from popular culture likewise severs them "from an origin, from an originator, from authenticity."[54]

Through these examples and analysis of these artists, Crimp develops the idea that the notion of originality is a myth. There can be no author, since all texts are only reworkings of already written ones, and no creativity, since anything that exists inside a person's mind has already been inscribed, encoded by language and culture. In short, an artist is representing what has already been framed by the culture. The larger cultural orientation which becomes apparent here is that fine art and photography began to collapse in on one another.

These critics are by no means a definitive list, but they represent the core of the dialogue that was beginning to

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[52]Douglas Crimp, pg. 98-100
[53]Douglas Crimp, pg. 98-100

emerge in the later 1960s with Smithson's writings and into the early 1980s with Crimp's exhibition and critical texts. This selection of critics also represents a time when photography was beginning to be taken more seriously by artists because of their interest in representation. This dialogue also comes at a time when Greenbergian modernism and his insistence on the inherent characteristics of distinct media - painting as painting, sculpture as sculpture, photography as photography - was being relegated to long term storage. The critics discussed here articulate some of these evolving impressions about photography - the implication of images, their cultural and social consequences, and consequences about artistic originality and representation.

One notion that was consistently noted in these critical essays is that photography has the capacity to democratize traditional notions of art - everyone now has the ability to take a photograph. To think of each photograph as a fine art object meant also contemplating the medium as a social leveler. These critics asserted that photography needed to be discussed in terms of its cultural implications and be freed from the realm of low art.

The discourse on photographic aesthetics has proven itself able to include the central concerns of representation, popular culture, and mass media, causing photography to sustain a problematic status within contemporary culture. We reside in a culture in which

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[54]Douglas Crimp, pg. 98-100

photographic-based images have become the norm for exploring issues concerning representation and notions about originality. As the goals of "fine," and "popular," and "kitsch" art begin to encroach on one another, those distinctions become blurred. It is not surprising, then during the late 1970s and early 1980s, that photographs became central to visual artists in order to critically focus on how these images shaped "representation." The result was they were also drawn to assess how images and the culture dominated by photographs shaped "identity."

Chapter Three - An Examination of Key Artists

Four artists who use photographic referents will be examined; each of these artists attempts to focus on the issue of representation and examines how images and the culture dominated by photographs shaped identity. The artists - Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Robert Longo, and Richard Prince - embody many whose work helped establish and bring to the fore the issues that were debated during these key years of the 1970s and the early 1980s. This analysis of artists and their work will connect and establish photography's power to examine photographic activity as a result of art work which involves itself with representation within an image-dominated culture. One of the outcomes of this type of work and heavy involvement with mass-media, is that this recent work undercuts and displaces the aesthetic standards that 19th Century fine arts celebrated.

Each of these artists have made work intended as art. Each artist also works under a central question - how to deal with the massive numbers of photographic images that are not produced as art, but which may be very interesting in the context of art. It is precisely this split that these artists attempt to bridge. A consequence of this analysis which is not linked to the artist's intent, but is outlined in the criticism, is that Greenbergian values gave way, yet

the underlying theme is that these artists re-addressed their relationship to mass-media. While they refer to mass media in different ways, each artist regards one of the most important stimuli to the development of new art forms and practices to be inspired by media culture. These selected artists negotiate a relationship with media culture, exploring its ideological significance.

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is an artist, primarily a photographer, who explores concepts inspired by film. Cindy Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey in 1954. She received her BA in Fine Arts from State University College in Buffalo, New York. She first showed at Artists Space in an exhibition entitled, "Pictures," (1978) now considered to be a ground-breaking event.[55] The exhibition included a group of young artists who were quickly to achieve high profiles in the early 1980's. In 1980, she had her first one-person exhibition at the Metro Pictures Gallery.[56]

Sherman's well-known series, "Untitled Film Stills," (see Appendix A) produced between 1977 and 1980, consists of photographs of Sherman costumed as a Hollywood film star, a suburban housewife, a teenybopper, and other assorted characters. In "Untitled Film Still #54," Sherman selects a

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[55]Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, *Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), pg. 256
[56]Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, pg. 256

pose drawn from cinematic referents; she holds the collar of her coat around her body and looks not at the viewer, but to the side of the frame. The background shows a dimly lit neighborhood city landscape. These works were well received from the first showing,[57] perhaps because the photographs focus on popular culture, and introduce a feminist critical context. Sherman appropriates images from many arenas, always choosing that which will best produce her objective. The photographs refer to, and comment on, preexisting categories of photographic material. Even more significant, what Sherman refers to or appropriates more often than not derives from the world of mass media or film. Sherman's choice of imagery is twice removed, evoking the quality of 1950's Hollywood B films, and echoing the photographic conventions of the 1930s and the 1940s at the same time. Her photographs appear as if taken directly from a movie, TV show, or advertisement.

In an interview conducted by Jeanne Siegel, Sherman talks about her relationship to advertising. She says that she was not consciously critiquing mass-media, but was always interested in ads on TV and in magazines, in terms of the artificiality and the deception. She also states that "I was more interested in going to movies than I was in going to galleries and looking at art....I was more interested in that media than art media."[58] This type of allusion is a result of

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[57]Andy Grundberg, *Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), pg. 119

[58]Jeanne Siegel, "Cindy Sherman" in *Art Talk* 1987 pg. 273

Sherman's absorption of these sources. Sherman's point is clear: her roots are in the photography of the immediate past and in its offshoots in the cinema and in television.

Sherman uses photographic materials to investigate issues concerning how media shapes our identity. She places herself in the role of feminine stereotypes, shifting the focus to looking at a series of representations that were inspired by these stereotypes. "Untitled Film Stills" challenges the "domineering 'male' audience who would mistakenly read the images as sexy."[59] Another critical issue attached to the this series is the notion of the "male" gaze.[60] The gaze of her stereotypes suggest some danger is waiting outside the frame. Sherman places herself in situations where identity and stereotypes replace individuality. Not her intent specifically, but an offshoot of her work, Sherman uses her own identity in the series of photographs of performing personas to deflate our image of the artist as a glamorized, isolated genius, autonomous and free from all other influences.

Barbara Kruger

Another artist who is concerned with the impact of photographic materials on culture and identity is Barbara

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[59]Jeanne Siegel, "Cindy Sherman" in *Art Talk* 1987 pg. 272

[60]See Laura Mulvery, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)" in *Feminisms,* eds. Robyn R, Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, 2nd. ed. (New Jersey: Rutgers , 1997), pg. 438-448 This essay has generated a great deal of critical discussion on the masculinity of the cinematic gaze.

Kruger. Kruger also uses images and text derived from the world of mass media, especially television. Kruger was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1945. She attended Syracuse University in New York from 1967 to 1968, Parsons School of Design in New York from 1968 to 1969, the School of Visual Arts in New York, also in 1968 to 1969. Kruger had her first solo exhibition in 1974 at the Artists Space, the same gallery where Sherman exhibited.[61]

Kruger worked in advertising before practicing visual art. From her advertising background she learned how the visual culture shapes representation and identity through the choice of image and style. Kruger indicated that her biggest influence was her experience working as a graphic designer. This is where she learned how to display her work visually with "a kind of quickened effectivity, an accelerated seeing and reading which reaches a near apotheosis in television."[62]

Kruger's pictures integrate appropriated photographs with text, using the rhetoric of political "sloganeering" and advertising to address the difference between the viewer and the viewed in terms of feminist theory(ies). Examples of her work read: "Your money talks," "I shop therefore I am," (see Appendix B) "You are the cost of living," and "You are giving us the evil eye." In one picture, behind the blocked-in type that says "Your money talks," a man leaps from an exploding

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[61]Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, pg. 256
[62]Jeanne Siegel, "Barbara Kruger: Pictures and Words," *Arts Magazine*, June 1987, pg. 303

house. In the picture, "You are not yourself," a woman's face appears in a shattered mirror.

Kruger's "Untitled (It's A Small World)," 1990, is over six feet in size; it hangs so that it towers over the viewer. The size, the type face that reads "Its a small world but not if you have to clean it,", and the black and white image choice of a woman looking through a magnifying glass are geared towards creating a powerful effect that is greater than that of traditional photographs. Comparisons have been made to Alexander Rodchenko's posters for the Sergei Eisenstein film, *Battleship Potemkin,* though Kruger's pictures reflect a more recent and commercial style. These links are not coincidental on Kruger's part, because these pictures not only have the ability to command attention, they are about the dynamics of power and media.

Kruger's work also focuses on images and image-making. Her work concerns cultural myths, as conveyed by media-oriented photography. Kruger's pictures are formed of fragments from found images and text, for example, "I shop therefore I am." They re-use pictures published in magazines and the like, reminding us of the impingements of advertising and mass-media generally. Like Sherman, Kruger suggests that we live in a society thoroughly documented by photographic images. She also suggests that these images are not innocent products of an objective lens, but vestiges of an image-dominated society. As such, they can be examined to yield evidence of the culture from which they came. Kruger's

investigation of mass-media as cultural signs incorporates photography's impact on the contemporary conscious — creating a visual analysis of the very meaning of identity in terms of its significance as an *image*. Her pictures take part of a larger polemical questioning, which reads both in terms of representation, and the terms by which we read the image. They thus actively question assumptions engraved in the culture as part of a previously assumed natural and invisible representation of the subject as image. Kruger's pictures establish a difficult rhetoric that is a mix of the visual and the written in which the subject is presented within a dense and complex series of codes and meanings. Both Sherman and Kruger address the terms by which women are to be known and viewed. Kruger and Sherman both feature social and sexual stereotypes fed by a consistent sense of self-questioning while criticizing the impact of mass media.

Robert Longo

Another artist who draws on a photographic aesthetic and investigates how representation shapes identity is Robert Longo.[63] Sherman and Longo both studied at State University College in Buffalo, New York. Longo has experimented with many different media such as sculpture, film, video, drawing, painting, and photography. His series, "Men in the Cities,"

[63]Longo's use of the photographic was discussed heavily by Douglas Crimp in his "Pictures" essay.

(see Appendix C) developed from 1978 to 1982, consists of drawings based on actual photographs.[64] The drawings are monumental, larger than life in size. They were conceived by Longo and based on his own photographs of his subjects, but were executed by a commercial illustrator.[65]

The figure's poses are important to the photographs; the faces of the men and women are rarely shown. Their bodies are tossed across the surface and strike poses that allude to both agony and enjoyment. The men are in suits and the women wear dresses, alerting the viewer that they are middle class citizens, presented in a style reminiscent of how people are presented in the advertising media. The poses are also references to stop action film stills. Longo, like Sherman, borrows from film and other forms of popular culture. A result of this borrowing is that boundaries traditionally formed between low art and high art become blurred.

In an interview with Longo, Richard Prince asked how "Men in the Cities" came about as a subject for visual art.[66] Longo cited a Rainer Werner Fassbinder film still from *The American Soldier* (made in 1970, but released in America in 1976) as his main source of inspiration. The scene was at the end of the movie when two gangsters are shot. The still is of a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a striped tie, posed with his torso arched forward and his left hand tucked into his back. Longo isolated that image and created his own

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[64]Howard N. Fox, ed., *Robert Longo* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989) pg. 171
[65]Howard N. Fox, pg. 24

variation of it. For Longo, this image contains several issues linked to media culture. The image of *The American Solider* brought together several of Longo's early interests - drawing, sculpture, and popular culture - synthesizing them into a single piece.

When Richard Prince asked Longo if he was doing a series of figure drawings, Longo responded that he was taking photographs of persons, and then would customize people, "I was making a picture, not a figure drawing...they were photo sessions...I was interested in pictures that were less figure drawings and more abstract symbols. They were more like Japanese calligraphy or logos."[67] For Longo, the photographs were only taken so he could manipulate the image of the photo for his visual statement. He could investigate the photograph as a sign, which could then be incorporated into the larger work.

Longo's art, with its sources firmly rooted in popular culture, critiques the impact of mass media on culture. His photographic images come from and represent the arena of popular culture. Snapshots and advertising images illustrate everyday life, not the rarefied realm of existence to which art traditionally has been addressed.

Later, Longo exhibited the series of color photographs that were the basis for the drawings. Since then, Longo has exhibited these "study photographs" as a part of his art

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[66]Richard Prince, "Men in the Cities 1979-1982," in *Robert Longo* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, INC. Publishers, 1986), pg. 89-90
[67]Richard Prince, pg. 92

work.[68] These photographs are as monumental and large as the series of drawings he exhibited. One could interpret the exhibition of these "study photographs" as a result of photography's renewed interest; they make a clear distinction that photography is a tool representing reality.

Richard Prince

Richard Prince began making photographs in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Prince was born in 1949 in the Panama Canal Zone. Prince had his first exhibition at the same gallery as Sherman and Longo, the Artist Space (1979) in Buffalo, New York. Then in 1981, he had an exhibition at the Metro Pictures gallery.[69] In 1983, Prince showed a series of photographs entitled "Cowboys," (see Appendix D) derived from a Marlborough cigarette advertisement campaign. Prince only decided on the size of the final image; he did not in any way alter the *original* image, which depicted the stereotypical American cowboy riding the range and lassoing cattle.[70] Prince is the leading practitioner of the art of what he has termed "rephotographing." Prince takes photographs of images that are found in magazines and other mass-media sources.

In the same vein as his contemporary Sherrie Levine, Prince attached his name to the photographs and appropriated

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[68]Howard N. Fox, pg. 181

[69]Corinne Diserens and Vicente Todoli, *Spiritual America*, (New York: Aperture, 1989), pg. 128

[70]From the research I have done, some sources report that Prince makes color shifts in his work.

the images as his own. Also, like Cindy Sherman, Prince appropriated images from mass media. In his book, *Why I Go to the Movies Alone,*[71] one can detect his attitudes toward the mass-media. Prince creates characters that are labeled "he" or "they," but one might see them as stand-ins for the artist. To illustrate the condition caused by mass-media, Prince writes:

> Magazines, movies, T.V., and records. It wasn't everybody's condition but to him it sometimes seemed like it was, and if it really wasn't, that was alright, but it was going to be hard for him to connect with someone who passed themselves off as an example or a version of a life put together from reasonable matter...His own desires had very little to do with what came from himself because what he put out (at least in part) had already been out. His way to make it new was *make it again*, and making it again was enough for him and certainly, personally speaking, *almost* him.[72]

Like Sherman's work, Prince's images refer to and comment on preexisting categories of imagery that provide a platform for cultural critique.

Prince rephotographs popular culture imagery, but more importantly, he changes the image's context. Prince responds to the question of how to deal with the massive numbers of photographic images that are not produced as art, but which are very interesting in an art context. This is because appropriation provides artists with a method well suited to cultural critique. His work attempts to probe photography's relationship as an art form linked to mass-media offshoots. However, one of the problems with this work is that the artist does not make a clear distinction between the

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photographic and mass-media, apparently seeing the two as inseparable. Like Sontag and Kruger, Prince operates under the argument of the "Image World," which is a distrust of images of all sorts - not simply photographs, or TV, or film - but all images.

The works of Sherman, Kruger, Longo, and Prince speak of a distrust of images. They use photography and concentrate on photography's ability to convey encoded systems by using what we call popular or mass culture. For these artists, what photography does best is based in part on where the image is found and how it is presented, whether it be in mass-media or fine art. Their work suggests that they have chosen their subjects to be cultural.

The direction of photography and photographic images remains a problematic issue in art and culture, but never before has the medium become so fully integrated with the more established visual arts. To use photography today no longer requires artists to isolate themselves from the mainstream of contemporary art. These artists did not consciously decide to use photography to answer the question of whether photography can be a fine art. They use photography and photographic images to address the conditions of our times. One of the conditions of our times is the omnipresence of photographs and photographic images.

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[72]Richard Prince, pg. 63

IV Conclusion

Critics of the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s worked to articulate a shift in visual cultural values. The critics, Smithson, Szarkowski, Sontag, and Crimp struggled to articulate the identity of photography - both as a system of representation and as a social phenomenon.

In this examination, traditional boundaries that dominated the fine arts during the 1960s, the 1970s, and into the 1980s became blurred due to photography's presence. Much of the art examined in this thesis resulted in undercutting and displacing the aesthetic standards of the traditional canonical works of art that had dominated the fine arts. In the materials evaluated for this study, the use of the term "photographic" signified those traits in new art work which were seemingly dictated by the camera's inherent picture-making traits; for example, the camera's ability to reproduce reality. However, critics also use "photographic" to introduce the wider critique of modern cultural and social systems that has come to be know as postmodernism.[73] They speculate on issues concerning what it means to speak separately and more broadly about representation.[74] One

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[73]There is insufficient space here to explore the history and implications of postmodernism as a general critical phenomenon. However, the connection and relationship should be noted.

[74]Andy Grundberg, *Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), pg. 129

impact of this new thread of criticism is that critics of the time made an immense effort to look at the content of images and how they relate within a network of cultural relationships and interrelationships. Critics focused on the issues concerning represention rather than seeing the work for its style or for the mechanics of its fabrication.

With acknowledgment to artists like the ones represented in this study, popular culture has become a strong source of subject matter and is an established mode of inquiry in the fine arts. It is both an indication and a characteristic of the hyperabundance of images in our mass-produced, mass-media, mass-reproduced culture.

At times, photography has been seen as synonymous with popular mass culture and, at other times, it has been seen as a producer of culture.[75] In contemporary culture, one is faced with billboards, advertising, newspapers, television, and a network of popular culture imagery; this is the subject matter for these artists. What interests critics and artists is that photography has the ability to represent, reveal, and shape our collective identity. These types of critical treatments stand in opposition to the past, for critical questions were not asked of works of art unless they originated and were firmly rooted in the fine arts. As Sontag noted in her book, *On Photography*, "Photography has decisively transformed the tradition of fine arts and the

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[75]Susan Sontag stated that "photography is an enterprise of another order. Photography, though not an art form in itself, has the peculiar capacity to turn all its subjects into works of art." pg. 149

traditional norms of taste, including the very idea of the work of art."[76] Less and less does the work of art depend on being a unique object, an original made by an individual artist. Current art practices show that a widespread use of images is derived from photographically produced materials. Photography has become so much the leading visual experience, all other art forms fade in comparison. Sontag concluded, "Now all art aspires to the condition of photography."

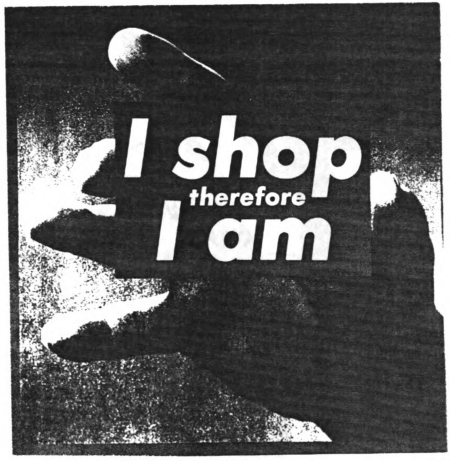
[76]Susan Sontag, pg. 149

APPENDIX A

Cindy Sherman - "Untitled Film Still #6," 1977

APPENDIX B

Barbara Kruger - "Untitled (I shop therefore I am)," 1987



APPENDIX C

Robert Longo - "Untitled (Men in the Cities)," 1980

APPENDIX D

Richard Prince - "Untitled (Cowboy)," 1984

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