Hands-On Digital: the Dialectical Photographer
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What can philosophers offer the current scene of digital photography as an art—or at least aesthetic—form? Philosophy is usually expected to offer a couple of things: first, something Socratic—that is, a critical questioning about general conceptions in use—second, perhaps, new conceptions, possibly connected into a better way of conceiving matters. Speaking of the Socratic: before making our own efforts regarding a new electronic photo-age, let's begin with a bit of self-examination regarding past efforts to understand photography.

Greeting daguerreotypy in 1839, the history and portrait painter Paul Delaroche famously stated, "From today, painting is dead." This was for an invention announced the month of Cézanne's birth, a year before Monet's, thirty before Matisse's, forty-two before Picasso's. Since then an opposed camp of what might be called "Nay-Sayers" -- including Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, Peter Henry Emerson, Roger Scruton, Janet Malcolm, and others–-has held that photography can't rank as serious visual art, beside painting. Not only has gallery and collection history since the 1980s gone against that, perceptual experience seems to have shown the premises of their arguments to be faulty.

1. Before considering those arguments more closely, let's also recall that, about a century later, following photography's so-called 'second invention', Walter Benjamin, though more thoughtful, proved no better prophet than Delaroche, when he predicted a counterattack: that photomechanical reproduction would evaporate an aura of uniqueness around works of visual art. However reproduction, together with postwar travel, has enormously widened that very appeal, so that the Metropolitan Museum is the most frequented gated-venue in New York City, and entrances to museums of all kinds in North America outrun those to sports events. I expect this holds in Europe, where the Louvre had 8.3 million paid visits last year. Market prices for unique works continually exceed expectations. Reportedly, there are four times as many art buyers now as there were in the boom of the early 90s; not only has China passed France as the number three in that market, 15 of the 35 highest-priced contemporary visual artists are now Chinese.

With photography's third, electro-optic (EO) main invention—notably when it became digitalized--another fifty years on, we had prophecy that, from that day, photography was dead. Yet, a decade later, a best-selling proclamation, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, seems to be twice mistaken. There seems to be no more evidence that photo-seeing has been reconfigured by computers than that it was by Moholy-Nagy's "new vision" of the'20s, or that we are any more post-photo than we are post-painting. Yet, the main concerns of philosophers of art, as well as the popular press, seem captured by that book's blurb: "Enhanced? Or faked? ... the very idea of photographic veracity is ... radically challenged by the new technology of the digital image." **[Nasa]** This is an age when digital enhancement actually greatly improves our

understanding of the universe through photo-sensing, also our appreciation of pictures—including of chemical photography--and when the actual catastrophic distortions of photography in marketing and politics can hardly be blamed on the digitalization of electronics.

In assessing such current conceptions and trying to do better, what can we learn from such previous efforts? Regarding Benjamin, he simply proved mistaken predicting historical facts, which none could have guessed. One often is. Radio was feared to wipe out phono disks, tv to wipe out radio and cinema (thus the wide-screen efforts of the '50s), vhs & dvd to wipe out cinema attendance, &c.: all mistaken. I don't see that we're in position now to predict general historical facts or those of technology much better than were thoughtful and informed people like Benjamin. From this we take the necessarily repeated Socratic lesson of Plato's *Apology* 23ab, concerning human wisdom.

2. Yet, notwithstanding the Sceptics' interpretation of it, Socratic criticism is also understood as a way of advancing inquiry. Perhaps we can benefit from considering the evidence and reasoning contained in the photo-art Nay-Sayers' arguments. Some of their objections concerning the possibility of photo-art are not only instructive but would, if correct, apply to digital photography, as well.

I don't suggest lumping all the Nay-Sayers together simply. They have principles in common, but they appear to me to go wrong in different ways. On the one hand, Eastlake and Emerson were very thoughtful people, who, like Benjamin, reasoned plausibly. They just proved mistaken as to their limited data. (Siegfried Kracauer is one who later looked over the data and its interpretations to come to a different, if qualified, conclusion about photo art.)

As mentioned, a still later group, represented by Malcolm & perhaps Ulrich Keller, seem to me to go wrong in a different way: not regarding the fuller 20th C. photo data, but in reasoning based on them. I'll try to show that this reasoning opens interesting issues, which apply to digital photography, as well.

As preface, I hope you won't mind 'opening a window' to think for a moment about fine art. Of course one way to avoid that is to say that art is whatever gets counted as art, so that the photo-art question's been settled at least since the 1980s, when photography was accepted in museums and the art market. Even so, historically, those debating photography's artistic status have usually had in mind several of the conditions for the modern idea of fine art—which seem fairly stable and easy to state.

This idea of the arts, consolidated by the early 19th Century, explicitly features four relevant conditions, each of which is of great independent significance. These are:
i) the aesthetic, ii) craft, iii) representation (then called "imitation", though attributed at the time to imagination), iv) self-expression—originally called "genius". Within the 'the fine arts' idea, they been given different emphases at

different times. Usually, they're combined, though the principles of combination vary, sometimes favoring different ones. We get something like stereometry differences in molecules comprising the same atoms. Thus "fine arts" originally meant the crafts for producing fine or beautiful things—and these were often representations. They have not always had equal emphasis: music, of course, always uneasily fitting representation. They are sometimes considered incompatible. Historically, self-expression proved the most intolerant: clearly, regarding representation, with various modern arts; for Mill and Collingwood, regarding craft; for Tolstoi, the aesthetic.

For photography, the first obstacles posed seem to be the aesthetic—but mostly the self-expressive--components. Craft perhaps came next, and (later, with Scruton) we even find representation represented, to round out four kinds of objections to the possibility of photo-art. For present purposes, let's consider a couple of cases, by what I'll call "Nay-Sayers", which bear on our issue of digital photography: the pair that Kracauer termed "formative": self-expression and craft.

[Eastlake] Well-known self-expression reservations about photo-art concern the level of mental causality, hence of image-maker's intentionality, in photographs. Thus, among the early group of Nay-Sayers, in the 1850s Eastlake stated that her "chief object ...[was] to investigate the connexion of photography with art—to decide how far the sun may be considered an artist." She concluded that the sun was more an aesthetically causal factor than was the mind of the photographer. For his part, in his 1891 "Death of Naturalistic Photography", P. H. Emerson concluded that "the limitations of photography are so great that, though the results may ... give a certain *aesthetic* pleasure, the medium must always rank the lowest of all arts,...for the individuality of the artist is cramped, ... can scarcely show itself" in the product.

Where Eastlake and Emerson seem to have gone wrong was, understandably, regarding our perceptual abilities to perceive differences in photographs, notably those expressing "individuality of the artist". This I take to be a point about perception, not only of art connoisseurship. Just as I recall reading of Phyllis Diebenkorn remarking that she could tell what kind of a day her painter-husband, Richard, had had, by the sound of the closing gate, we do seem to be able to sense mental characteristics of photographers from their works, and to understand their works—since they are taken as intentional productions—somewhat in terms of these characteristics. What's required, perhaps not available to Eastlake or even Emerson, in their times, is sufficient experience with the individual cases in question and a range of comparisons.

[Hill & Adamson] Note in this account the interaction of the components aesthetic and self-expressive. Our aesthetic perception of the look of the early salt-prints as compared with albumen from glass-plate is distinct; so, within the former aesthetic, is our perception of [quote] the "individuality" of different photographers: Julia Margaret Cameron, say, as compared with Hill and

Adamson or **[Regnault]** Regnault (this is a carbon print), just among calotype photographers. (A current example might be what's written about Eggleston, regarding the current retrospective at the Whitney, compared with what was written around the 1976 Museum of Modern Art show.) I take two points from this: first, that we do seem able to distinguish photographers' works by their looks (an aesthetic point); second, that we do so partly in terms of what we perceive the photographers to have *done* in their works (which links to self-expression). So the self-expressive becomes part of the aesthetic. My claim is, empirically, this has proved possible for photographers' works, as it is for lots of other things. **[egg & spoon]** There is no logical, or perceptual, conflict between detecting states of what was photographed and those of the photographer, or of other parts of the causally formative situation.

3. **[Szark.]** In connection with things looking to be done in a certain way, I suggested that there's another kind of Nay-Sayer error, perhaps more avoidable, as due to faulty reasoning. This is the Janet Malcolm idea that museum exhibits of snapshot or "vernacular" photographs constituted "a shattering experience for the advocate of photography's claims as an art form", that is, that "in the hands of a great talent [note the genius, self-expression element], and by dint of long study and extraordinary effort [the craft element], photography can overcome its mechanical nature and ascend to the level of art." That's because, according to Malcolm, vernacular photos—especially snapshots--put beside those of canonic art photography often prove their "aesthetic peers".

This argument seems to me questionable in three ways, related to the just noted connections between the aesthetic and the self-expressive components of art. First, in the most influential cases of such exhibits—notably, Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye*--one begins with 'canonic' art photos, such as Walker Evans', then seeks vernacular ones that are like them. **[Evans]** This would be questionable use of data in social sciences. For in selecting vernacular cases with the canonic ones in mind, the former's looks are going to be affected. A very small percentage of the masses of them will, largely accidentally, look interesting in ways established by the canonic ones. **[Goodman]** (Similarly, to what we might term "suitably prejudiced observers", the Penguin in Batman might keep looking, irrelevantly, like a well-known philosopher of art, who neglected the two formative components.) **[<Evans]**

Second, in Malcolm's argument, as in the famous Szarkowski show, photos are taken singly, instead of as parts of a photographers' work. This, too, will affect the way a picture appears, something particularly true of photographs. Photographers, somewhat unlike novelists, playwrights, film directors rarely make an artistic impression by single works. (Thus Ansel Adams reports roasting his backside on a radiator at '291' while Stieglitz, behind closed doors, took hours to look through his portfolio.)

Again, I suggest that the perceptual point isn't special to aesthetics. Experience with a variety of cases is usually necessary for telling one kind of thing from

others of a similar kind, which in time becomes obvious. They'll move you to another part of the hardware store if you can't learn to tell at a glance a #10 screw from a #12, 1 1/4 inch nail from a 1 ½. Similarly, technicians learn to read x-rays, to gauge the (reversed) colors in color-negatives, etc. (When I resold a car I could no longer afford to repair, the dealer immediately spotted the paint difference between the door and the rest [saying of the shop I'd bought it from, "I thought they were better than that"], which became as obvious to me at that moment as what I sucker I'd been, while thousands of dollars fell from my price. This is exactly the advantage such salespeople take on us.)

[hollow face] The third consideration is that, if we're talking about photos as 'artworks', the latter term tells us twice ("art", and "work") that it's an artifact. It's a truism of psychology that mental conceptions are forceful 'top-down' influences on sense-experience. The "hollow-face" experiment is a dramatic demonstration of that. Less dramatically, 'artifact' vs 'natural', as pretty basic categories, should have top-down effects on perceptual experience, too. **[bog]** As Kant (almost) said, seeing something as an artifact affects how it looks, since we look at it differently: a bump becomes a handle, it seems right-side up, crooked &c. **[digging stick]** Pictures, including photographs, are usually taken as artifacts. This third, artifactual, consideration seems to me to be particularly important aesthetically, including photography. Notably, we look at aspects of such works for what they're doing there: why they were put there, or left there by the maker. **[van Dongen]** 'What's that?' becomes 'What's that for?', 'What are we supposed to do with it?" The question 'why', as Plato noted, takes on a purposive--more than a physical--meaning, and this guides our perception, which is usually not just a matter of looking, but of making sense of things—that is, looking for answers. And, as artifacts, artworks' answers are partly purposive, even when, as always, they're partly accidental. As purposeful, perceived in terms of purpose, they are what is called "intentional", and so can be self-expressive. My point has been that that the self-expressive, as part of a photo-aesthetic, can be argued without using any particularly theoretical Aesthetics principle. To consider all this properly, we'd need to go over individual cases.

4. **[Burley]** However, we're invited here to consider what implications digitized EO technologies might have for photographic aesthetics and arts. A whole new realm of mistakes is waiting to be made.

This digital photo of a digital photo, in our current aesthetic of mural photography-- an aesthetic about which Michael Fried has just written might serve for vivid introduction to what's called "the impact" of digital EO photography over the decade. It's from the courtyard of Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art: the urban photographer Robert Burley's photo of implosion of buildings at Kodak Park, Rochester, N.Y., October of last year. (His "Disappearance of Darkness" project also covered Toronto Kodak's eighteen-building campus, destroyed earlier that year.) The crowd includes employees of the plant recording the event (mostly: **[Brewhaus]**), some on compact digicams, including phones. Burley's was a larger format digital camera, with larger sensor,

more pixel size and depth. The mural's from an analogue or continuous-tone "chromogenic" (RA-4) print, standard for negative color-printing, now adapted to digital files by (Lightjet) laser exposure onto large (here, 75 x 100 cm) photographic sheets, developed normally. **[det.]** A typical hybridization of processes. Although I read that the mural enlargement was digitally produced, I see no sign of pixel-posterization, as another element added to an already aesthetically interesting intersection of optical resolution, motion-blur and surface texture. (Burley's part of a recent exhibition using Emerson's old title, "The Death of Photography", for which there's a catalogue.)

[yellow hat] The depicted content, of silver-haired employees witnessing the end of the age of silver photography, may be taken as poignant. This may be slightly softened by recalling that Kodak engineering was in the forefront, with over a thousand digital-imaging patents, almost all digicams relying on Kodak technology (settled with Sony, still suing Samsung), that they marketed one of the first 'popular' (though pricey) digital cameras (the DC40 sold for over £700), in 1995. But they didn't expect that market to grow so fast (in 2005 overtaking their film sales), or for margins on digital to be only a sixth of film's: layoffs continue.

Artistically, there are now concerns about the aesthetic(s) of various film photo-processes. But each successive aesthetic had been putting down its predecessors, anyway. (**[Sea Witch]**, **[India]** Here, a word for digitalization: its capture, storage and display systems are presently preserving--even making well-visible for the first time--features of old film-based pictures.)

However, according to the traditional debates just outlined, one might've been encouraged regarding the artistic gain of the crucial component of self-expression. The more the personal input, the more scope for intentional content. Digitalization, everyone notes, allows for more post-visualized working than do chemical methods. And, as it develops, so-called 'computational photography' may allow more *pre*-exposure contributions by the photographer. But, curiously, in philosophical aesthetics, as in the press, this response has been qualified by worries about "photographic veracity" (as in the passage quoted earlier), called by the philosophers 'epistemic' issues. That's the first thing you hear. I have two suggestions, in a different direction.

5. The first is that although without question 'epistemic' issues are an important part, not just only for photo uses, generally, but of photo aesthetics—as they affect how photos look by affecting how *we* look at them (and it would be good to have more attention to particular cases to show the different ways we look)—recently philosophers have, in my opinion, been rather too epistemic about this matter. This showed up in their thinking about previous kinds of photography, now with the reception of digitalization.

[Swoop] Besides providing bases for believing—even seeing--things about what has been photographed, photographs seem to be valued for the part the situation,

not just the photographer, plays, causally, in forming relevant aspects of the image. For example, in this picture . . . .

I suggest that this theoretically neglected aspect has general significance for our general, background, idea of fine art itself. One way of putting this would by saying that, somewhat contrary to the arguments for self-expression I presented, photography has demonstrated an inadequacy of the four-component conception of fine art, shaped as it was by specific cultural ideas, two hundred or so years ago. For there are many traditions of what we classify as art, for which formative factors wider than the maker overshadow those of the maker--even to the craft represented by the maker—although craft, too, has been a familiar recourse for de-emphasizing individual self-expression. (Capa, for example, rejected the name "artist", Weston said he preferred the work of journeymen portrait photographers to that of the Stieglitz Pictorialists.)

Emphasis on what shows *up* in, as opposed to what photographers show in a work, is clear in many religious or, at least, metaphysical traditions. Such emphasis is also made by numerous modern artists in various media, including those who have deemphasized both craft and self-expression. For all such, attention to the psychological factors of the production, such as was, for example, argued by Richard Wollheim, is seriously misplaced. My point is that, even absent such traditions, or views, photography, now digital, makes us aware of a valued "manifestation" factor in art, which, presently lacking appropriate philosophical context, conceptual resources, we tend to treat epistemically. If this is right, there is *philosophical* work to do, providing a better context. But back to the dialectic: part of the conceptual project would be to include the traditional emphasis on self-expression—that is, to include under what the artist has done what the artist has enabled to happen, as one feature in a broader situation.

6. My second, and last, point stresses the title "hands-on"—I mean for photo artists.
What engineers have predicted for digitalization generally is pervasiveness, due to two features of the technology. First, that many kinds of information can be translated in and out of it, adjusted and recombined in the process. It's highly recombinant. Second, obviously, its radical physical miniaturization. "Digital", like "electrical", is an adjectival or adverbial, rather than a nominal, historical event. Unlike previous revolutionary technologies, rather than producing new, distinctive sets of artifacts, it gets embedded in existing artifacts, their forms morphing by a sort of sea change (hence seeming to some like an invasion of body-snatchers). The first meaning of "hands-on" is that, as with previous photography, we'll have to observe what different things photographers do with it, to tell whether that'll be distinctive. It's still very early. **[Matturri]** I offer one conjecture, that pervasiveness of digital electronics leads to pervasiveness in photographers' experiences.

That is due to some factors, which, I suggest, are not sufficiently considered, because they're so simple and obvious: here are some of them. There's miniaturization. This means smaller, more portable cameras; small sensors, therefore more depth of focus; greater storage capacity. Since the results are electronic, cost ceases to be a factor. More automatic controls, and immediate display of results. Then there is editing, the first stage of which is easy, painless deletion. Then, notably, easily variable cropping, which begins to free photographers from the entrenched accidents of film formats.

With smaller cameras, I suggest, the result is a kind of image-making more closely related than ever to looking. As the intervals between seeing something, making an image from it, seeing the result, looking again or revising the image are smaller than with any previous image-making technique, the feedback relations become stronger. I suggest that this, together with the low investment in image-making approaching that of seeing, itself, frees picture-making to explore more experience of what a psychologist recently wrote me is "systematically edited out by adapted consciousness." I'm not referring to depth psychology, but rather to interesting forms. Most of our seeing comes with fugitive layers or marginal flickers of other interpretations, much of which aren't assignable to categories of substance or event recognition basic to epistemological thinking. For me, at least, the digicam works mostly as a form catcher, and interesting form is what matters most, in all in the arts. "Enhanced ... or faked?" doesn't mean much to that experience, first, because there is so little epistemological at stake. Also because nature will be richer in forms than what one is likely to devise.