

mechanism and expression

the essence and value of photography

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the history of photography hitherto shows two culminating periods, the first at the beginning of development (daguerre), the second at the end (see the photos of this volume and many "anonymous" pictures published in illustrated papers). the greatest part of what has been produced between this beginning and end is questionable, because a frank or disguised attempt was made to imitate the drama that belongs either to painting or to graphic art. this of course was a deviation from the proper task of photography, a task which, though one cannot entirely escape the manner of seeing of his time and will always show a certain kinship to contemporaneous art, ought never to have sunk to imitation. the present bloom has not spread widely enough, for, after the misharvests of the nineteenth century, the ideals of visual formation in the broad public are still tainted. yet it may be taken for granted that true visual culture will expand more and more, and that (possibly in ten years already) we shall encounter as little semblance, pretence and bluff, as in mediaeval painting and graphic art, where no "kitsch" ist met with.

two circumstances are decisive whenever cultural table-land is to rise: in several places and at the same time single volcanoes must smoke, showering new pictorial ideas upon the land, sowing fertilizing lava. the existing soil must be of a kind to absorb and amalgamate nature. the supposition from above is already realized by single photographers such as appear in this book. the condition from below is also given: the appliances of new photographic technique are so simple that in principle everybody can handle them. the technique of graphic art (to keep comparison on the plane of black-and-white formation) was so complicated and slow, that up to the present time people were met with, who though absolutely possessing the visual power of forming, yet had neither leisure nor perseverance nor skill to learn the way of realization. the relation between conception and the medium of expression was too complicated. from this viewpoint it is characteristic that in this book non-professionals get a hearing. amateur signifies "one who loves the thing", and dilettante means "one who delights in the thing." the german werkbund exhibition "film and photo", 1929, this most important event in the visual field in the last few years, showed next to nothing by so-called professional photographers, who so often pettily in conventionality of manner, a renewed proof that rejuvenescence and elevation in various realms of life, of art, and also of scientific research, often proceed from outsiders, who remained impartial. thus this new bloom of photography also belongs largely to the field (now tilled by me) of misjudged history of general non-professional productivity.

the importance to the history of mankind of development of instruments such as the camera, lies in obtaining increasingly complex results while the handling of the apparatus becomes more and more simple, to maintain that "short cuts" by relieving him of all effort, lead but to man's greater dulness and laziness, is romanticism in the minor key. the field of mental struggle is but changed to another place. the "raphaels without hands" can now become productive. for it was likewise romanticism (this time in the major key), to assert that everyone who has something to say will find a way of saying it. only when the technical media have become so simple that everybody can learn to apply them, will they become a keyboard for the expression of many.

the statement is right, that not to be able to handle a camera will soon be looked upon as equal to illiteracy. I even believe that in schools the instruction in photography will soon be introduced in the so-called drawing lessons (while antiquated branches are dropped, let us hope). pedagogics — though of necessity coming after — always include in the program of instruction the techniques that begin to become a general accomplishment of adults. in the days of charlemagne only the scholar could write, some centuries later all cultivated people mastered the technique, and still later every child. a similar process in a more limited space of time: in 1900 the typewriter was found only in remote special offices,

today it is in use in all establishments, and tomorrow, meanwhile having become cheaper, every pupil will have one, whole classes of tiny children will drum in chorus on noiseless little typewriters.

the camera will likewise soon have passed those three typical stages, for it is not only the medium of wonderful pictorial sport, but has extremely practical backgrounds, today already the enormous increase of illustrated papers indicates how indirect view (written) is giving way to direct report (pictures of interesting incidents). thereby new possibilities take rise, not so much for draftsmen as for photographer-reporters in the broadest sense, at least for the grasping ones among them. whosoever in 1890 on a long journey wrote a diary of 500 pages, would in the present time take home 100 metres of leika-film-band that contain more complete memories than the word, being charged with contemplation, making use of the international language of outer environment that fundamentally neither changes after centuries nor after countries, the effect extends over a vast area of space and time. with regard to sociology it may be stated that photography serves the capitalistic upper classes by its steadily increasing insertion into advertisement. by a photograph we can gain a more accurate notion of the articles offered than by ever so suggestive a drawing. on the other hand the camera supplies a want of the lower classes: for we often meet a common man on a Sunday excursion attempting to fix an incident of his holiday experience, all the more important is it therefore, that books providing a good horizontal section of the best results of the time should come to the masses.

from reporting in the broadest sense, as one of the main provinces of human craving for life, such pictorial preparation should be severed as aims at producing a surface imbued with expression. here some misinstructed people still raise the question, whether — in principle — to produce a photo full of expression and finished to the very corners can be an impelling inner necessity. what we mean is the question whether we are — exclusively in this sense — concerned here with art, commonplace men and "connoisseurs", both of whom generally are misforms of existence, still often meet in refusing to the most finished of photographs the quality mark of "art". either there is here but the semblance of a problem, since the definition of art is wholly time-bound, arbitrary and ungreat, or human sight is totally deformed and susceptible only to one kind of beauty even opposite nature. if however we understand art as an end in itself, called forth by man and filled with "expression", good photographs are included. yet should art be understood but as manual production expressed by the human hand under guidance of the mind (what would be unwise, indeed), we can establish a new category without diminishing the aesthetic value of these forms. it is a grave, subjectivist error to believe that forms pervaded by the aesthetic arise exclusively when every line has sprung from the "smelting-pot of the soul", i. e. the mind-guided hand of man himself. of the three vast realms of all expressive appearance the above limiting definition would contain but one, neither aesthetic perfection of certain forms in nature, nor of certain machines likewise not created for expression, would be possible.

in this book we encounter forms quite coming up to the above definition, that in fact establishes but one rate, one quality. they are the photos in which we wish nothing to be moved, raised or levelled, no part to be either materialized or dematerialized, &c. there surely are people who will declare even of the best of photos that they do not reach graphic art in power of expression. yet that this is not a question of photography can be demonstrated, inasmuch as the very same people usually also refuse new painting and new graphic art, whether it be abstract, constructivist, or objectivist art. whosoever finds the photographs in this book, for instance, far-fetted in section, stiff and unorganic (I have met such people), generally has the same reproach ready for painting and graphic of the younger generation. sufficient proof that this has nothing at all to do with a special problem of "photography and mechanism", but rather with the new, tenser, and more constructive seeing.

photography is not mere print from nature, for it is (mechanically) a turning of all colour value, and even of depth in space, and structure in form. never-the-less the worth of photography lies in the aesthetic value of nature itself. is it but necessary to master the implements of photo-

graphy to become a good photographer? by no means; as in other fields of expression personality is required, the peculiar human valuation of form at the time is expressed in the photo just as it is in graphic art, to all probability — of course for the trained eye only — the locating of anonymous photos as to period and country is only more difficult in degree than locating works of graphic art, painting and sculpture, and this even when the contents of a photograph (costume or the like) cannot be dated or located, and there are but a series of landscapes or of animals to compare.

this individual constant quality that, as in the arts, is remarkably lasting, suffices to show that a good photo is also based on an organizing, individualizing principle. it often occurs that photographs taken by the one will always appear uninteresting, though he be skilled in technique, while photos by the other, who considers himself but an amateur and whose work is not technically perfect, yet invariably are of forcible effect, contrary to graphic art the principle of organization in photography does not lie in all-ruling manual re-forming of any bit of reality, but in the act of selecting an in every way fruitful fragment of that reality, in the graphic arts there are a thousand forms of recasting and reducing the exterior world, there are a hundred possibilities of focus, section and lighting in photography, and above all in the choice of the object.

this limited range of possibilities permits of realizing significant individualization. we generally overrate the number of the few elements required to obtain ingenious forms. what a simple and confined instrument is the piano (to change to another field), with its ever-returning octave, and yet by constantly changing combination of the given elements, every pianist can draw forth a world of his own from these few series of tones.

the choice of the object is already a creative action, "tell me with whom you associate and I shall tell you who you are" is a saying applicable also to the section of reality before which we stop, as distinctive as it is of a man what women move him, so characteristic is it of the photographer before which forms he stands spellbound, which focal angles and springs of light enthrall him. how organizing the general principle of photography can act at times is indicated by the fact that the diltheynhl doctrine of types, applicable only to psychically conditioned formations, may be applied, particularly if the index of period is added, thus stating that since about 1920 all types have a dash of so-called duality tension.

our book does not only mean to say "the world is beautiful", but also: the world is exciting, cruel and weird, therefore pictures were included that might shock aesthetes who stand aloof. — there are five kinds of applied photography: the reality-photo, the photogram, photomontage, photo with etching or painting, and photos in connection with typography.

the photogram hovers excitedly between abstract geometrical tracery and the echo of objects. in this tension there often is a peculiar charm, these pictures, as is known, are taken without a camera, only by the meeting of certain objects with sensitive paper. by exposing them a long or short time, holding them close or far, letting sharp or subdued artificial light shine upon them, schemes of luminosity are obtained that so change the colour, outline and moulding of objects as to make them lose body and appear but a lustrous strange world and abstraction. while going from snowiest white, across thousands of shades of grey, down to the deepest black the most transparent tone degrees are gained, and by intersection and convergence an optic semblance of space that can suggest the most distant distance as well as plastic closeness. as with all human systems of disposition, it is at first difficult to "calculate" the effect of objects while still in the process of taking them, yet gradually one acquires a feeling for the result. in the beginning there are often but chance hits. it is however a noted error on the part of idealistic subjectivism to conjecture that fully expressive effects cannot be called forth in this manner. it is a question of rejecting a number of pictures. in art (as in etching for instance) the process of selection lies largely in the mentally remodelling hand (I), in photography (reality-photo) it lies in stealing upon the most suitable bit provided by environment (II), whereas in the photogram selection lies at first in eliminating failures — for

according to the law of probability a stroke of luck will occur sometimes (III), constant practice and a good "instinctive disposition" will soon move the process from the third sphere to the second, with such advance a crescendo of value in all forming processes of life will be gained, and in the quantity of successful attempts, but not in the order of the three kinds of possible perfect hits.

just as the making of silhouettes was very popular a hundred years ago, so the photogram will become an ingenious pastime of the present day. it is far superior to the silhouette, for it permits of a thousand gradations in shade between black and white, by this means not only the intersections and disclosures mentioned above are possible, but actual penetrating of bodies, whereby the covered part remains visible and the whole charm-system of transparencies can become effective, it is however by the sublime possibilities of gradation between the poles black and white that polyphony of tones is obtainable.

new attractions have also been added to the reality-photo, in the first place new objects have been drawn into the sphere of fixation, a furtherance of the process. for man in the jog-trot of sensual life generally conceives but a conventional impression, and rarely actually experiences the object, thus I remember how some people, otherwise quick at grasping, would not make allowance for the taking of the paris sewerage canal, until those very same people finally arrived at understanding how expressive and almost symbolic such fragments of reality can become.

next to a new world of objects we find the old seen anew, here the difference in degree of intensifying plasticity becomes a pictorial means, for a long time we had photographers who clad everything in twilight (imitators of rebrandt in velvet cap, or all softening impressionist minds), today everything is brought out clearly, yet herein recipes are not admitted, and occasionally the palpably plastic may be put next to the optically flowing, whereby new effects are gained in pictures which the narrow intellect of the professional is inclined to point to as failures. "wrong" focalizing, so-called mistakes in the scale of distance, sometimes will, if ingeniously used, provide new optical attractions, as also the use of the same plate over again (photographs one in another), a further means: new view in the way of perspective, formerly pictures were taken only in horizontal view-line, the audacious sight from above and below, which new technical achievement has brought about by sudden change of level (lift, aeroplane, &c.), has not been utilized sufficiently for pictorial purposes so far. new photos show this up and down of appearance, here the taking of a vertical line (standing house, mast, or the like) obliquely, is stirring, the significance lies in opening astronomic perspectives so to say: vertical in this greater sense really is radial position corresponding to an imaginary centre of the earth.

comparatively new is also a further variety of the reality-photo: the negative print, the principle of inversion is known in arrangement of abstract forms, as applied in weaving and wicker-work, it occurs in music too, though seldom, why should not the same principle be applied to exterior realities though they be not in ranges? besides the inversion of direction an inversion of light-and-dark is well possible, this, for the present, specifically photographic charm cannot be experienced elsewhere, for the distinction between a day and night view of the same reality is quite a different thing, we might perhaps speak of a world in the major and the minor key, to indicate at least the completely changed expression of tone values.

there is furthermore the combination of photography with graphic art or painting to point to, of which examples are given (see max ernst's marvellous works), to maintain that here is a mingling of heterogeneous elements that can never combine is but an empty doctrine.

remains the photo-"montage" (produced by cutting, pasting and mounting), this form took rise from futurism and dadaism, and has gradually been clarified and simplified, photomontage, formerly a demolitionist of form, a chaotic whirl of blown up total appearance, now shows systematic construction and an almost classic moderation and calm, how flexible, transparent and delicate is the play of forms in "lela"; and crystal-hard the starry miniature world of dadamerica, the fanciful of this whole species is not factorial fantasticality, as was a certain stage of

cubism, where the simple world of objects was dissected into complicating structure, but an **object-fantasticity** in which from simple fragments of reality a more complex unit is piled up. it was significant that here the principle of mosaic, that so far had been applied only to particles of colour and form, was to such an extent applied to parts of the objects themselves, though these possibilities of formation are met by the technique of photography, yet "montage" is based on a deep need of human imagination. this is shown not only in futurist pictures, but also in irish twisted ribbons, in the copulation of objects on romanesque capitals, and particularly in the paintings by bosch and bruegel, where most extraordinary forming fancy expresses itself fully in such graftings of reality. a new and rich pictorial humour is rising here. no wonder that many people think comic papers of the future will make use of this resource. it is of no moment that they still hesitate to do so, for some score years ago they let **draftsmen** of new style wait long enough too.^{*)}

the use of photomontage for advertisements has already spread considerably, and also for outer book wraps (that appear so much more alive than the heavy, humdrum cloth covers they so mercifully conceal). the malik verlag has been leading in productions of this kind (and that at a very early date). in spite of the humour, or the merely advertising character, of these things, they should not be looked upon as trifles, or only incidental details, for they can be of demonic-fantastic effect.

we now reach the last class, the interesting **combination of photograph and type**, of which we show important specimens. we have little to say here, as these things speak for themselves and have found an extensive field in the advertising business.

the most important utilization of photography, the cinema — a marvel that has become a matter of course and yet remains a lasting marvel — is not within the province of this book. we are concerned but with the statically fixed, with situations that merely pretend dynamic, while in the cinema, by addition of static situations, real dynamic rises. questions of form here enter an entirely new dimension.

^{*)} georges grosz writes to me: "yes! you are right, heartfield and I had already in 1915 made interesting photo-pasting-montage-experiments, at the time we founded the grosz & heartfield concern (süddeutsche 1915); the name "monteur" I invented for heartfield, who invariably went about in an old blue suit, and whose work in our joint affair was much like the work of mounting."