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Styleless Style? What Photorealism Can Tell Us About “The Sixties”

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This essay reads 1960s “photorealist” painting and its critical reception against two sets of contemporary social analyses. First, it places these artistic and critical works next to Pierre Bourdieu’s 1965 text *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, demonstrating that, although the critical literature surrounding “photorealism” tended to assume that its involvement with photography grew out of a desire for an objective realism, contemporary thought on photography was anything but convinced of the medium’s transparency. Second, it looks to cultural critics like Susan Sontag and Jacob Brackman to propose that, rather than seeing the art of this period in opposition to the heated political battles of “the sixties,” the presumably “styleless” works of artists like Robert Bechtle and Ralph Goings may lead us to reconsider the forms of those battles themselves.

In his essay “Photographic Guilt: The Painter and the Camera,” Jonathan Weinberg suggests that the difference between Robert Bechtle’s paintings and the documentary photographs of Robert Frank lies primarily in Bechtle’s evasiveness. “Bechtle’s covered cars are far more difficult to read,” Weinberg writes.

They do not take a clear moral position. Is he ridiculing America’s devotion to the automobile? If one of Bechtle’s themes is the kind of bourgeois respectability embodied by the carefully manicured homes and possessions of average Americans, the viewer’s attitude toward that subject will be determined more by his or her own nationality, social status, and ideological beliefs than by any editorializing on the part of the artist.¹

The refusal by artists like Bechtle and other “photorealists” to editorialize was, as one might expect, the source of an extended critical debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Were these painted reproductions of photographs a celebration of contemporary American life – the result of a populist “wish to close the gap between the public vision and the artist’s vision” – or a comment on its absurdity?² Forty years later, to ask this question of works by painters

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¹ Jonathan Weinberg, “Photographic Guilt: The Painter and the Camera,” in Janet Bishop, ed., *Robert Bechtle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46–61, 56.

² H. D. Raymond, “Beyond Freedom, Dignity and Ridicule,” *Arts Magazine*, 48, 5 (Feb. 1974), reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975), 126–34, 134.

like Bechtle, Ralph Goings, Malcolm Morley, Richard McLean, and others seems perfectly understandable. After all, what could it have meant, at the moment of such pronounced social and political turmoil, for a group of painters to present, in the words of their critical champion Ivan Karp, “a circumstantial evidence of seeing that does not prove involvement or belief: neutralism as against nihilism”?³ Unfortunately, this is a question that discussions of the work rarely, if ever, address. Weinberg, for example, argues that the apparent “neutralism” of these images was actually a complex negotiation of the art-historical dilemma facing painters in the 1960s, a tactic that succeeded in making photography “strange” by painstakingly reproducing its images in the “dead” medium it had purportedly superseded. Useful as this reading may be, however, it still fails to answer the question of these works’ relation to their broader historical context. Why might this group of painters have taken such an interest in snapshots of American life just as that life had begun to come under attack for its oppressive tendencies? What could it have meant to cultivate a “styleless style,” to have distanced oneself from the signifiers of “involvement or belief,” in a decade commonly associated with an emphasis on authentic political commitment?⁴ Might this interrogation of photography have been more than just an effort to reopen the debate surrounding the death of painting? By placing the works of the photorealists and their critics next to 1960s analyses of photography, objectivity, and authenticity by authors like Pierre Bourdieu and Jacob Brackman, I hope to offer some sense of the potential significance of the “stylelessness” these painters seemed to pursue, and to show the ways in which their works might shed new light on the social and political conflicts they so insistently avoided.

I

In some sense, the viewers of photorealist paintings must have been relieved. In his 1965 lecture “Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method,” Max Kozloff pointed out that in the early 1960s he and other critics had become increasingly anxious about their own status in relation to works of art. Clement Greenberg, Hilton Kramer, Leo Steinberg, Michael Fried: the number of critics who seemed suddenly to be concerned with the viability of their practice was remarkable. On one hand, Kozloff suggested, it would be

³ Ivan Karp, “Rent Is the Only Reality, or the Hotel Instead of the Hymns,” *Arts Magazine*, 46, 3 (Dec./Jan. 1972), reprinted in Battcock, 21–35, 30.

⁴ The desire to cast the 1960s as a decade of commitment/authenticity has persisted even in more recent attempts to recast this period in American history. See, for example, Douglas C. Rossinow’s *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

foolish to assume that these critics' discomfort was somehow removed from the increasingly popular status of much contemporary art. As he put it, the "greatly accelerated interest in art by laymen only emphasized by contrast the evasion of responsibility by most critics. Nothing less than their leadership was at stake."⁵ However much these critics may have felt challenged by art's new audience, though, it was the art itself that proved their greatest bugbear. With the emergence of movements like pop art and minimalism, "Nothing was clearer than the inadequacy of the then-going critical apparatus."⁶ Neither formalist criticism, seeking to remain faithful to the pure optical data of the work, nor its "poetic" counterpart, which looked to explicate the content of aesthetic objects, seemed capable of dealing with the rising generation of artists and their works. The paintings of Frank Stella appeared to "encourage, only to reject, a certain kind of analysis," and the films, paintings, and even persona of Andy Warhol read as if they had been "designed to invalidate" any attempt at critical analysis.⁷ The only option available to the contemporary critic, according to Kozloff, was a speculative foray into the realm of artistic intention. By maintaining a proper balance between "credulity and incredulity," the critic, Kozloff argued, might eventually ferret out the artist's intentions, and thus come closer to determining the true "nature of the object."⁸

Thus, when a number of painters began working directly from photographs, their images seemed to provide critics with a clear, external standard. No longer would one have to struggle to comprehend the internal formal logic of the work, or to puzzle out the idiosyncrasies of an individual artist. Photorealist paintings appeared to ask nothing of their audience other than a comparison to the precise visual reproductions of the camera. Bechtle's meticulous renderings, for example, served to distance him from Bay Area figurative painters like Richard Diebenkorn and David Park, both known for their sensual handling of paint, and, in Diebenkorn's case, an insistence on the painter's personal relation to his subject matter as crucial to the work's success. As Bechtle explained in 1973, traditional realists and figurative painters were really interested in the difference between the marks [they] can make on paper, even though [they are] trying to be very accurate with it, and the thing itself. The subtle distinctions that occur between what goes on paper and what actually exists there. [They are] interested in that difference and I think we're not. We try to eliminate that difference as much as possible and resort to the camera to do it.⁹

⁵ Max Kozloff, "Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method," in Kozloff, *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 303.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 305, 307.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁹ Quoted in Linda Chase, "Existential vs. Humanist Realism," in Battcock, 81–95, 85.

The photorealists, in other words, only wanted what painters were assumed to have been pursuing since the time of Zeuxis and Parrhasius: to create two-dimensional images indistinguishable from the objects they depicted.

For Ivan Karp, along with a number of others, the attempt to erase this distinction seemed incredibly progressive. Photorealist painting was successful, he argued, because it allowed the beauty of even the most ordinary objects to shine through: “just as a fresh, ripe, homegrown tomato seems suddenly so terribly important [photorealism] may reawaken us to the dormant joys of observation.”¹⁰ And as much as this assertion may make these paintings sound nostalgic, Karp felt that this was at best only half the story. Certainly one could find in their works a longing for things past. But the loss these artists mourned was not simply that of figurative representation, as was often assumed. If this were the case, he argued, their works would have appeared far more sentimental. To the contrary, these artists’ reliance on the camera had in many ways negated that type of cathexis. They had looked not to evoke an “emotional response,” but to treat objects as “emblem[s] representing nothing but [themselves].”¹¹ The photorealists, like anthropologists of the contemporary world, treated all things equally “in both their power and vacuity” in an attempt to reintroduce viewers to the world around them.¹² They had, it seems, recognized the beauty in contemporary life, and the result was nothing less than “a democratic triumph.”¹³

For historian and critic Linda Nochlin, however, the result of the photorealists’ professed desire for objectivity was a focus not on the things depicted, but on the presence of the paintings themselves. In trying, and, more importantly, failing, to replicate the mechanical vision of the camera, she argued, the photorealists had offered one of the first truly new, and, more importantly, truly contemporary developments in postwar American art. More than the pop artists, who made use of popular imagery only to subordinate it to the formal conventions of modernist abstraction, the “New Realists” had exploded Clement Greenberg’s myth of modernist painting as a continuous progression toward the work of artists like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland – work that, no matter what one might say regarding the “modernist” imperative of its reduction of means, seemed to have little to say about contemporary modes of perception. This, of course, is what the “New Realist” work offered. If painters like McLean, Audrey Flack, and others had attempted simply to resurrect realism in its traditional form, to invoke “the meretricious mini-platitudes of a self-styled ‘old’ realist like Andrew Wyeth,” their work would have been merely

¹⁰ Karp, 22–24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28. H. D. Raymond echoed this sentiment when he later wrote that the photorealists partook of a “nonelitist common denominator of shared interests with the public.” See Raymond, “Beyond Freedom, Dignity, and Ridicule,” 134.

retardataire.¹⁴ Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, the “New Realists” valued metonymy over metaphor, concerning themselves with the “accuracy of ‘meaningless’ detail” that would tie their works “so firmly to a specific time and a specific place.”¹⁵ But this link to their “specific time” and “specific place” meant that the “New Realism” would, at least on the surface, appear different to the work of earlier realists. Quite simply, realism in the 1960s, insofar as its aim was to present that which was “essential simply to being at a concrete historical moment,” could not look like that of the 1860s.¹⁶ The objects captured in these paintings of photographs would obviously proclaim their contemporaneity (think, for example, of Bechtle’s many paintings featuring late-model cars, or Richard Estes’s city streets). But, more importantly, the unapologetic adoption of photography asserted unmistakably that the artist’s eye had been fundamentally transformed by the technological developments of her/his time. The camera had so altered the individual’s relation to the world that any failure to address that change – whether in the form of a spurious “old” realism or monochrome abstraction – amounted to an act of either ignorance or stubborn denial. By subordinating the will of the artist to the lens of the camera the “New Realists” succeeded in making the “impress of the immediate present” instantly recognizable.¹⁷

Yet in her eagerness to highlight the underlying similarities she felt united the “New Realists” and a painter like Courbet, Nochlin failed to mention perhaps the most striking difference. Much as she seemed prepared to condemn contemporary abstraction and the nostalgic “realism” of Andrew Wyeth in the name of realism’s tradition of social and political commitment, in her discussion of the “New Realists” Nochlin rather curiously allowed the question of content to fall by the wayside. She repeatedly insisted that the use of the camera was the primary distinction between the “New Realists” and nineteenth-century realists like Courbet, framing their differences in terms of technology rather than ideology. For this reason, while she pointed to Courbet’s 1865 *Portrait of P.-J. Proudhon* to illustrate realism’s presentation of a “concrete rather than an ideal . . . reality,” she chose not to comment on the political significance of “concrete reality” in nineteenth-century political thought.¹⁸ Instead, the essay turns to a discussion of the presentation of “concrete reality” in contemporary cinema, stressing the relationship between the “New Realist” painting and European “avant-garde” film. Both painters and filmmakers, she wrote,

avoid involvement with narrative theme or symbolic content, and resolutely exclude any possibility of interpretation that would involve translating the visual “given” into

¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, “Realism Now,” in *Realism Now* catalogue (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1968), reprinted in Battcock, *Super Realism*, 111–25, 116.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

terms other than its own, or reducing it to a mere transparent surface for an all-important “something more” lurking beneath. In both the New Realism and the avant-garde cinema, the literalness of the imagery makes the art object dense and opaque; anything that would tend to pierce through the presented surface and give rise to narrative meaning or psychological implication is immediately put between parentheses and thereby assimilated to the opaque, continuous surface that constitutes the totality of the aesthetic statement.¹⁹

That is to say, one should not waste time looking for any identifiable meaning in these images. Whatever the “New Realism” might reveal about contemporary modes of perception, its true significance lay in its literal impenetrability, its tendency to render form and content indistinguishable. These paintings and films invited the viewer to leave interpretation behind and to attend strictly to matters of form. As Nochlin explained, misinterpretations, or “overinterpretations,” of these works should be seen as the result of “an inveterate tendency to reduce form to a kind of handy, disposable container for content.”²⁰ Only through careful attention to the images themselves could these works be understood. In the end, therefore, the point of “New Realist” painting, at least according to Nochlin, was not to document the existence of its chosen objects, but, by faithfully reproducing the appearance of those objects, to assert the objectivity of the painting itself. The works’ ambiguity was the result of these artists’ attempt to forestall interpretation. Their reintroduction of “subject matter” in this fashion was not so much about bringing recognizable content back into the work of art,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123–24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125. Nochlin’s argument regarding the “New Realism” in art and film here closely resembles the contemporary writings of art and literary critic Susan Sontag. In the collection of essays entitled *Against Interpretation*, first published in 1965, Sontag argued that in the 20th century the relationship between the critic and the work of art had become strained because the critic no longer respected the work’s objectivity. “In most modern instances,” she wrote, criticism simply rendered art “manageable, conformable.” By offering interpretations of artworks the critic implied that form and content were distinct, thereby violating the work, separating it from itself. In response to this critical misunderstanding, Sontag argued that modern artists had begun to make works that thwarted any and all attempts at interpretation by appealing directly to the senses. Artists from Antonin Artaud to Michelangelo Antonioni had sought to “elude the interpreters . . . by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is.” The value of these works, she argued, was that they defied translation. They forced one to acknowledge the work’s “pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy . . . and its . . . solutions to certain problems of . . . form.” Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965), 9, 11. For a closer reading of Sontag’s art criticism in the 1960s, see Craig J. Peariso, “The ‘Counter Culture’ in Quotes: Sontag and Marcuse on the Work of Revolution,” in Barbara Ching and Jennifer Wagner-Lawler, eds., *The Scandal of Susan Sontag* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 154–70.

but about pressing the world of recognizable things into the service of aesthetic form.

Much as Nochlin's reading of the "New Realism" appears to clash with Karp's, the two are nonetheless united in one important way. In their haste to portray these artists' use of the camera as an attempt to celebrate the beauty of the everyday, to approximate contemporary modes of perception or the existence of objects, or simply to deny our efforts to interpret the resulting images, neither of these critics thought to question the relationship between photography and objectivity. Looking back on these discussions more than thirty years later, this seems almost surprising. For, as Jonathan Crary, Alan Sekula, and others have since made clear, the presumed objectivity of photographs has never been entirely self-evident.²¹ Yet even without the benefit of more recent histories of the medium, there is something odd about these authors' willingness to let the objectivity of an imaging technology go unquestioned. After all, in 1965, the same year that Kozloff struggled to pin down some model of artistic intention, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu assailed popular assumptions regarding photography's status as an "objective representation" of the material world, seeking instead to theorize what he called the "photographic intention."

II

For Bourdieu, the photographic intention was to be located not in the individual will of any particular photographer, but in the social field itself. Simply put, as an imaging technology, photography highlighted the historical constraints on the forms of subjective expression. To understand photography, he argued, one must not rely on psychological analyses seeking to explain the practice in terms of individual motives or desires, for that approach enabled one "to penetrate no further than psychological functions as they are experienced, that is, to penetrate no further than 'satisfactions' and 'reasons', instead of investigating the social functions concealed by those 'reasons', and whose fulfillment moreover procures directly experienced 'satisfactions.'"²² Though one might anticipate that photography, "which has no tradition and makes no demands," would be the medium of individual improvisation, according to Bourdieu photographic practice could not be more formulaic.²³ The distinguishing characteristic of photography, he argued, was not its

²¹ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); and Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, 39 (Winter 1986), 3–64.

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

democratization of artistic expression, but the way in which individuals holding cameras tended to see only a limited number of objects and scenes as photographable. The images produced thus presented neither subjective expression nor “realistic” or “objective” copies of nature. They were instead the results of a socially delimited practice of “selection, and . . . transcription.” “Photography,” he wrote, “is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from its origin) it has been assigned *social uses* that are held to be ‘realistic’ and ‘objective.’”²⁴ Thus the point of his analysis was not to ignore questions of form, but to demonstrate the ways that, “whether in its rhythms, its instruments or its aesthetic, the social function that allows [photography] to exist also defines the limits of its existence.”²⁵ The aesthetics of photography were inseparable from the images’ social efficacy. To comprehend this point, one needed only think of the sheer number of images that seemed to reproduce the “strained, posed and stereotyped photography of the family album.”²⁶ No matter how the individual photographer felt about the stilted, standardized images s/he produced, taking formulaic pictures of reunions, weddings, birthdays, etc., nevertheless appeared to be “just as inevitable as the . . . ceremonies [those pictures] solemnized.”²⁷

In her 1984 essay “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” Rosalind Krauss takes issue with Bourdieu’s apparently reductive treatment of photographic aesthetics. The sociologist’s treatment of photography, she contends, fails to come to terms with its true importance as a medium because, in spite of his quarrel with those who simplistically equate the camera with objectivity, his analysis nevertheless assumes that pictures are in some important way transparent. That is, he treats the photographs he encounters, whether they function as records of a family gathering or as amateurish imitations of paintings, as simple social indices, never once considering that the medium itself may in fact be the source of its own peculiar aesthetic logic. Or, one might say, its own peculiarly anti-aesthetic logic. For the importance of photography, in Krauss’s analysis, lies in its ability to collapse the traditional assumptions of aesthetic theory “from within.” The photograph’s status as a reproduced image, she explains,

joins the theoretical possibility that all images taken of the same object could end up being the same image and thus partake of sheer repetition. Together these forms of multiplicity cut deeply against the notion of originality as an aesthetic condition available to photographic practice. Within the aesthetic universe of differentiation – which is to say: “this is good, this is bad, this, in its absolute originality, is different from that” – within this universe photography raises the specter of nondifferentiation

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 73–74 (italics in original).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

at the level of qualitative difference and introduces instead the condition of a merely quantitative array of differences, as in a series.²⁸

Resisting the common temptation to dismiss the reproductive or repetitive as simply “derivative,” Krauss suggests that the conceptual link between photography and reproducibility in fact constitutes the camera’s most important contribution to contemporary art and critical thought. Photography’s significance lies in its tendency to evacuate the language of classical aesthetics, revealing the tendentiousness of any judgment of quality, originality, and so on. It “deconstructs” art, distancing it from itself to show the impossibility of separating artistic form from the stereotypical or “culturally already-given.”²⁹

In chastising Bourdieu for overlooking the possibility of a “discourse proper to photography,” however, Krauss neglects a crucial moment in his essay. In discussing the standardized, rigidly frontal poses of family photographs – just when the reader expects him to argue that photography demonstrates the ways in which the self, insofar as it is always social, is inseparable from the position it occupies in a particular field – Bourdieu indicates that the pose may be a form of self-fashioning. The pose constitutes “the extreme form of [the sitters’] relationship to others,” he writes; it is the sitters’ attempt to control the way in which others perceive them:

faced with a look which captures and immobilizes appearances, adopting the most ceremonial bearing means reducing the risk of clumsiness and gaucherie and giving others an image of oneself that is affected and pre-defined. Like respect for etiquette, frontality is a means of effecting one’s own objectification: offering a regulated image of oneself is a way of imposing the rules of one’s own perception . . . How, under these conditions, could the representation of society be anything other than the representation of a represented society?³⁰

In attempting to fix the identity of the sitter, the photograph, insofar as it is determined by its social function, paradoxically opens up the possibility of her/his nonidentity. The pose, ultimately an apotropaic gesture, seemed to hold the potential to turn the “photographic intention” back on itself. It revealed the extent to which photography’s objectivity was both a function of its social utility, and always necessarily incomplete. Any attempt to offer an exhaustive account of the “photographic intention,” therefore, would founder on the pose, yielding in the end only uncertainty. The “deconstructive” approach to the performance of self that Krauss found so fascinating in the work of Cindy Sherman was, as Bourdieu recognized, already at work in the photos of birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings he so detested.³¹

²⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” *October*, 31 (Winter 1984), 49–68, 58–59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

³¹ This aspect of Bourdieu’s argument, as many readers will have noticed, also anticipates the issues taken up 20 years later by Craig Owens in his essays “The Medusa Effect, or,

This recognition, of course, only serves to raise once again the question of historical context. While photography provided an occasion for thinking through the conceptual trickiness of posing, it would be a mistake to dehistoricize this “deconstructive” potential of the pose as a necessary effect of the camera’s invention. In the 1960s, after all, as Kozloff’s essay makes clear, posing was common outside the photographic frame as well: virtually any individual or object one submitted to critical analysis eventually slipped through one’s fingers. For this reason it is interesting to note that, as Bourdieu and Kozloff struggled to pin down their respective models of photographic and artistic intention – each one finding, in a tidy rehearsal of the Lacanian dialectic of the gaze, that the closer he came to the stereotypical or the individual, the more each of those concepts tended to pass over into its opposite – film critic Jacob Brackman wrote that the “put-on,” a pervasive form of ironic self-presentation, had “clog[ged]” critical judgment and “scuttle [d]” aesthetic standards.³²

In the late 1960s, Brackman argued, the put-on had become something like a standard form of (mis)communication. “By means of a subtle transformation in the way artists deal with their public and people with one another,” he wrote, “we suddenly have reason to distrust a good deal of art, fashion, and conversation – to withhold a flat-footed response. More and more often, we suspect we are being tricked.”³³ Where earlier practices like “kidding” or “joshing” presented untruths as truths only to reveal the ruse within a few moments – and thus call attention to the victim’s gullibility – the “put-on artist” was more likely to continue his/her performance indefinitely:

The put-on is an *open-end* form. That is to say, it is rarely climaxed by having the “truth” set straight – when a truth, indeed, exists. “Straight” discussion, when one of the participants is putting the others on, is soon subverted and eventually sabotaged by uncertainty.³⁴

The put-on artist, whether agreeing or disagreeing, merely recited a series of clichés. S/he seemed intent only on turning communication into a guessing game: the put-on “inherently *cannot* be understood.”³⁵ Refusing to speak in the name of truth or an authentic self-identity, the put-on artist appeared merely to revel in her/his ability to evade the listener. Regardless of the perpetrator or the form, the result was nearly always the same. Rather than revealing an individual’s “true” position, the put-on suggested the dubiousness

The Spectacular Ruse,” and “Posing.” See Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 191–217.

³² Jacob Brackman, *The Put-on: Modern Fooling and Modern Mistrust* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1971), 26. ³³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 (emphasis in original).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis in original).

of *any* “true” position. It rendered the stereotypical aspect of all positions palpable, thereby setting “straight” conversation adrift.

In the world of art, as Kozloff indicates, the popularity of the put-on had brought about a fundamental shift in the way audiences approached the latest works. Viewers had come to assume that a great deal of contemporary work sought to engage them not in some type of purely sensual communion, but in an elaborate “con game.” In response, Brackman suggests, critical arguments seemed to shift from determining what qualified as a “good” work to what constituted a “real” work. In this situation, of course, when a critic dismisses something that others have considered good, he is no longer simply challenging the merits of a specific work; he is telling the public that his colleagues have been taken in by fraud, that they are hoodwinked in their notions of what constitutes art, that none of us really knows for sure anymore what is real and good.³⁶

Much like the interlocutor, forced to withhold her consent for fear of having been taken in by a conversational put-on, the cultural critic found her judgment rendered unstable as well.

For this reason, it is interesting to note the way in which Brackman explained the put-on’s historical origin. This set of practices, he argued, had sprung directly from Susan Sontag’s 1964 piece “Notes on Camp.” Her “disjunct essay in *Partisan Review* . . . was read by tens of thousands, but its reverberations affected the culture consumed by hundreds of millions.”³⁷ What, in the early 1960s, had been preserved within the “classy preconscious” of American culture, surfaced in the wake of Sontag’s essay as a mode of “popular consciousness.” That which had once been “an outlaw form was rapidly institutionalized”; what Sontag had described only as “a method of appreciation” had been taken up as “principles of manufacture.”³⁸ Long before Madonna “struck a pose” and introduced a mass audience to voguing, the put-on had popularized the theatrically queer sensibility of camp. In the process, Brackman argued, that sensibility had been turned into a series of pointless jokes, a self-defeating evasiveness that undercut any attempt at meaningful dialogue. Brackman, anticipating the later work of Peter Sloterdijk, worried that irony had become the contemporary form of ideology. Unfortunately for Brackman, what he saw as the negative social and political effects of the put-on were not so easily stanchd. Not unlike Sontag, who feared that her own attempt to come to terms with the “Camp sensibility” would result only in “a very inferior piece of Camp,” Brackman quickly discovered that any attempt to regain one’s footing, to understand the put-on’s relation to Camp by imposing the standard conceptual framework of a pioneering avant-garde and an imitative kitsch, was destined to fail.³⁹ For, as Fabio Cleto has since pointed

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 277.

out, the inability to maintain this distinction was one of the defining characteristics of American culture in the 1960s. If anything, as Cleto puts it, by depicting camp as the dominant sensibility of that era, Sontag's "Notes" ultimately succeeded in describing the peculiar historical paradox in which the "democratic" leveling of social (and cultural) hierarchies" seemed to be viewed with an oddly "aristocratic" detachment.⁴⁰ The sociohistorical context in which camp emerged, the same conditions that enabled its popularization in the form of the put-on, thus made it impossible to right one's critical ship simply by reasserting the value of immediacy. For, as Sontag's, and later Nochlin's, difficulties made clear, no one could be certain what immediacy really was. Calls for meaningful dialogue, "sensuous immediacy," and even "kynicism" will ultimately run aground on this very difficulty. Everything, to paraphrase Sontag, has been placed "in quotation marks" – not by camp or the put-on, but by the peculiarities of postwar American culture.

To be sure, if this had remained the problem of a few art critics, it would most likely merit little discussion. What makes the unavoidability of the put-on interesting is precisely the fact that it was not merely the problem of a few determined formalists. The put-on's cynical irony had tainted virtually every interpersonal exchange. One did not simply reenter the realm of sincerity by stepping outside the gallery. For this reason, Brackman's argument implies that any attempt to speak of "the sixties" without accounting for these tactics of misdirection would be foolhardy. To offer just one example, consider perhaps the most common target of criticism in discussions of late 1960s political activism: the sexist, homophobic rhetoric associated with the struggle for Black Power. From Eldridge Cleaver's infamous critique of James Baldwin to LeRoi Jones's claim that "Most American white men are trained to be fags," the Black Power politics of that era have been cast repeatedly as guided by an unquestioned faith in the power of black masculinity.⁴¹

When placed next to Brackman's analysis of the put-on, however, this overwrought machismo no longer seems so straightforward. Indeed, in describing one of the most common forms of the put-on, the actualization of a

⁴⁰ Fabio Cleto, "Introduction," in Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 46.

⁴¹ For examples of this, see, among others, Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso Press, 1999); Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "True Confessions," in *Ten.8*, 2, 3 (1992), 40–49; Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of Lynching," in Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 81–114; and Leerom Medovoi, "A Yippie-Panther Pipe Dream: Rethinking Sex, Race, and the Sexual Revolution," in Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, eds., *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 133–78.

stereotype, Brackman depicts a conversation between a “benevolent progressive” and a “militant Negro” in which

the perpetrator personifies every cliché about his group, realizes his adversary’s every negative expectation. He becomes a grotesque rendition of his presumed identity . . . [saying] “Don’t make your superego gig with me, ofay baby. Your graddaddy rape my grandmammy, and now you tell me doan screw your daughter? . . . don’t offer me none of the *supreme delectafactory* blessings of equalorama, ‘cause when this bitch blows you gonna feel the black man’s machete in the soft flesh of your body, dig?”⁴²

Though Brackman asks us to read this as a cynical joke at the expense of the “benevolent progressive,” this embodiment of racist stereotypes was performed not as a signifier of some simplistic belief in the power of an “authentic” blackness, but a complex exercise in self-representation. It was, one might say, a way of posing as “black.” In this sense, in spite of his obvious disdain for these tactics, Brackman’s depiction may offer us an opportunity not only to rethink the rhetoric and personae of Black Power spokesmen like Cleaver and Jones, but also to revisit any number of other curious moments in the history of that movement, from H. Rap Brown’s extended meditation on “playing the dozens” with America to Huey Newton’s admiration for the cleverly elusive significations of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.⁴³ And this, again, is just one example. The antiwar movement, the counterculture, gay liberation: virtually every grassroots, oppositional movement commonly associated with “the sixties” presented, in Brackman’s eyes, yet another case of the kind of unresolvable misdirection he found so frustrating.⁴⁴

And although the work of the photorealists was, at least on its surface, quite different from these performances of politics, it is important to recognize that both ultimately problematize the assumed objectivity of contemporary imaging technologies. Once again, paintings like those of Bechtle, Goings, and others appeared to foreground the tension between the photographic and the handmade. Though they drew quite obviously on the types of subject matter and compositions found in family photographs, the paintings themselves were still nearly impossible to mistake for photographs. The slight differences or “imperfections” that marked them as something like an operation of paraphrasing – simplified colors, shadows, reflections, omitted

⁴² Brackman, *The Put-on*, 90–93.

⁴³ See H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die! A Political Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), 13–31; Huey P. Newton, “He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*,” in Newton, *To Die For the People* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1995), 112–47.

⁴⁴ A thorough discussion of Brackman’s various examples is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on the put-on as it relates to activism see Craig J. Peariso, “Re/Citing: Radical Activism in Late-1960s America” (PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2006).

details, and so on – were the very things that enabled them to, in Weinberg’s terms, make photography strange. This seems to have been precisely what J. Patrice Mandel was driving at when he proposed to label these artists “new figurative painters” rather than photorealists, “New Realists,” super realists, or any other name that might indicate a concern for “reality” in their works. Their images seemed to want neither to present some form of *trompe l’oeil* illusionism, nor to capture an objective “truth” kept hidden in our daily experience. If anything, Mandel suggested, these “new figurative painters” had forbidden the viewer to mistake anything presented in their images for reality. In spite of the purportedly literal mimesis of their paintings, the amount of information that appeared on the canvas was almost always less than what was contained in the photographic source. Elements of the original image would be saved or discarded based on their role in the painting’s composition. What was left could thus only be described as a “deductive image,” one in which “what is left out of the picture is . . . almost as important as what is put in.”⁴⁵ What passed for “realism” in the mid-twentieth century, therefore, was nothing more than a process of abstraction. And these artists, recognizing their inability to “discover reality,” had chosen to engage in an elaborate series of tricks in which “the more accurate the picture seems, the more imaginative it is.”⁴⁶

And while Brackman never makes the connection explicit, many of the put-ons he disparages as a form of pseudopolitics were developed in response to the media’s claims to represent the truth of alternative cultures and grassroots movements. As many others have already made clear, most Americans’ knowledge of the various forms of contemporary oppositional political activity was shaped not through firsthand experience, but by the almost daily barrage of media imagery depicting protests, demonstrations, and so on. In the late 1960s, images of opposition were a staple of the budding infotainment industry. For this reason, it is understandable that most historians’ discussions of the mass media’s relationship with grassroots politics have focussed on the power of a medium like television to undermine the political potential of virtually any movement it touched – its ability to “make and unmake” movements, to use Todd Gitlin’s famous phrasing.⁴⁷ Yet in doing so, these authors portray the activists in question as something like the naive victims of media manipulation, too simplistically sincere in their commitment to a given political position and/or so convinced that the audience would understand and identify with their message that they were unable to recognize the dangers in speaking to reporters. The possibility that these individuals

⁴⁵ J. Patrice Mandel, “The Deductive Image,” in Battcock, *Super Realism*, 36–48, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 46.

⁴⁷ See Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

may have wanted something other than a form of straightforward mass communication – that they may have wanted, as Abbie Hoffman once wrote, to be a cross between Fidel Castro and Andy Warhol – is rarely considered.⁴⁸ Brackman's text thus holds profound implications not just for our understanding of the art of the late 1960s, but for a great deal of what we now accept as the truth of "the sixties."

Viewing the works of photorealists like Bechtle through the lens of the put-on allows us to see that their artistic and ideological indeterminacy may not have been the result of their apparently "styleless style," but of their tendency to foreground the stylistic aspect of all forms of "objective representation." At the same time, if, as Brackman suggests, the queer logic of the put-on was at work in much of the grassroots activism of that decade, then the assumed disconnect between the heated politics of the late 1960s and the apparently noncommittal works of some of that era's best-known artists can no longer be maintained. Moreover, the key to understanding the connections between those artists and activists lies neither in looking for the moments of "commitment" in works previously labeled "apolitical," nor in simply translating the rhetoric of activist politics into the terms of formalist criticism.⁴⁹ A more productive contribution to our understanding of the visual culture of late-1960s America might be found, as Brackman's argument indicates, in seeking out those moments when both art and grassroots politics seemed to acknowledge the impossibility of their own immediacy or "authenticity," those moments when each one appeared to engage in an extended critique of truth and power. What might performances of a stereotypical "radicalism," like the photorealists' enactment of the clichéd desire for illusion in painting, reveal about the status of opposition in the late 1960s? Photorealist painting seemed to want to make the conventions of "objective representation" strange. It is high time that we, as historians, begin to make "the sixties" strange, recognizing the imbrications of earnestness and play, "direct action" and performance, "straight conversation" and camp, and art and activism that cause any attempt to apprehend the "reality" of that era to fall short.

⁴⁸ Free [Abbie Hoffman], *Revolution for the Hell of It* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 59.

⁴⁹ Ultimately, this is the solution offered by David Joselit's recent work on art, activism, and television in the 1960s. In spite of Joselit's commendable desire "to contribute to the social and political debates of our time," his analysis too often assumes those debates to be settled, taking conventional notions of "the sixties" at face value. Thus, for example, he recounts the ways in which the "visual culture of psychedelia was devoted to dissolving objects into networks of optical pulsion," without interrogating the apparent significance of concepts like psychedelia and dissolution in American culture. See David Joselit, "Yippie Pop: Abbie Hoffman, Andy Warhol and 60s Media Politics," *Grey Room*, 8 (Summer 2002), 62–79; and Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).