

PHOTOGRAPHY, PHOTO-REALISM, HYPER-REALISM AND THE REAL

Background notes

Beth Taylor - 31 October 2018



William Henry Fox Talbot, *Trees and Reflections*, 1842



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Introduction

In this seminar we look at photography from its beginnings in the 1840s to mid 20th century before moving on to the Photo-Realist paintings and the art photography of the later 20th and early 21st centuries. A variety of terms which have linked photography to the condition of being “real” will be referenced and discussed. We will consider whether art using photography and art in the form of photography (especially digital photography) has retained or lost the connotation of reality which was linked to earlier photographic formats.

Early photography and its uses

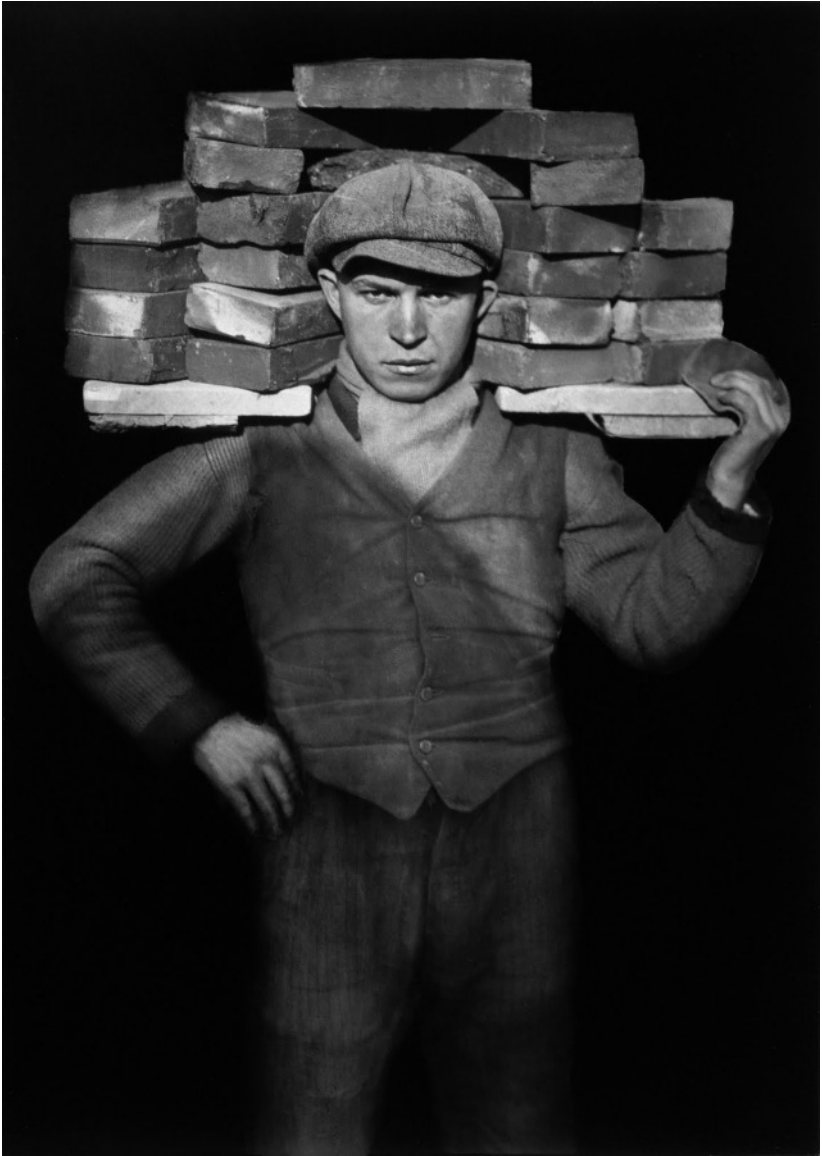
Photography as a means of producing images of the “real” world was developed in the late 1830s in England and France. Called the “*Pencil of Nature*” by Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), this new medium was associated with scientific reality and for its ability to capture detail and produce a “likeness” of its subject matter. It thus began as a medium which shared the status of scientific *objectivity* and progress, proving an ideal medium to record the conditions of modernity – the growth of cities, industrialisation and the growth of imperialism. Photographic portraiture became ubiquitous, travel photography found a wide audience and photographs, for example of suspected criminals, became acceptable as *evidence* in the courts.



John Thomson, *Physic Street, Canton*, c. 1869
Albumen Print

Documentary photography

Photographs took on the status of *document* and benefited from their reproducibility, making them an ideal medium for illustrated publications and reports. Social documentary photographers like Lewis W. Hind (1874-1940) considered the medium a *tool for research and documentation* of the social reality of working class life in the late 19th century. August Sander (1876-1964) embarked on a project to record in photographs the typology of the German nation.



August Sander, *Hod-Carrier, Koln*, 1928
Gelatin silver print

In America, “*straight*” photography was used to describe the photography of Paul Strand (1890-1976) whose work was described as “*direct, pure and devoid of trickery*”. For Strand, the essence of a photograph was its objectivity. For Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), photography was a means to capture the *precise details* of industrial architecture. As photo-journalism developed, it was used to draw attention to news events in periodicals and newspapers, sharing in the *realist and evidential* role of photography.



Lee Miller (1907-1977) *Buchenwald 2*, 1945

Artists using photography as a source and a style

Black and white photography dominated until the 1940s when reliable colour film became available. Colour photographs were used from the 1960s by photo-realist artists like Richard Estes (b. 1932), Chuck Close (b. 1940) in America and Ben Johnson (b. 1946) in the UK. Making paintings that at first glance look like realist photographs or glossy advertising images, these works challenge our reactions: appearing real but in actuality being *constructed images*.



Richard Estes, *Nedick's*, 1970, oil on canvas

Artist making photographs for the museum

One can now see photography exhibited at the major galleries, where recently large format works, by artist/photographers like Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky are shown. Now considered an art form, its large scale – suitable for the museum setting – and intense colour and sharp focus can have an overwhelming impact. These are objects for meditation, requiring slow looking. Often portraying late 20th and early 21st century commercial activity, such works often use numerous digital images in their making. Although viewers are aware of the ease with which digital images can be manipulated, the sheer size of these works and their apparent “straight” or “documentary” content imposes *the sensation of reality*.

Suggested reading:

History of Photography

Clark, Graham *The Photograph* OUP, 1997

Edwards, Steve: *Photography: A Very Short Introduction* OUP 2006

Jeffrey, Ian: *Photography: A Concise History* Thames & Hudson 1981

Marien, Mary Warner: *Photography: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed., Laurence King Publishing, 2010

Some Photography classics

Bathes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, trans. Pichard Howard, Fontana 1984

Benjamin, Walter: *On Photography*, ed. Esther Leslie, Reaktion Books, 2015

Berger, John: *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer, Penguin Classics, 2013

Dyer, Geoff: *The Ongoing Moment* Little, Brown 2005

Sontag, Susan: *On Photography* Penguin Books, 1979



Art Institute of Chicago II

Chicago 1990

Cat. 4141, Chromogenic print, 180,0 x 215,0 cm

EXHIBITED: KHZ, KND, MSP

Thomas Struth's *Art Institute of Chicago*

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