

REPRESENTATION AND PRESENTATION IN PHOTOGRAPHY: SELECTIONS FROM THE COMER COLLECTION



Letha Wilson, *Glacier Sky (back to back)*. 2016, archival inkjet print, 15.4 x 11.3

Art Exhibition: SP/N Gallery | **January 18 - February 16, 2019**

Thursday, January 31st

Gallery Talk: Francesca Brunetti

2:00 pm, SP/N Gallery (reception to follow)

Curator: Francesca Brunetti,
Ph.D. student, UT Dallas

Tuesday, February 12th

Reception

6:00 - 7:15 pm, SP/N Gallery

Honored Photographer

Lecture: Letha Wilson

7:30 pm, Davidson Auditorium, JSOM 1.118



Francesca Brunetti

REPRESENTATION AND PRESENTATION IN PHOTOGRAPHY

This exhibition reflects the way photography can be approached by using a theoretical framework based on the distinction between “presentation” and “representation”. This approach is discussed by the Italian scholar Claudio Marra in *Fotografia e Pittura nel Novecento (e oltre)* (2012) where he explains how this dichotomy can be used to understand the history of photography and its relationship with contemporary art. According to Marra, photography as “representation” is based on its formal aspects, such as the aesthetization of the forms and spaces, and the focus on light and tone. Photography as “presentation” focuses, instead, on conceptual and abstract contents such as perception, materiality, and conservation (Marra 17).

To exemplify Marra’s distinction between “presentation” and “representation” I compare two pictures: Ansel Adams’s *Tenaya Creek, Yosemite Valley, California, 1948* (1955) and Letha Wilson’s *Glacial Sky (back to back)* (2016). Both of these two pictures address elements connected with landscapes and the natural environment and they both allow an encounter with what is pristine and immaculate. However, despite these similarities, behind these two pictures there are two different aesthetic ideas.

In Adams’s *Tenaya Creek* we can observe the focus on the formal aspects of photography and on its “pictorial” values. I intend the term “pictorial” as the one discussed by Marra in connection with his concept of “representation” as a kind of photography characterized by the aesthetization of the forms and spaces, and the importance of lights, tones, and composition that are distinctive to the history of painting (126-127). In Adams’s picture we can observe a balanced and harmonic composition characterized by perfect tones and forms. By observing this picture, the viewer is hypnotized by the majestic beauty of the landscape. What this photograph elicits is pleasure, absorption, and immersion. Here Adams shows all his compositional and technical skills by representing a clear and sharp landscape where the rendering of nature is impeccable.

Adams’s *Tenaya Creek* represents the idea of the perfect outdoor hike, the connection with nature, the idyllic moment in which the beauty of the wildlife becomes accessible to the human gaze. The perfection of the scenery allows the viewer’s sojourn into an ideal dimension in connection with the immensity of nature where the human being becomes secondary, disappears, and forgets about herself. This kind of response is absent in Wilson’s

Glacial Sky. If we try to read Wilson’s *Glacial Sky* by referring to the formal qualities of photography, we do not understand the meaning and the purpose of her work. By contrast, the value of her work is not based on formal principles, but instead, on the “presentation” of reality and the focus on the conceptual and theoretical potential of photography.

“Adams’s Tenaya Creek represents the idea of the perfect outdoor hike, the connection with nature, the idyllic moment in which the beauty of the wildlife becomes accessible to the human gaze.”

In Adams’s work the spectator enjoys the crystalline and fresh water of the river and she has the freedom of moving her gaze far away, toward the rocks, in the direction of an infinite and boundless space. By looking at Adam’s picture the spectator is free to wander toward the horizon and to encompass with her gaze the openness and the vastness of nature. This movement of elevation and idealization is what Wilson’s work makes manifest by disrupting it. In lieu of an idyllic landscape *Glacial Sky* reveals a simple, bare, close-up of a section of a rock. Differently from Adams’s *Tenaya Creek*, here the rock is not meant to be part of a balanced and harmonious composition that drives the observer’s consciousness far away in the vastness of the landscape. In Wilson’s work, Adam’s action of embracing and encompassing what is big and majestic, is turned into the abrupt encounter with the bare, hard, materiality of the rock. In *Glacial Sky* the rock confines the viewer’s field of vision and prevents her dreams and ideal trips into the vastness. Wilson’s presentation of the nude rock discloses in the viewer the unconscious way she understands her relationship with this material as an idealized element of her travels.

The close-up of the rock works as an impediment for our gaze to travel toward what is open and wide. The little slot in the rock functions as a temptation for the eye to excavate the image and to achieve openness. However, the eye’s movement toward the horizon is blocked and pushed back by the bare materiality of the rock that forces the gaze to stay still and to hesitate in front of its banal and anti-ideal physicality. The two gashes in the picture where it is possible to see the sky makes the viewer aware of her

eye's necessity to embrace and control the horizon. Instead of satisfying the eye in its need to achieve openness, here there is a claustrophobic relationship between the picture and the viewer's gaze.

“ By repeating Fontana’s action of cutting the support of the artwork, Wilson creates in her work a complex relationship between “representation” and “presentation” ”

This claustrophobic nearness is disrupted by the slashes on the paper that the picture of the rocks is printed on. From one side these lacerations make the viewer access the horizon that the close-up of the rocks prevents. On the other side these cuts break the two-dimensionality of the picture by introducing a third dimension in the artwork. The laceration of the paper in Wilson's work is in dialogue with the slashes on the canvas made by Lucio Fontana in works such as *Concetto Spaziale* (1964). Here the artist, by cutting the canvas, makes manifested its materiality, which is otherwise concealed by the absorption of the viewer in the image represented in the painting. By repeating Fontana's action of cutting the support of the artwork, Wilson creates in her work a complex relationship between “representation” and “presentation”. In *Glacial Sky* there is at play a circular process that goes from the representation of nature printed on paper to the presentation of the paper itself as support of the image in its materiality and functionality. From the reproduction of the rock in a picture, Wilson produces the disclosure of a third dimension that manifests the materiality and three-dimensionality of the artwork.

The comparison between Adams's and Wilson's works shows how from one side photography represents, as in Adams, an image projected in a symbolic dimension, where the aesthetic quality of the landscape respects the canons of the history of painting and its concepts of beauty, harmony, and proportion. On the other side, as in Wilson's work, photography “presents” reality in a direct way as Duchamp presented his *Fountain* in 1917. There is a relation between photography, presentation, and readymade that is underlined by the scholar Jean Claire in *Duchamp et la Photographie* where he shows the similarities between the criticism made by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire about

photography during the Paris's Salon in 1859 and the criticism made about contemporary art based on the readymade (Claire 66). During the *Salon* in 1859 Baudelaire strongly criticizes the photographs in the exhibition because, according to him, photography did not have the credentials to become a form of art. He referred to photography as “the refuge of all failed painters with too little talent, or too lazy to complete their studies” (Baudelaire 71). According to Baudelaire, the direct representation of reality made by photography could not be considered a form of creativity. The work of the artist, according to Baudelaire, is to invent new realities and new fantastic worlds. In this perspective, photography was perceived by Baudelaire as predictable and banal in its automatic repetition of what already exists. By referring to Baudelaire's ideas about photography, Claire underlines how photography and readymade are connected by the same prejudices where the artist does not exhibit her mastery because the artwork is the direct presentation of reality itself.

Photography and readymade are also connected by what the art theorist Rosalind Krauss defines as the “indexical”

relationship of photography with reality. This concept is analyzed by Krauss in *La Photographique* (1990) where she addresses how photography is usually wrongly considered according to criteria that are typical of other forms of art. Photography is commonly studied as an “icon”, an image connected with reality according to a principle of resemblance and likeness. By considering photography as an icon it is studied according to aesthetic principles such as focus, light, composition, and originality of the subject. However, the iconic element of photography, according to Krauss, is not its essential one. This is because photography, differently from other kinds of art, presents a peculiar relationship with reality. Photography's relationship with the world is not one of presenting an interpretation of it based on resemblance, like in the case of traditional painting, but instead becomes connected with reality according to an “indexical” relationship in a similar way as the readymade. Photography presents reality in itself in a similar way as Duchamp presented



Tenaya Creek, Yosemite Valley, California, 1948.
Photograph by Ansel Adams
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his *Fountain*. Instead of an encounter with an interpretation of reality as a painting, we experience the displacement of a simple, bare toilet, parallel to Wilson's presentation of the image of a simple, bare rock. In that regard, it is no surprise that so many of Wilson's photographs are presented as sculptural objects, to insist upon their physical presence, their weight, their ability to occupy space. They disrupt the conventional photographic illusory representation, its description of three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional illusion.

Krauss borrows the concept of "index" from the philosopher Charles Peirce, who in his theory about semiotics distinguishes three kind of signs: the symbol, the index, and the icon. Photography can be defined according to Pierce's definition of "index" in the way it refers to its object according to a dynamic and active connection with it. This connection is material, photochemical. The photographic image produced by the photochemical process works as a "trace", a footprint of reality. At the same time, photography speaks and does not speak in the way it presents an element of the world without explaining the context that surrounds it. This indexical relationship between photography and reality makes the picture a presence and an absence at the same time. Photography speaks and does not speak; it is, as the philosopher Roland Barthes writes, a "message without a code" (34), a single word without the information surrounding the image represented. This enigmatic aspect of photography is the one that allows the viewer's reflection on the connection between what is presented in the picture and the viewer's understanding of his world and his society.

By investigating how photography can be understood not only as the formal representation of what is composed according to stylistic and technical parameters but also as direct presentation of reality itself, it is possible to discuss two different ways to approach art. By keeping in mind this duality, we can consider the language of photography according to these different points of view. The language of photography, from a representational point of view, is connected with the compositional aspects of the picture and with the technical features of the camera such as the lens, focus, light, and exposure. Conversely, by considering photography as presentation, its language follows other parameters, and what creates its meaning and its value are the conceptual categories of perception, memory, and materiality.

This conceptual potential of photography is what the philosopher Georges Bataille underlines in his concept of "formless" that he discusses in his magazine *Documents*. Bataille does not address the formless with a single definition or a specific explanation but by describing its task and its action. Formless' task is the one of declassing the traditional formal categories used to understand and discuss art. The formless activates a structural process of deconstruction of the forms, which introduces in the idealized construction of reality a process of laceration and dissonance of its principles. The formless not only negates the formal aesthetic categories, but it is also a way to transgress and subvert them in a movement that introduces an openness, a wound. The essence of the formless is a movement of coming and going from the ideal to the real forms. This movement is manifested in the comparison between Wilson's *Glacial Sky* and Adams's *Tenaya Creek*. In the aesthetic tradition the rock is usually represented in its connection with landscape, with the idealized depiction of nature that allows the human being to

dream and to elevate herself toward an ideal understanding of her existence. Wilson's rock, instead, represents the anti-dream, the anti-wideness, the anti-idealization of nature. Moreover, the formless, as the movement that goes from the idealization of the forms to the material aspects of reality, is observable in Wilson's action of lacerating the picture as a way to disrupt the viewer's contemplation of the rock by introducing the materiality of the picture's support as an aesthetic element of the composition.

This movement of declassing the landscape from idealized space to bare materiality is similar to the one described by Bataille in his article "The Big Toe". Here Bataille describes this part of the human body as a paradigm of the polarity that characterizes human life:

With their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse--a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot. (80)

From one side the big toe is the most "human" part of the human being. This feature distinguishes humans from other animals such as monkeys and allows them to walk in an erect position. On the other hand, it is the most ignoble part of the human being because it reminds the person that while she is constantly projected toward the sky looking at what is high and elevated, her feet remain in the mud, in what is low and dirty.

The human being is surrounded by a multiplicity of polarities in reaction to which she constantly tries to elevate herself in the direction of what is high and ideal. However, the result of this attempt leaves the human being frustrated and upset when she realizes that, despite all her efforts to move upward, her feet remain down, in the mud, in what is filthy and unclean. This embarrassing, unremovable fact cannot be changed. By underlining this point Bataille addresses the formless as what has the power of declassing the fake authority of the ideal and abstract forms. The same frustration is the one that catches the viewer in front of Wilson's *Glacial Sky* where the gaze is pulled down, far from the sky, on the earth, in the *katabasis* toward the material and dull aspects of human existence.

References

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