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ARH 580

“Is That a Painting?
It Looks Just Like a Photograph”



“Postmodernists argue that one cannot consider a photograph solely on the basis of what it looks like, as the Modernists proposed to do.”¹ This rejection of formalism in recent decades introduces a number of new methods of inquiry as to the nature and function of photography. Ideas such as the index, *punctum*, *studium*, signifier/signified, viewer/reader, theatricality/antitheatricality have come to dominate the discourse. According to Michael Fried, the recent interpretations of the photograph have been the result of the medium finally arriving as a fully realized art form. “Starting in the late 1970s and 1980s, art photographs began to be made not only at large scale but also [...] for the wall.”² With aesthetics, subject matter, color and composition long forgotten with the triumph of postmodernism, one can see that the exchange of ideas concerning the photograph has begun to parallel that of painting. The latter has a slightly longer history of conceptual theorizing following the dominance of formalism in the mid-twentieth century. In the case of the Photorealist painters the similarities of discourse with photography would appear to be particularly analogous. In this essay I will take some of the recent theories in the philosophy of photography and apply them to the work of Richard Estes in an attempt to discover to what degree these paths of inquiry are applicable to photorealistic paintings.

Realism is a confusing term even when limited to discussions of painting. Capital “R” Realism is a 19th century art movement associated with painters such as Gustave Courbet and Jean-Francois Millet, who painted scenes of everyday life in rejection of Classicism, Romanticism, and Symbolism. All of these movements involved painting in a

¹ Joel Eisiner, *Trace and Transformation: American Criticism of Photography in the Modern Period* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 5.

² Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

representational style. In the mid-to-late twentieth century all artists who painted recognizable images began to be referred to as “realists.” This is owing to the fact that painting in a representational manner had become more rarity than the norm. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a new school of representational painting arose that came to be known as Photorealism. “[T]he sharp division between Realism [*sic*] and Photorealism, hinges on painting based primarily on direct observation as opposed to painting derived from photographic source material.”³ Among the original Photorealists were Robert Bechtle, Charles Bell, Tom Blackwell, Chuck Close, Don Eddy, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings, Howard Kanovitz, and Malcom Morley. Arguably Richard Estes is the most recognizable name among this group.

Estes primarily paints urban landscapes based on photographs he takes himself. His technique is much more traditional than one might be lead to believe by looking at the works themselves. Because the artist’s painting method is so masterly, rumors have long circulated that he somehow must “cheat” in order to achieve his results. Estes works from photographs as a matter of convenience, but beyond careful measuring there are no mechanical “tricks” such as tracing or projecting used to produce his paintings. Without close inspection the works of the photorealist painters are indistinguishable from photographs, and their association with photography is unavoidable. One is led to ponder to what degree the viewer’s relationship with these paintings is identical that of a photograph. The major difference would appear to be that one tends to be awe-struck by the sheer virtuosity of the painter.

³ John Arthur, *Realism Photorealism* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Philbrook Art Center, 1980), 13.

To compare fairly the relationship between the paintings of the Photorealists and photography one must put aside the admiration for the painters' technique. The months Richard Estes dedicates to his paintings result in a product that has many of the characteristics of a photograph, which may be produced in a fraction of a second. It is insightful to compare the art of Richard Estes with that of a photographer who addresses the same subject matter, the New York urban landscape. Andrew Prokos takes photographs of the same city as Estes. While the painter strives for the mundane or banal, Prokos is inspired to create more dynamic images. If Estes were primarily a photographer, his body of work would appear to consist of snapshots taken at random. There is little attempt to capture a striking image. Prokos, on the other hand, is driven to create a more aesthetically pleasing image. The photographer's work has all of the characteristics one would expect from a professional in his field, while Estes' images, if seen as photographs, look like what one would expect from an amateur or tourist. So as a photographer Estes might be seen as mediocre. But that is what he is striving for. Other photographers, such as Jean-Marc Bustamante, have made careers out of capturing the commonplace.

When regarding Estes' images as photographs one can begin to ask the same questions of them that photography theorists have been pondering for the last few decades. The index, as understood in semiotics, is often used as a way of explaining the "function" of a photograph. The relationship of the index to its subject can be understood metaphorically as smoke's relationship to fire. It is a pointer, a signifier, "the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign."⁴ If a photograph by Prokos of a

⁴ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 3.

particular building is perceived to be an index of that building, is an Estes painting of the same subject also an index? Regardless of the debated merits of the index as a concept, certainly Estes' paintings serve the same function as Prokos' photographs. Even if the viewer is aware that he or she is viewing a meticulously rendered oil painting rather than a mechanically produced image, the experience would still appear to be the same. The Photorealist painting can be understood to be a referent to its subject matter in the same manner as the photograph. The index function will exist in both works of art. Assuming the snapshot Estes is reproducing on canvas is an index of its referent there is no reason to believe this quality is lost when the image is manually transferred to the canvas. But if the snapshot image is changed or manipulated in any way the index function is diminished. Despite Estes' remarkable craftsmanship, he can still never achieve the precision of a camera.

There will always be some distortion or manipulation in every photograph, whether intentional or not. In the jargon of the photography theorists, the photograph is often referred to as the signifier and its subject the signified. It is technically impossible, at present, for the signifier to present a truly unaltered reproduction of the signified. A photograph is two-dimensional, but then so is a photorealistic painting. This alone is a drastic departure from the subject. Yet there is still a causal relationship between the signified and the signifier and this is understood to be an indexical relationship in semeiotics. To what degree one accepts the photograph to be an index is irrelevant to whether or not Estes' paintings can be believed to possess this same quality. Complicating the issue is Estes' tendency to rearrange his images for compositional and personal reasons. He has said, "I can select what to do or not to do from what's in the photograph.

I can add or subtract from it.”⁵ But here we can still find a strong relationship with contemporary photography. The digital revolution has allowed photographers to mechanically alter their compositions with much the same results that Estes has been able to achieve by hand. “Anyone with a PC can crop, distort, add, delete, transpose, and create a convincing manufactured photographic image that looks real but is totally bogus. And yet, the aura of authenticity remains.”⁶ If one manipulates the subject of a photograph subtly through color or dramatically by adding or deleting information, can the final product still be a photograph? There is no consensus on this question. The fact that the same issue can be debated regarding Estes’ paintings only adds to their analogous relationship to photography.

As noted by Michael Fried and others, until recently photography has only been understood in relation to its subject matter and in formal terms. Photorealist painting has not only been understood in a similar manner, but also conceptually. Though Estes’ distances himself from this understanding of his art, “Photorealism ...can be called a subset of Pop Art, [offering] paintings of photographs equivalent in some way to John’s paintings of targets and flags.”⁷ This is only one way in which Photorealism can be defined, it can also be seen as a reaction *against* Pop Art. Estes’ work, because of its geometric nature, has been associated with that of earlier Abstract painters such as Piet Mondrian and Frank Stella. It has also been seen as a commentary on photography itself. “Theoretical positions about photography are abundant today, much more so than in the past. The positions are multifaceted, complex, full of specialized terms, and often

⁵ John Wilmerding, *Richard Estes* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2006), 15.

⁶ Louis K. Meisel, *Photorealism at the Millennium* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2002), 16.

⁷ Louis K. Meisel, *Richard Estes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 20.

difficult to understand.”⁸ We have arrived at a point in the discourse of art where photography is receiving a philosophical examination that Photorealism could never expect to warrant. Photography is, after all, an entire medium that poses questions about the human experience and technology that go far beyond the debates about how to categorize art movements. This in no way ignores the fact that volumes have been written on the aesthetics of painting. Photography is a relatively new phenomenon, and its theories are still being formulated.

Roland Barthes identified two signifying functions of the photograph, which he labeled denotation and connotation. “A photographed still-life arrangement may *denote* (show) flowers in a vase on a wooden table; it may *connote* (suggest, imply) peace, tranquility, and the delightfulness of the simple.”⁹ Here is a quality attributed to the photograph that is rarely contemplated in discussions of Photorealist painting. The paint and painter are forever getting in the way of a more subtle philosophical examination of Estes’ work. The bulk of criticism dedicated to the Photorealists has been based on technique, formal elements, or conceptual notions about painting a picture of a photograph. But this is not exclusive. When the movement was still fairly young and undefined, much of the understanding of what the painters were doing was associated with their subject matter. A review of Estes’ exhibition at the Allen Stone Gallery in the September 1974 issue of *Art News* by Lawrence Campbell deals with the paintings as though they were photographs. No mention of technique or formalism can be found. The critic writes:

⁸ Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs* (Mountain View, California, London and Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 148.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

Sometimes all is utterly modern and acidly bland, and sometimes there is a kind of moral contrast between a neglected or torn-down building cascading in a pile of rubble into the street next to a store window decorated with the latest in graffiti. One view of a store is filled with meaningless mirrors, reflections and painted signs; it is as though the viewer were looking down a barrel of a gun. Estes heightens the strangeness of the mood by framing some of the works as though the pictures were themselves storefronts instead of pictures of storefronts.¹⁰

Here one can clearly see that Barthes' notions of denotation and connotation can be applied to Photorealist painting. It appears that one has to go back to before the movement was conceptually vetted to find examples of Estes' work being understood this way. The ideas of denotation and connotation could also be applied to many paintings that do not have the special relationship with photography that Photorealism has.

In Campbell's review it is interesting that he uses the term "framing." Framing is a concept more associated with photography than painting. In 1966, eight years before Campbell would write his review of Estes, John Szarkowski identified five distinguishing features of photography in an attempt to separate it from other art forms. These five characteristics are "the thing itself," "time," "the detail," "vantage point" and "the frame."¹¹ The frame is something that Estes, and painters in general, have long dealt with. One has to wonder if the fact that Szarkowski was writing at a time when representational painting was almost unheard of influenced his inclusion of the frame in his five features unique to photography. The term "frame" is now usually understood to mean more than simply "choosing what will be in the photograph and deciding what will not."¹² Historical settings, political situations, and all presuppositions of the viewer and presenter of a photograph can make up its "frame." Yet these are qualities that can be applied to all

¹⁰ Lawrence Campbell, "Richard Estes" *Art News* (September 1974):114.

¹¹ Barrett, *op. cit.*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 146.

works of art. Szarkowski was certainly using the term in its narrower sense, but when understood either way it can still be applied to Photorealist painting.

One can also apply Szarkowski's other distinguishing characteristics of photography to Photorealist paintings. Working from photographs Estes' work can be seen to possess the quality of "the thing itself" in the same way as a photograph. When the artist paints a taxicab with such precision that it is indistinguishable from a photograph, little distinction can be made in the impact of a manually or mechanically produced product. Depending on the particular camera and photographer and the particular amount of detail Estes puts into a painting one of the two presented images may or may not reflect "the thing itself" more than the other. Does photography have a unique quality of "detail" that is lacking in a photorealistic painting? Once again it would have to be taken on a case-by-case basis. Szarkowski's "vantage point" is something that is taken into consideration by all representational painters. "Time" is a quality arguably inherent to photographs before digital manipulation. In the case of Estes and the other members of the Photorealist movement "time" becomes linked to the photograph being reproduced, and thus is also a fundamental quality of their paintings. Szarkowski's ideas might appear antiquated to contemporary photography theorists, so it is important to apply more recent concepts from the dialogue to Photorealist painting to see if the similarities hold up.

Though the philosopher Michael Fried has been dealing with the issues of "theatricality" and "antitheatricality" for some time in his writings about art, he has only recently applied these concepts to photography. In a work of art defined by Fried as theatrical, the viewer brings an active participation to the act of experiencing a work of art. The artwork doesn't simply transfer its meaning unaided. Using the work of Jeff Wall

as an example, Fried claims, “the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it became crucial for photography as they had never previously been.”¹³ He believes that until recently photography had been antitheatrical in that it supplied all the information its audience needed to understand its meaning. There was nothing the viewer needed to bring to the experience of appreciating a photograph. In the case of Photorealist painting the issue is more complicated. There has always been a theatrical and antitheatrical aspect to the movement. They can be understood as antitheatrical in that the works can be seen as pictures of particular objects or paintings in the traditional sense. But they can also be seen as theatrical in that the viewer has to understand that something is being said about the nature of photography and painting. Understood this way there is a divergence between Photorealistic painting and photography. Unlike Szarkowski, Fried’s theories do not seem to apply to the two mediums equitably.

The differences between photography and Photorealistic painting become unambiguous when one fully appreciates the two very distinct means of production. Few can paint with the skill of Richard Estes. Photography, on the other hand, is almost ubiquitous in Western culture. One can argue the aesthetic value of the typical family snapshot versus the work of an established “master” of the medium but these types of value judgment will always be subjective. The fact is, anyone *can* take a photograph. If one was to compare a painting by Richard Estes with a photograph of the same subject, reproduced the same size and hanging side by side on the

same wall, would the experience be the same? The realization that one was painted with a brush and the other produced mechanically would seem to make a major

¹³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

difference in the viewer's reception. Here Fried's notion of theatricality comes into play. When the viewer participates in the process of experiencing the two works of art the act of viewing is altered radically.

The late French philosopher Roland Barthes' concepts of the *studium* and *punctum* have been widely utilized by photography theorists when examining a viewer's response to a photograph. The *studium* can be understood as "a kind of intelligent interest, a reasoned enthusiasm...the learned element in this response." The *punctum* can be seen as a "violent, intense, localized, apparently random effect."¹⁴ If one applies these two ideas to Photorealist painting would the viewer's response be the same? If the *studium* involves the knowledge that one is encountering a painting it might detract from the *punctum*. The authenticity expected from a traditional photograph can never be achieved with a painting, no matter how well executed. There will always be the doubt that the image depicted is genuine, that it is "true" to its subject. Consequently, even the most emotionally charged painting will always be tainted with a sense of artificiality.

The Photorealist painters are at the mercy of photography. This has a number of both advantages and limitations. For Estes, who refers to multiple snapshots to get the information he needs, he must remain loyal to what is depicted in the photograph. Traditional easel painting might appear to be "realistic" but Photorealism is meant to look like a photograph. It is a genre in painting that is as dependent on technology as photography. Photorealism could not exist without the camera. Traditional painters might rely on sketches and their imagination, but Estes is limited to what is depicted in his snapshots. "As Photorealism developed into a full-blown style, a Photorealistic ethic

¹⁴ Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 203.

emerged. Although it was never laid out in any formal sense, the feeling was that to be a Photorealist painting, a work should adhere strictly to the information found in the photo.”¹⁵ The relationship between Photorealism and photography can be seen as being similar to the relationship between the photograph and its subject. One might go so far as to say the Photorealistic painting is an index of the photograph it depicts.

In the case of Estes the, photographs being used are taken by the artist himself. When Sherrie Levine reproduced Walker Evans’ photographs it was clear that a conceptual idea was being explored. When the Photorealists reproduce photographs it is also generally understood that a conceptual exploration is taking place, though one very different than Levine. “The desire [of the Photorealists] to paint from the photograph was inspired in part by the desire to limit the arena in which personal choices come into play and yet still gain a more direct relationship to the image.”¹⁶ Like the index there is a direct causal relationship between the final paintings and the subject, with the subject of the Photorealist painting being the photograph. Because the Photorealist painters are conceptually bound to adhere to the photographic source the subject matter is not the image produced but the photograph of that image. Like Levine, what is produced is an index of an index.

To a degree the work of Sherrie Levine is easier to understand than that of the Photorealists. The virtuosity of the paintings overwhelms the conceptual aspects of the work. Yet these conceptual ideas have always been fundamental to Photorealist painting. In fact it is only the underlying theories behind painting a picture of a photograph that allowed Photorealism to enter the art canon at a time when representational painting was

¹⁵ Louis K. Meisel, *Photorealism at the Millennium* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2002), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

generally considered unsophisticated. An interesting example of this line of thinking can be found in Louis Meisel's 1986 book, *Richard Estes*:

The reproductions in this book—or any book—are at least four times removed from the paintings they stand for. The original visual information has been translated into, and therefore been transformed by, for separate codes in succession: from reality through the camera lens, to the developing of the color transparency, through the color separation process, through the technology of printing. Since Estes' paintings are, to a large part, based on his photo-notes (mediate by memory), the reproduced images of the paintings are in fact five times removed from what one might see with the naked eye.¹⁷

Yet despite all of the potential theorizing, in many ways Richard Estes is a traditional easel painter. Many contemporary representational painters use photographic references for convenience but, for the sake of clarity, the term Photorealist should be limited to members of that particular art movement that began in the late 1960s. Otherwise the defining characteristic of the conceptual framework justifying the movement will be lost.

Because so many contemporary artists use photography in such a variety of ways to produce their work, the definition of the actual word “photograph” has become nebulous. This is more complicated today than it was when Photorealism was conceived. The problem of medium specificity has never been more difficult. One might ask whether medium specificity is worth championing or if it is even possible to evaluate anymore. When Clement Greenberg argued for paintings' flatness, to differentiate it from sculpture, he set up a philosophical theory that would reject most of what is defined as painting today. The illusion of depth found in the work of the Photorealists would trouble Greenberg as a deviation from the flatness and authenticity he sought in “pure” painting.

¹⁷ Louis K Meisel, *Richard Estes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1986), 13.

He believed “[c]ontent is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself.”¹⁸ So, possibly, Greenberg would have been happy to categorize Photorealism with photography. But if one wants to apply the concept of medium specificity to photography how could any painting qualify? Of course Greenberg was simply trying to rationalize the work of artists of the late 1950s and early 1960s. When trying to determine what can or cannot be called a “pure” painting, or a photograph for that matter, the great man’s shadow continues to loom large.

The question of whether or not a Photorealistic painting could be called a type of photograph must remain subjective. These same issues can be raised about hand-tinted photographs or the once popular portraits that are a combination of both painting and photography. Collage and digital images pose many of the same problems. Photorealism has a special relationship with photography. It is derived from photographs and would not exist if not for the camera. Certainly there are numerous similarities between the two art forms and many of the questions asked about photography can be asked about the *oeuvre* of an artist like Richard Estes. The differences are primarily in the execution. Photorealist paintings look like photographs. They are paintings of photographs. One might say that the relation between the Photorealist painting and the photograph is similar to that of the photograph of a tree and the tree itself. To the viewer the photograph of the tree and the Photorealist painting of that photograph may, at first, appear identical. So is it justifiable to label a Photorealist painting as a photograph? In conclusion it must be accepted that there can be no definitive conclusion.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Kitch and Avante-Garde” in *Art Theory: 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 531-2.

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