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It has been said that the switch from analog to digital might spell the death of photography as a distinct creative form. If that is true, it will not be owing to the loss of material supports such as film rolls or the negative-positive process, but rather on account of continuing inadequacies in the art-historical treatment of past and present photography—inadequacies grounded, in part, in simplistic notions of distinctiveness, for which the word *medium* has provided a convenient cover. An insufficient attention to photographs—rather than photography at large—as objects of formal and theoretical inquiry, and a highly inadequate account of photography’s institutional history, are merely two indications of a great lag in methodology between photography studies and the study of other modern arts.

An arrested development of discourse has been compounded, paradoxically, by the great gain in institutional acceptance for photography as contemporary art. On the one hand, such acceptance has challenged those who upheld the separateness of the discipline, and has revealed long-standing defenses of photography’s “special status” within museums, academia, or the art market to be merely expressions of an inferiority complex. The inadequacy of arguing photography’s purity or uniqueness at this juncture throws into relief the historical interdependence of photography with books and print culture, theater, film, and certainly painting. On the other hand, that long-standing interdependence, and photography’s great basis in vernacular idioms, have historically given multiple vantage points from which photography as an underdog field could open up art at large to the forces of change, renewal, and self-critique. Those vantage points—which constitute the real

\* This essay was first delivered as the introductory address at “Photography as Model?,” a symposium I convened in October 2012 at the Arts Club of Chicago, at the invitation of the Clark Art Institute. The gathering, planned from early 2011, had three motivating factors: an investigation of the place of photographs in recent art-historical discourse, a subject I was pursuing in the exhibition catalogue *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964–1977* (2011); my recent assumption of responsibility for the Department of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago (2009), which pushed me to engage with the legacy of curatorial thinking in photography at American museums; and the presumed crisis of photography as a creative discipline occasioned by the advent of digital imaging and printing technologies. Thanks go to Michael Ann Holly, Natasha Becker, and David Breslin, all with the Clark at that time; Janine Mileaf and her staff at the Arts Club; and symposium participants Elena Cepero Amador, George Baker, Moyra Davey, Georges Didi-Huberman, Maria Gough, and Kaja Silverman.

way in which “all photography,” as it were, may be considered art—risk marginalization when photography is streamlined within the institutions and mechanisms of contemporary fine art.

Reclassifying photography from a specific medium to a part of “art in general”—the polymorphous creative field occupied by many or most workers in the fine arts today—has necessitated a fresh look at the different phases of photography’s history, a reconsideration in which photography specialists must ask ourselves how or which past achievements in photography belong to the field of art history. Should photography departments at museums be split along chronological lines, as has happened on occasion with modern and contemporary painting and sculpture? Should nineteenth-century photography be placed with Prints and Drawings, and should a new disciplinary territory be demarcated for photography since 1960, one that includes video, film, and computer art? Should survey books and courses on the history of photography that conclude with contemporary art extend the premises of that conclusion retrospectively, focusing attention exclusively on key makers, rather than key images or technologies? Or do practitioners and guardians of photography have a ready “post-medium” means to evaluate the art-historical significance of its many and varied manifestations? What do those manifestations model, and how are they exemplary for us now in light of the great institutional acceptance for photography as contemporary art?

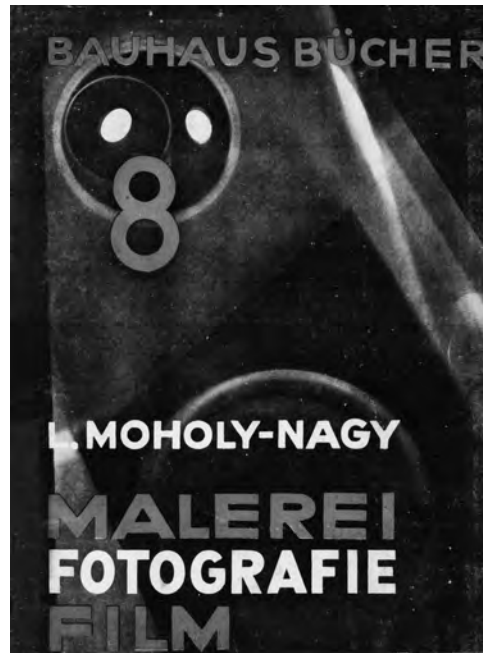
*Medium* remains a frequent unifying term in photography studies in academia and in the marketplace. It is a word that came suddenly into common usage for this purpose around 1930, introduced by artist-writers like László Moholy-Nagy and Franz Roh and art historians like Heinrich Schwarz, all of whom saw photography in the last analysis as art history by other means: expressive, perhaps, but above all a form of cultural analysis.<sup>1</sup> Photographs, in the view of Schwarz and other pioneers of photography’s history as art, bore witness to the cultural epoch in which they were made, and they signaled omniscience about the world; either through the gathering together in images of every possible subject, a feat implied by Albert Renger-Patzsch in his publication *Die Welt ist schön* (*The World Is Beautiful*), subtitled *100 Fotografien*, from 1928, or through the operations of sifting and filing used in photomontage, as in *Großstadt* (*Metropolis*) by Paul Citroen, a classic example reproduced in Moholy-Nagy’s book *Malerei Fotografie Film* (*Painting Photography Film*),

1. The art history in question is that practiced at Austro-German research institutes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Great diversity in methodology notwithstanding (along with uneven levels of insight), totalizing concepts of cultural production largely held sway, in which varieties of “high” and “low” art were meaningful mostly for what they said about the *Zeitgeist* of their historical period. For examples in the period literature on photography, see László Moholy-Nagy, “Die wichtigsten Epochen aus der Geschichte der Fotografie,” *Das Werk* 16, no. 9 (September 1929), pp. 258–67; Franz Roh, “Mechanism and Expression: The Essence and Value of Photography” (1930), in *Germany: The New Photography 1927–1933*, ed. David Mellor (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), pp. 29–34; Heinrich Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill: Master of Photography* (New York: Viking Press, 1931). The historical specificity of “medium” as a term of photographic discourse is reviewed in Matthew S. Witkovsky, “Circa 1930: Art History and the New Photography,” *Études photographiques* 23 (May 2009), online (without illustrations) at <https://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/3426#text>.

which was published in 1925 and again in 1927. *The World Is Beautiful* and *Painting Photography Film* were undoubtedly the most influential photography books of their era, and both convey an understanding of photography as an encyclopedic commentary on its time.

The presentation of photography as a unified “medium” cohabited by anonymous and illustrious makers, early-nineteenth-century experimenters, and contemporary avant-gardists was, in effect, a means to justify the “world in images” studied by Austro-German art historians around 1930, and the proliferation of histories of nineteenth-century and contemporary photography—often with the two periods treated together—amounted to a slide show idealizing their profession. Roh, a German art historian who, like Citroen, made a hobby of collecting picture postcards, described Citroen’s *Metropolis* in 1925 as a synthetic treatise in images: “The work of the artist,” he wrote, “begins with the slow but sure collection of decisive, interrelating fragments and culminates in their meaningful composition.”<sup>2</sup> Roh could as easily have made this statement about his own art-historical method, learned from his professor Heinrich Wölfflin, to compare and contrast style in paintings so as to piece together a compelling worldview. Particularly in an age of slide lectures and postcard reproductions, the historian and the photomonteur seemed to use similar source material in parallel ways.

Such analysis tends toward a sense of omniscience, and this is the understanding I have of Citroen’s *Metropolis* as well. What seems to be a solid wall of glass and cement—a disorienting modern jungle—gives way at the middle to a swooping bird’s-eye view onto a spacious, receding boulevard, with a beaux-arts manor to one side and bushy trees behind it, such that an initial impression of chaos—admittedly heightened over time through differential yellowing of the more than two hundred fragments in this postcard tapestry—resolves itself into a distanced overview with an oasis of calm at its center. *Metropolis* could be a parable of Austro-German art history’s address of photography: synthetic, even totalizing, and, for all its stated love of



László Moholy-Nagy. *Painting Photography Film*. 1925.  
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2. Franz Roh, *Nachexpressionismus; Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinckschardt & Biermann, 1925), p. 46.



*Paul Citroen. Metropolis/Großstadt. 1923.*  
 © Paul Citroen/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
 New York/Pictoright, Amsterdam.

fragmentation and collage, in fact congenitally uncomfortable with disjunction and difference.

That discomfort has spread widely across the subset of art-historical writing concerned with photography. How should we address disjunction within a field that we wish to describe as coherent? Attending closely to the objects and the historical circumstances of their production and reception seems to me the only way to assure an answer to these questions. Yve-Alain Bois's 1990 collection of essays, *Painting as Model*, makes a good argument for basing an approach on a closely inter-

woven study of form and ideas—really, of ideas *as* or *in* form. But because the undertaking is not guaranteed success, I have recast Bois's title as an interrogative: *Photography as Model?* Can we model an understanding of photography as art? Can photography today still model our understanding of art at large?<sup>3</sup>

*Painting as Model* was an impassioned, and in places testy, defense of close looking and broad reading. In his introductory arguments, Bois set forth a series of positions inimical to his own, most of which can be summarized as suffering, in his view, from simplistic reasoning and hasty observation or even indifference to actual works of art. Theory is not to be applied, Bois argued, but to be sought out by the art historian as a complement or response to questions generated by attentive consideration of a given artwork. Meanings must be assumed to be complex and open-ended; the painting is not a rebus but a palimpsest. The feat portrayed by Citroen, of occupying a field (the modern urban jungle) while simultaneously surveying it from a lofty distance, is in reality impossible. Instead, the importance of one's chosen artists must be defended with partisan rigor, work by work and idea by idea. Materialist formalism, the inheritance of Alois Riegl and Mikhail Bakhtin, was the method to pursue: a privileging of form as historically embedded, physically contingent matter that has the power to shape ideas. No ideas preexist form; no form is transcendent.

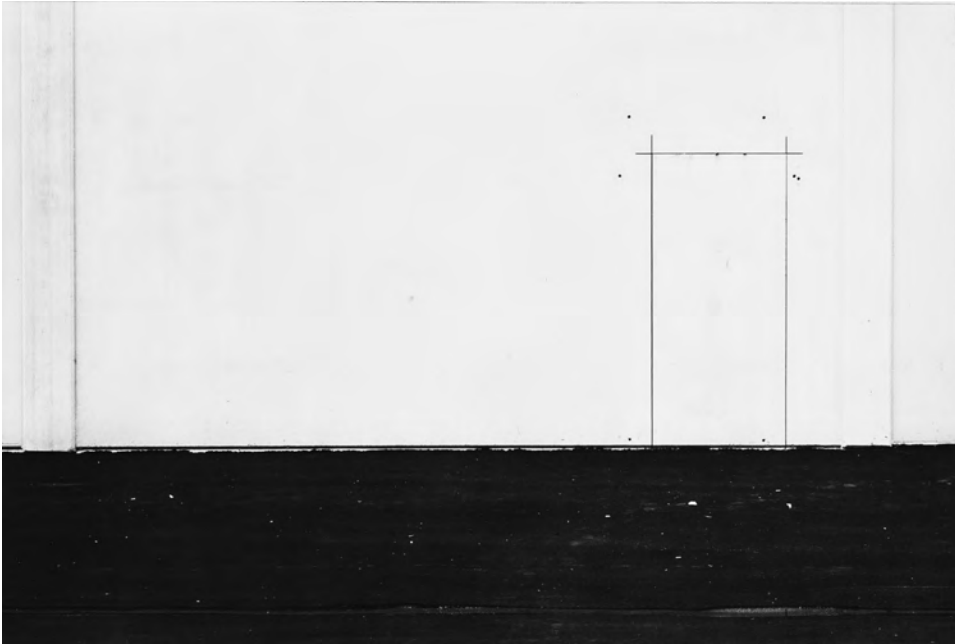
A rigorous attention to material form and a closely argued intellectual position grounded in the study of a chosen object or objects are surprisingly uncommon approaches in photography studies, particularly for photographs that come before the contemporary moment or lie beyond or beneath its art-world purview. As Jan Baetens has observed, most theorists of photography treat the photographic print or projection as a hermetic image, ignoring thoughts or information that may have been supplied by the photographers and omitting discussion of the technical processes that conditioned the work's appearance.<sup>4</sup> As an example, the critical stage of darkroom work that came between negative and print—particularly in the mid- to late twentieth century—and for which Photoshop is but an analogue, receives essentially no discussion in writings on photography. Local interventions, from burning and dodging to exposure times and temperatures, toning, or spotting, are as potentially meaningful as cropping or paper size, the two aspects most readily visible in comparing a negative with a finished print.

I have written about such interventions in discussing the early pictures of Lewis Baltz, a group of nearly one hundred photographs made from around 1967 until 1976 that Baltz came to call the *Prototype Works*.<sup>5</sup> The best of these works feature a luminosity and inky richness in the prints that contrast remarkably with

3. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). Thanks to Robin Kelsey for suggesting I replace the period with a question mark.

4. Jan Baetens, "Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The Question of 'Interdisciplinarity,'" in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 53–74.

5. The paragraphs that follow reprise a portion of my essay "Photography's Objecthood," in *Lewis Baltz: The Prototype Works* (Göttingen and Chicago: Steidl in association with the Art Institute of Chicago, 2010).



*Lewis Baltz. Mission Viejo. 1968.*

the insistent planarity and shallow, horizonless depth of the images. Object and image are in tension with each other, as a result of systematic decisions taken by the artist. First, Baltz chose to photograph with a 35-mm. film camera and no tripod, even though his objects were static, and thus best suited to capture by a view camera, especially as Baltz insisted on grainless precision. The 35-mm. camera was chosen for its connection to photo-reportage: the generic equipment of journalists making a news report. Baltz would operate as a sub-journalist, just as his topic would be not architecture but what he called “subarchitecture,” the faceless tract homes and industrial parks that were then beginning to transform the California landscape.

If journalism (in its postwar American version) strove to avoid subjectivity or editorializing, then Baltz would take the principle of impersonality to an extreme: Strict parallelism between the buildings and the photographic picture plane was essential to reinforce a sense of utter anonymity. A camera developed for architecture would have facilitated his goal, one that “tilted” and “swung” (shifting the lens side to side or up and down along the camera body) to minimize optical distortions, such as keystoning, that occur when a large flat surface is out of plane with

the camera lens. Maneuvering with his inadequate machinery, Baltz “tilted” and “swung” his hands, trying to minimize distortions during shooting. As this was not necessarily sufficient, he then cropped the negatives tightly to the edges of the buildings and, as a final and truly strange step, tilted the enlarger relative to the photographic paper underneath it to compensate for any remaining planar distortion. These efforts, which created a good deal of supposedly unnecessary work, should not be understood in a heroic mode, but as means whereby Baltz heightened his own consciousness of his decisions, refusing to take his equipment—or his artistic identity as a photographer—for granted.

Baltz further decided to work with Kodak Hi-Contrast Copy film, a product with a very low sensitivity rating of just ASA 6—essentially black or white and nothing in between. This, too, was part of the conceptual address; Hi-Contrast Copy Film had been developed for making microfilm, a library operation that could be said to constitute the ultimate in “dumb documentary” photography. However, the paper Baltz chose, and especially the Perfection Micrograin developer, could bring out terrific richness of tone if the prints were manipulated locally and then kept long enough in the developing bath. Baltz burned and dodged his prints up to two dozen times, intensifying or diminishing light over selected areas to deflect attention from, or direct it to, specific details. The result was work of absorptive textural richness and just enough “stuff”—holes, debris, surface texture—to give a sense of the real while genericizing that real to calculated effect.

As a final intervention, Baltz chose to present many of his *Prototype* prints in a way that drew attention to their character as objects and heightened the tension between image and object already contained in his choice of equipment and materials. Baltz trimmed the margins of these prints and mounted them on second sheets of photographic paper to give them a minimal thickness. He mounted these double-thick works to board and, in a flourish he had learned from Western landscape photographer William Current, he then rimmed the double sheets in India ink. The result was the slightest of bas-reliefs, a formation that drew the spectator’s eye out of the picture and toward the immediate surroundings: frame, gallery, building. The absorptive pull of lush blacks and luminous whites in the *Prototype Works* fights against the rigid flatness of the walls, the blankness of the sidewalks, and the conspicuous object quality of the prints themselves. (In several cases, Baltz also made the slightest of nicks to one corner of the mounted, ink-rimmed print, another minimal indication of objecthood in an optical image.)

There will be those who counter that to emphasize composition and even a form of facture in this way is to approach photography as an ersatz drawing or painting technique and thus to bastardize a history of photography proper. To this I would respond that it is precisely the bastard history that counts most in photography. Baltz’s terrific attention to questions of process no doubt has its grounding and its foil in MFA programs in photography, newly created in the 1960s, which professionalized the “pictorialist” amateur photographer clubs’ long-standing obsession with techniques and technologies. To qualify as art worthy of an advanced degree, thought the specialists (like the amateurs before them), photog-

raphy demanded an inordinate display of skill. And yet Baltz was not ostentatious in his skill. Precisely the opposite: To the casual observer his prints seem schematic, too high in contrast, boringly composed, undramatic. Soon to join the Castelli Gallery, in the late 1960s Baltz was learning with unusual perspicacity from recent American painting and sculpture, whose practitioners (several of them already showing with Castelli) were pushing the great modernist inheritance of deskilling in new ways—an inheritance repeatedly furthered, it must be said, by the avant-garde adoption of photography at key points across the twentieth century.

Baltz was standing, however, with both feet in the photography world. He advanced his work in dialogue with Minimalist and post-Minimalist art, but just as strongly with the issue of documentary, a theme of perennial concern in photography and in fact an area where photography offers insight into the relations binding all forms of art to events in history or everyday life. To engage a dialogue with painting and sculpture that begins and ends with intense self-reflection on the formal means and pressing concerns of photography at a particular moment, and opens back out onto issues of concern for all art—that is a rare enough narrative in any art-historical study, let alone one on a photographer.

Baltz, then, could satisfy the criteria for “photography as model” (without a question mark), in which close material and formal study of a set of works yields a set of theoretical assertions about photography that are of the order of the “game” in general rather than an individual “match,” to pick up terms used by Bois.<sup>6</sup> (An individual contest may seem important temporarily, but it is the game itself that endures and holds lasting significance.) The trouble is that there is more than one “game” going on in photography—more than one playing field, as it were. Baltz is easy for historians of modern or contemporary art to assimilate because he has had the career of an artist, an option considered neither available nor desirable for much of the history of photography. Baltz followed a path—from art school to teaching to exhibiting—that is specific to the post-1960s art world.

The framework of a professional art career facilitates a strong reading of form and authorial intent that is complicated in many earlier or other trajectories in photography. Anne McCauley pointed out years ago, in a book on the *carte de visite* impresario Antoine Disdéri, the inadequacy of discussing studio photographers as artists, given the entourage of assistants for posing, lighting, printing, and even lifting the lens cap or pressing the button.<sup>7</sup> Yet we have still not fully developed a language to address the particular quality of authorship that results, for which the term *conceptual* is categorically misleading. And attention to the specific form of the resulting images is also insufficiently developed.

There are exceptional studies in this regard, writings that through historically

6. Bois, *Painting as Model*, p. 256, citing Hubert Damisch in a review of the latter’s book *Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

7. Anne McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 7 and chapter 2.



and aesthetically attentive considerations of form elaborate an understanding of photographic agency in conditions far removed from the institutional parameters of art. In the opening chapter of his book *Images in Spite of All*, Georges Didi-Huberman treats a precious photographic record of gas chambers in operation in the concentration-camp complex of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The four surviving images that he discusses—all we have—were made by inmates who had been assigned to operate the chambers, forced into helping murder fellow inmates and then dealing with their remains. As part of the cleansing of evidence required by camp commanders, any trace of these events needed to be scrubbed clean as well. To attempt to preserve photographic testimony of the genocide, then, was to take to near certainty an already great probability of death.

Didi-Huberman describes in detail how several members of this *Sonderkommando* cooperated to accomplish their desperate documentary work, assessing their agency with the seriousness I have accorded to Baltz in his *Prototype Works*. Relying principally on testimony from inmate David Szmulewski and on forensic analysis, Didi-Huberman recounts how a plan was devised to sabotage the roof of the fifth crematorium building, in order to be sent to repair it. Szmulewski lowered a camera concealed in a bucket through the rooftop hole he had been told to repair, and a Greek Jew named Alex—no more is known of his identity—then managed to expose at least the four frames that made it into the hands of the Polish Resistance, smuggled from the camp in a tube of toothpaste. Alex took two frames of gassing victims awaiting immolation on a pyre, “when the crematorium could not manage to burn all the bodies,” as political prisoners Józef Cyrankiewicz and Stanisław Klodziński explained in a note that accompanied the smuggled film.<sup>8</sup> To make these initial photographs, Alex must have uncovered his secret camera from within what Didi-Huberman calls the “dark room” of the gas chamber itself, protected (if marginally) by “[t]he slant and the darkness in which he stands.”<sup>9</sup> Exiting the building, he then hastily snapped two pictures of female inmates at “one of the places in the forest where people undress before ‘showering’—as they were told—and then go to the gas chambers,” again according to the accompanying note. To process these negatives, and to transfer them for safekeeping, involved successive burials, unearthings, and reprintings; the original celluloid frames and any first prints made from them were soon lost.

In a particularly brilliant move, Didi-Huberman gives close attention to the four images in two different registers. The first, operative in the book’s opening pages, is that of the detective or sleuth. Clues of smoke, bodily slant, and dress or nakedness allow Didi-Huberman to describe the path taken by Alex on his brief photographic mission, and to corroborate the account of his results given by

8. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (2003; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.



*Above and right: Two of four pictures made in Auschwitz by a Greek Jew named Alex with David Szmulewski, Józef Cyrankiewicz, Stanisław Klodziński, and unidentified others, 1944.*

Cyrankiewicz and Klodziński.<sup>10</sup> The second register is more properly art historical, but it takes to task the many aestheticizing moves—cropping, reorienting, enlarging, even retouching—that have been performed on these negatives by well-meaning historians who, like Bois's overeager interpreters, alter and diminish the meanings of a work in their hasty handling of form:

[T]he original photographs had to be made *presentable*. In order to achieve this, there was no hesitation in transforming them completely. Thus, the first photograph in the outside sequence underwent a whole series of operations: the lower right-hand corner was enlarged and then made orthogonal, in such a way as to restore the normal conditions of a photo shot that did not in fact benefit from those conditions; then, it was reframed, cropped (the rest of the image discarded). Worse, the bodies and the faces of the two women in the foreground were touched up; a face was created, and the breasts were even lifted. This absurd doctoring . . . reveals an urgent desire to *give a face* to what in the image itself is no more than movement, blur, and event. . . . [T]he four photographs of the *Sonderkommando* have [also] often been transformed with a view to making them more *informative* than they were in their initial state. . . . In particular, we note that the images in the first sequence are regularly cropped. . . . [T]he cropping of these photographs [to remove the black margins] is a manipulation that is at the same time formal, historic, ethical, and ontological. The *mass of black* that surrounds the

10. Ibid., pp. 9–16.



sight of the cadavers and the pits, this mass where *nothing is visible*, gives in reality a *visual mark* that is just as valuable as all the rest of the exposed surface. That mass . . . is the space of the gas chamber: the *dark room* into which one had to retreat, to step back, in order to give light to the work of the *Sonderkommando* outside, above the pyres. That mass of black gives us the situation itself . . . the condition of existence of the photographs themselves.<sup>11</sup>

In light of Didi-Huberman's admirable, close consideration of the tactical and formal details in these photographs, it would be understandable to see my step-by-step reading of the *Prototype Works* by Lewis Baltz as mere travesty. Yet the incompatibility of these two methodologically similar readings, and even the undercutting of one topic by another using comparable analytical methods, seems eminently valuable, and it is ultimately what causes any field to cohere as a discipline. Photography may be a particularly disparate field of production and inquiry. If a collection of examples like those presented here is to be managed in some way beyond ontological claims to medium, indexicality, image world, or other totalizing terms, then many more such readings need to be produced, and for a greater rather than more limited variety of image types. Curatorial photography departments and university courses in photography should become models of diversity and porosity rather than guardians of a unified or unique domain. To the extent that photography is treated as art, furthermore, it must be proven to have qualities that modify our understanding of art in general.

To do that will, in my view, require an attention to form in the historically conditioned, materialist way that Bois elaborated in *Painting as Model*. It may well be that the models generated by different photographs cannot be contained in a history of art, which could precisely be their advantage, for while I consider Didi-Huberman's attention to the images from Auschwitz to be a part of art history, I do not think this places the images themselves in a history of art. They can, however, form part of an open-ended history of photography, far more readily than oil paintings from the concentration camps could be brought into a history of painting.

Discontinuity and difference need to be argued for, they need to be put on display, for they break the homogenization of a totalized contemporary-art system and remind us that the field of art, if it is to be inclusive, must be grounded in incompatibilities—an insight that stands opposed to the organization of *Painting as Model* as a sequence of interlocking studies of master creators. A well-cultivated, deliberately heterodox range of subjects, periods, and analytical approaches may be taken to model the productive disunity that constitutes photography as a field of inquiry. Shared attentiveness to ideas through form, meanwhile, can demonstrate a common basis for recognizing the authority that photography studies carry in and as a history of art.

11. Ibid., pp. 34–36.