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The Principles of American Photorealism: From Photographs to Paintings

Abstract

American photorealism was an art movement born in the late 1960s in the USA, from where it travelled to the European continent over the following decades. Drawing inspiration from pop-art iconography, it resolutely stood in opposition to abstract expressionism, conceptualism and minimalism. Its uniqueness was rooted in a new medium, which it began to employ in the creation of its paintings: photography, which in this way established new relationships with painting and brought several crucial issues for the theory of art of the period to deal with. This study focuses on two of them: the issue of the truth of the photographic medium and the reproducibility of a work of photorealism.

Key words

Linda Nochlin. Painting.
Photography. Photorealism.

Introduction

In her studies, written in the 1960s and 1970s, the American theorist and art historian Linda Nochlin systematically dealt with the issue of realist depiction in art and its place in the complicated discourse of the history of art¹. In addition to an in-depth analysis of the realist art of the 19th century, which she considered to be represented by the work of Gustave Courbet, it was realist depiction in the so-called post-postmodern period that she particularly focused on². She considered the work of Maurice Denis and the Les Nabis movement to be a breakthrough style in art, the moment when the realist movement had begun to lose its footing and had gradually been replaced by purer, optically oriented abstract forms. It was around 1880, after Denis had declared that a painting is above all an area covered in

¹ See: NOCHLIN, L.: *Style and Civilization: Realism*. Pennsylvania : Penguin Adult, 1971.

² See: NOCHLIN, L.: *Style and Civilization: Realism*. Pennsylvania : Penguin Adult, 1971.

blotches of paint grouped according to a certain order, and only then is it a military horse, a female nude, or another scene, that realism had begun to lose its existing position among artistic discourses. However, after a very strong avant-garde phase, in which abstraction had acquired a dominant position, along with various experiments in artistic language, sporadic efforts for a return of realism began to appear: whether in the form of the German Neue Sachlichkeit movement, in the works of the French artist Balthus, in the English artistic group the Euston Road School or in American realism and regionalism. We could even provide socialist realism as an example; it dominated in the European communist countries as the only acceptable substitute for abstract art. But no single movement or artistic effort enjoyed such a degree of artistic power as to make a return of realism possible. Only when pop art appeared on the American scene in the late 1960s, and together with it photorealism and hyperrealism, did there occur a new, in this case real appeal for the return of the real. In the opinion of the contemporary American art theoretician Hal Foster, the art that originated after 1960 began to evolve along two lines. One line was still directed towards the rejection of realism and its most important expressions were conceptualism and minimalism. On the contrary, the other line revived the realist principle in the form of the so-called

“return to the real”³. Foster mainly finds it in pop art, photorealism and hyperrealism. This revived form of realism, however, did not represent a return to the old concept of realism, because it no longer drew its chief impulse from an external reality, but from innovative photography, which became the first representation of a real section of the world.

Photography – Primary Impulse for Photorealism

As a new American art movement, photorealism originally evolved in the late 1960s from pop art and from the medium of photography that pop artists were already making great use of in their art⁴. But it was not just pop artists who put the photograph on a new artistic pedestal. It was also used by conceptualists, who used photography to record the progress of artistic events: happenings and performances. It was very common for documentary photographs to provide the only preserved testimony that something had happened. Photography thus entered postmodern art in a very resolute way and, for a long time, its place among artistic media was indisputable. Photorealists were artists for whom the photograph became their primary impulse in the subsequent realisation in

paint. They perceived photography as a tool capable of quickly and accurately recording the immediate reality, which the photorealists subsequently “repainted” onto a canvas⁵. Photorealism evolved from pop art in an effort to posit a clear opposition to abstract expressionism and all the minimalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the American movements. And although the American artistic scene could not boast a strong realist background, which was perhaps why photorealists preferred to link up with the pop-art tradition rather than the realist tradition, this new movement nonetheless resonated strongly among artists and artistic institutions. In common with pop art it had a particular preference for the medium of photography, which had established itself so firmly, from the beginning of the 20th century, that by the 1960s it was already considered a phenomenon that might replace the, so far, indisputable position of paintings. But whereas pop artists approached photographic images in a rather critical way in terms of their commercial use, photorealists increased their value, making them a means to the creation of a new painting⁶.

⁵ MEISEL, K. L.: *Oral history interview with Louis K. Meisel*. [online]. [2021-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-louis-k-meisel-15673>>.

⁶ FOSTER, H.: *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. London : The Mit Press Cambridge, 1996, pp. 127-144.

³ FOSTER, H.: *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. London : The Mit Press Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1-34.

⁴ See: MEISEL, K. L.: *Photo-Realism*. New York : Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980.

Two exhibitions held in New York in the late 1960s affected the birth of American photorealism. They both concentrated on and exhibited works by photorealists, but also neorealists, i. e. two completely different approaches to artistic creation. But in the late 1960s there was not yet a precise clarification of the specification. That only began to emerge on the basis of these exhibitions, through the subsequent reactions of art theoreticians and philosophers. The first exhibition was organised in 1968 by Linda Nochlin at Vassar College in New York, it introduced young artists who focused on realist figurative creation. The exhibition, which she named characteristically *Realism Now*, mapped the very current, just emerging interest in realist painting, but working with the medium of photography rather than continuing the traditional way of working. Linda Nochlin's exhibition is thus considered to have been the first exhibition to present the creations of the emerging generation of young figurative artists. In the introduction to her catalogue text the curator already asked the question of how this new generation of realist artists could become established in the art of the mid-20th century, in which a completely different – minimalist – trend was dominant and whether it made any sense to speak about new realism in the 20th century. Her response was unequivocal:

“If pop drove the opening wedge into the entrenched view of modernism as a necessary and contiguous progression starting

with Paul Cezanne and ending with Frank Stella, then the new realism has exploded the modernist myth entirely. Despite the patronising attempts of some critics to consign the new realism to the peripheries of the contemporary art world, (...) the new realism, far from being an aberration or a throwback in contemporary art, is a major innovating impulse. Its precise quality of novelty, it would seem to me, lies more in its connexion with photography, with new directions in that most contemporary of all media, the film, or even with the advanced novel, than in its relation to traditional realist painting”⁷.

The second exhibition named *22 Realists* was held in The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1970. Again the exhibition introduced artists who continued to work in the field of realist figurative art, along with the future photorealists: Chuck Close, Malcolm Morley, Robert Bechtle, Audrey Flack and Richard Estes. The curator of the concept of the exhibition and the author of the catalogue text was James Monte, who divided the exhibiting artists into two basic groups: those who wanted to return to the pre-modernism period with their work, that is to traditional realist forms, and those whom Monte called artists of post-pop realism (Monte, 1970, 9–10), that is the future photorealists. He already

⁷ NOCHLIN, L.: *Realism Now*. [online]. [2021-02-18]. Available at: <https://art-squeek.angelfire.com/ah/realism-now.html>.

perceived their work in connection with the medium of photography. That is also the fundamental difference in the approach to painting between the two groups. In the words of James Monte: *“The complexity of modern urban visual phenomena does lend itself to the self-absorbed contemplation of an artist before his subject with pencil and paper. The camera is a useful tool in recording visual phenomena under trying circumstances”⁸*.

The author of the term photorealism, Louis K. Meisel, spoke about the importance of the photographic medium to the existence of photorealist paintings as early as 1969. He had dealt intensively with the new artistic method of the creation of paintings from photographs from the early 1960s. On the basis of a request from Stuart M. Speiser, who ordered a huge collection of photorealist works, Meisel created a five-point definition of photorealism: 1. The Photo-Realist uses the camera and photograph to gather information; 2. The Photo-Realist uses a mechanical or semi-mechanical means to transfer the information to the canvas; 3. The Photo-Realist must have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic; 4. The artist must have exhibited work as a Photo-Realist by 1972 to be considered as one of the central Photo-Realists; 5. The artist must have devoted at

⁸ MONTE, J. (ed.): *22 Realists*. New York : Whitney Museum of Modern Art of America, 1970, p. 12.

least five years to the development and exhibition of Photo-Realist work⁹.

The photograph thus becomes the primary representation of the reality. The camera gathers information about the world, documenting it. The photorealist painter then transfers the recorded moment onto the canvas in such manner that the resultant painting appears to be a photograph. The photograph becomes an indispensable part of a traditional medium – painting. The process followed to create a photorealist work is clearly defined: the author uses an analogue camera to record a particular moment of reality on a 35 mm colour film. The topics that interested the early photorealists were very ordinary, reflecting everyday reality: from industrial objects such as automobiles and motorcycles, through simple urban life, to the depiction of human faces. They were the icons of mass and consumerist society supplemented with the effect of lustre and glamour. After developing the photograph, usually as a photographic positive, the photographic image was transferred onto the canvas. Here the artists used a traditional grid technique¹⁰. The result is so veristic that the

⁹ MEISEL, K. L.: *Photo-Realism*. New York : Harry N. Abrams, 1980, pp. 12-14.

¹⁰ The painting canvas is divided using a geometric grid. This system enables a more detailed and precise depiction of even the smallest details. It is a system similar to the one used when studying pixels in a digital photograph, which is capable of providing a high resolution. This procedure was employed by, for example, Chuck Close in his portraits.

viewer gets the impression that they are, again, looking at a photograph rather than a painting.

Although a photorealist painting is easily recognisable and thematically well defined, its relationship to reality is completely different from that of realist pictures. Whereas the realist painter draws their impulses from the direct observation of reality, photorealists make no secret of basing their work on a photograph. They do not camouflage or falsify the presence of the photograph in the creative process. They openly identify with it.

The Question of the Truth of the Photographic Medium

From the moment of its establishment among other visual media, photography had been connected with realism, that is with an exact record of reality. An opinion prevailed that pictures created either by an analogue camera are more objective than a painted picture, because their existence does not depend on the skill of a person but on technology. But it is mainly the relationship of the subjective and objective aspects of the photographic medium that became the key issue of the theories of photography that were born after 1960, that is after the period of the domestication of photorealism and subsequently its European variant, hyperrealism, among other artistic directions.

One was from the French theoretician Roland Barthes, who in his, now famous, book *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*

*(Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography)*¹¹ approached photography and the myths surrounding it in a new way¹². The myth particularly concerns the issue of the truthfulness of photographs. Without deeper consideration a photograph draws us to believe that it is a faithful reflection of reality. It is some kind of evidential material which we have no need to question, because we approach it as a reproduction of that what was seen. A photograph appears to be the truth. But in Barthes' opinion the crucial question that came with photography was not just that of the truth but also the question of the relationship of *here and now*. In its essence, a realist painting is capable of pretending (imitating) that a reality truly exists without it working with tangible facts providing evidence of the truthfulness of this imitation. Although the language of a realist painting works with elements that refer to reality, these are chimeras rather than objective evidence. In the case of photography the situation is different. We cannot ever deny that what is depicted truly existed and that the photographer was at the particular place at the particular time¹³. It is a specific property of the photograph, which distinguishes it from a

¹¹ See: BARTHES, R.: *Světla komora. Vysvětlivky k fotografii*. Bratislava : Archa, 1994.

¹² STURKEN, M., CARTWRIGHT, L.: *Studia vizuální kultury*. Prague : Portál, 2009, p. 26.

¹³ BARTHES, R.: *Světla komora. Vysvětlivky k fotografii*. Bratislava : Archa, 1994, p. 69.

painting or drawing. The medium of photography is proof that “something was here”, “something happened” and “somebody” was truly present to see it. This proof is based on empirical experience. It may seem that a photograph is truly a bearer of the truth, and to speak about the myth of photography therefore makes no sense. Roland Barthes, however, brings forward other arguments that question this unequivocal belief. In his opinion it is necessary to realise that the previous justifications for the existence of photographic truth are concerned, above all, with spatial proof and not temporal proof. A photographic image is a copy of a past reality, not a current reality. With a photograph we always enter one particular temporal dimension. It is not a means that can connect all possible temporal dimensions. It is a tool that numbs the past reality for the sake of the present reality. For Barthes photography becomes a new form of hallucination, because it is untrue in terms of perception, but true in terms of time¹⁴. Photography, so to speak, freezes a given space and time in a single moment. And although it is already clear to us that there is no need to doubt the truthfulness of the space and the time, what we still doubt is the richness of the experience. That which we have witnessed, our memories and experiences linked to a real event are compressed into a photographic

image by means of photography. It may evoke in us a memory or a particular memory trace, but it will always point to a certain form of mortality, to the moment when time stopped. Therefore the essence of a photograph is a paradox: on one hand it is a documentary record of what happened at a particular time and place. In this sense the photograph is factual, but it is also emotive in that it evokes memories of experienced events. It thus becomes a certain form of memory trace.

Another line of consideration suggested by Roland Barthes is the very concept of myth¹⁵. It is a hidden set of rules and connotations whose meanings derive from a particular social group, but may have an all-society influence on the whole culture, because: “Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things. Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech”¹⁶.

¹⁵ See: BARTHES, R.: *Mytologie*. Prague : Dokořán, 2004a.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 108.

We could apply this line of consideration to the thematic selection of photographs made by the photorealists themselves. Their selection not only shaped the ideas and expectations of a particular generation of people living in the 1960s and 1970s but also our ideas about that period. They created a certain form of cultural myth that characterised the social-cultural climate of that period in the USA. The topics which interested early photorealists were simple based on common observations of life: in *McDonalds Pickup* (1970), Ralph Goings (1928–2016) depicted the icon of American fast food – a McDonald’s – with an American flag. Thanks to photography these icons of American life may be depicted so realistically that every detail acquires its own important place in the space of the painting. Richard Estes (1932) in his *Supreme Hardware Store* (1974) recorded a city deserted by humans but crammed full of consumerism shrouded in the reflective signs of various shopping chains. The shops invite all potential customers to enter their premises. Estes’ craftsmanship reveals the cultural character of the American big city focused, again, on a consumerist lifestyle. A similar idea was elaborated by Duane Hanson (1925–1996) in the sculpture *Woman Eating* (1971). The life-size sculpture depicts a sitting female figure, dressed in simple clothes, surrounded by shopping bags. The clearly overweight woman is sitting at a small table consuming fast food. His sculpture does not merely refer to the consumerist lifestyle but also sends a social message that

expresses feelings of resignation, internal emptiness and loneliness. These examples of photorealist works are based on photographs that mapped the social and cultural life of an American person living in a big city, but with an internal emptiness and lack of freedom: influenced by consumerism, advertising and icons of American life such as McDonald’s or eye-catching branding. The social moments recorded by the camera not only contribute to the creation of the cultural myth of the particular time but also to shaping our knowledge, which we form on the basis of these visual memory traces. A different form of cultural mythology was uncovered by the photorealist works of the American photorealist Audrey L. Flack (1931), who focused her attention on objects of everyday consumption from a typical household (*Banana Split Sundae, 1981*) and, especially on typically feminine objects used to emphasise physical beauty: lipsticks, perfume bottles, necklaces, rings ... (*Chanel, 1974*) Her look that focused on the female world stands in great opposition to the strong masculine stream which was present in American photorealism in the dominance of such topics as commercials, consumerism, motorcycles and cars. Flack’s visually very distinctive still life works, that approximate to the kitsch, uncovered new topics and focused attention on the female world. Her paintings formed new cultural myths talking about the female narrative and crucial feminist strategies.

The early American photorealism strictly focused on the everyday life of the average American may be interpreted in the context of Barthes’ mythology. By using a connotative meaning which links to the photograph we may arrive at the denotative, literal meaning. In his study *The Rhetoric of the Image*¹⁷, in which he deals with images in advertising, Roland Barthes analyses this relationship through a simple example: a French advertisement for Italian pasta and pasta sauces does not merely present food products but mainly presents the spirit of Italian culture. It creates a certain form of myth which is linked to this culture. The same is true for photorealist works which reflect everyday reality through a photograph. It is not only a record of the visible form of the American way of life in the 1960s but also a recreation of the myth of American culture of the particular period.

The Issue of the Reproducibility of Photorealist Works

Another crucial topic which resonated highly intensely with the early photorealists was the portrayal of famous or unknown people, as well as the creation of their own self-portraits. The most important artist to make portraits and self-portraits was Chuck Close (1940). His portrait work appeared as early as the late 1960s and his interest in

¹⁷ BARTHES, R.: *Rétorika obrazu*. In CÍSAŘ, K. (eds.): *Co je fotografie?*. Prague : Herrmann&synové, 2004b, pp. 51–61.

this genre has not yet ceased. His, at that time non-traditional, manner of depiction quickly attracted artistic, but also critical, recognition despite him drawing thematically more distant from other photorealists. His detailed, very realist paintings of human faces diverted attention from the cultural and social problems of contemporary Americans and began to point to the internal concerns of a person who is mostly dealing with the existential questions of their own identity. In order to emphasise their importance and extent, in the 60s and 70s he created large-scale portraits based on photographs, transferring them onto large canvases using a grid. He worked slowly, copying the photographic image square by square. He gave life to the portrait either by using black-and-white or colourful hues. When selecting the person he wanted to portray he was conservative, only choosing people he either knew well or had shared and an intense experience with. Most often they were family members or close friends. Unlike, for example, Andy Warhol, who painted famous pop stars, Close was not interested in the social position of the people he portrayed. What interested him was the power of their expression and inner radiance. The people he portrayed do not express any strong emotions, or even evoke them in the viewer. Their expression is generalising, general and objective at the same time. The human face changes into a furrowed landscape, created out of small micro-particles. A wrinkle, a pore, a hair, the skin are the micro-worlds which interest

Close which he brings to the fore and promotes to the level of an independently existing reality. In Close's perception, the human face is an unexplored land. The viewer, when they look at such a large canvasses, has two options: either to step back from the painting and perceive the whole of the human face, or draw close and gradually discover the unknown corners of the face. This is also apparent in his self-portrait from 1967, which he aptly named *Big Self-Portrait*, which belongs to a series of black-and-white paintings. He transferred the expression of his own face onto the large canvas from a photograph by means of a grid. Without any embellishment he shows all the imperfections of his own face in a most callous way with his face several times larger than a photograph or a real image. In his portraits Close postulated another theoretical problem which started to be linked with the art of photorealism. It was the issue of the reproducibility of the artistic work. He was of the opinion that it is impossible to reproduce a photorealist portrait and preserve its essence and concept. This was his response to the so-called "reproduction boom", that is the theory that deals with the ontological essence of reproduction, postulated by Walter Benjamin¹⁸.

Close questioned the mutual replaceability of the reproduction and the original, stating that the process of the viewing of portraits on large-size canvases cannot be transferred into a small scale reproduction. The viewer can only understand the whole depth and essence of the piece when standing in front of the original and looking close up at every single detail, at each micro-particle of the face. In that moment the viewer is travelling across the image of the human face and independently discovering the hyperrealities. Reproduction does not offer such an experience. The viewer can only receive the tangible visual hyperreal information from the original. Close thus again emphasises the analogy between looking at a painting of a human face and the discovery of an unknown landscape. In a certain sense this is not only an internal pilgrimage but also the physical experience of such a journey.

Conclusion

American photorealism brought fundamental changes to both art and art theory. It brought a change to the artistic paradigm, supplanting the trend of abstraction, conceptualism and minimalism which had lasted for several decades. Although this form of the return to the real did not link with the previous realist trends, they nevertheless had something in common due to their link with the real. But whereas the previous realist trends were based on an immediate depiction of the real original, photorealism employed a step between reality and the painting - a photograph. It changed the view of art and artistic media in a radical way. Photography thus became a medium that was equal to the traditional visual media. At the same time, however, it brought a necessity to re-evaluate its place in the process of the creation of an artistic work, and many art theoreticians of art reflected on this: Roland Barthes, Hal Foster, an older study by Walter Benjamin, which acquired new meanings in the 1960s.

Thanks to the great revolution it brought to art, American photorealism is considered to have been one of the most important trends in American postmodernism. Its significance in the world of art is testified to by the fact that it still has a great following among artists, and the art audience of all the continents of the world.

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¹⁸ BENJAMIN, W.: *Umelecké dielo v epoche svojej technickej reprodukovateľnosti*. In BENJAMIN, W.: *Iluminácie*. Bratislava : Kalligram, 1999, pp. 197-198.