

A photograph of a beach with a blue and white patterned object on the sand. The top half of the image shows the ocean under a pale sky. The bottom half shows a wide expanse of brown pebbles. In the center of the pebbles, there is a small, flat, blue and white patterned object, possibly a piece of fabric or a small sculpture.

STILL ON THE BEACH

a site-specific installation
by Jane Watt

Still on the Beach is part of Caroline Wiseman's year-long programme,
Duchamp 100 Years, at Aldeburgh Beach Lookout

22-23 July 2017

www.aldeburghbeachlookout.co.uk

See more of Jane Watt's work at www.janewattprojects.com

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Still on the Beach was made with the participation of Aldeburgh Beach-goers Rab Boll, Jim Boll, Tom Boll, Gillian Chaplin, Felicity Faulkner, Romily Moore, Milo Moore, Mireille Ribiere and Caroline Wiseman.

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STILL ON THE BEACH

A year after Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Fountain* was exhibited, Duchamp produced his last painting on canvas: *Tu m'* (1918). His preoccupation with the readymade continues across the 10ft wide painting. However, this time, the presence of the objects is only suggested through cast shadows.

Duchamp's friend and collaborator, the photographer Man Ray, continued to experiment with photographic traces of everyday objects through the 'rayograph', or photogram. Theorist Rosalind E. Krauss remarks on this process: "The image created in this way is of the ghostly traces of departed objects; they look like footprints in sand, or marks that have been left in dust".



During high summer daylight hours at Aldeburgh Beach Look Out, artist Jane Watt uses an early photographic process, the cyanotype, to capture moments of stillness on Aldeburgh Beach. Jane uses this camera-less process that utilises shadows to create striking blue and white life-size photogram images of bodies on fabric that lie across the shingle. The result is a glimpse, or a suggestion of form: a trace.

EXPANDING PHOTOGRAPHY: REFLECTIONS ON KRAUSS' 'NOTES ON THE INDEX'

Can one imagine the landscape, a beach, say, as a photograph? If the question is not immediately dismissed as merely rhetorical, one might respond that this is precisely what photographers do when they take landscape as a pictorial subject. They might scout for the appropriate location, carefully survey the scene, and ultimately position their camera having foreseen within the mind's eye the photographic transformation of landscape into picture. All this is true, but in posing the question I had something far more speculative in mind.

In 1977, the important American art critic Rosalind Krauss published a two-part essay, titled 'Notes on the Index', that fundamentally consolidated her break from Clement Greenberg's influential emphasis upon medium specificity—a stance taken by the older critic at the end of the 1930s that had come to appear irreducibly doctrinal by the beginning of the 1970s, as well as utterly removed from cutting-edge practices that issued from Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Previously one of Greenberg's acolytes, Krauss' interest in phenomenology and structuralism, alongside her strong engagement with artists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd, had compelled her to reject Greenberg's understanding of modernism. Such a rejection was publicly announced in her 1972 essay 'A View of Modernism' published in *Artforum*; buttressed by Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, she newly perceived modernism as a coherent 'paradigm' and, as with Kuhn's theories, that paradigm will deteriorate when anomalous elements begin to emerge within and against it, thereby necessitating a shift towards a whole new paradigm.

Although she would not utilize the term until 1979 (so far as I am aware), by conceiving modernism as a paradigm no longer suitable to current artistic realities in 'A View of Modernism' meant that Krauss was beginning to

envisage a new paradigm—*postmodernism*. ‘Notes on the Index’ represents an attempt to sketch the defining characteristics of the new paradigm, of new art practices, without recourse to a developed theory of postmodernism insofar as that was not yet available to her. If the artworld of the mid-1970s struck many observers as confusedly pluralistic and thus problematically indefinable, for Krauss such a plethora of activity was connected through an underlying principle: the *index*. She took the concept from the semiotic theory of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Seeking to unpack the logical rudiments of communication, Peirce developed a typology of *signs* that differed according to how representations conjoin with their objects or meanings. *Icons* depend on *resemblance* to its object (imagine an ‘accurately’ painted portrait of someone) and *symbols* relate to their objects by dint of *convention* (imagine, then, an abstract black square functioning by shared public consent as a portrait of someone). Indexes, the last of this particular triad within Peirce’s semiotic categories, connect sign and object through causality; here we might think of smoke on the horizon being an indexical sign of fire, footprints in the snow as an indexical sign of someone (or something) having trodden that way earlier, etc. Photographs are often taken to be indexical signs, going beyond the order of iconicity by virtue of photons emanating from a physical object that are then exposed upon a light-sensitive surface. The ‘trust’ we ordinarily put into photographs—regardless of our knowledge that they *can* lie—is a corollary of this indexical status. If the thing was photographed, it *must* have been there and *caused* the photograph to look how it does. As has been pointed out by Krauss and Margaret Iversen, photograms and cyanotypes, which are typically produced from direct physical contact between light-sensitive surface and object, especially exemplify the indexical condition of photography as such.

Given the explicit theme of Krauss’ essay is to outline how the index serves as the unitary principle for the apparently heterogeneous field of 1970s art, it comes as some initial surprise that a large share of the essay’s first part is given over to the figure of Marcel Duchamp. In his oeuvre Krauss sees

numerable hints of an extended fascination with indexical signs. The most obvious case being *Tu m'*, a panoramic painting of 1918 that depicts several of Duchamp's work projected as shadows upon the canvas amongst other things. Shadows are in themselves indexical signs caused by the obstruction of a light source, and further highlighting the theme is the appearance of a hand, index finger pointing, just off the canvas's centre. Another instance is Duchamp's 1959 plaster cast and drawing *With My Tongue in My Cheek*; once again, the actual form of plaster moulds being caused by the preceding object.

Yet Duchamp has another major role to play in the essay, namely to disrupt the logic of the index and operate as a way of attacking Greenbergian medium specificity. The crucial test case is his 'definitively unfinished' *The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923; also referred to as *The Large Glass*). This upright-standing glass panel construction demarcated horizontally into two 'domains' (that of the bride and of the bachelors) remains one of the most conceptually complex of Duchamp's works; the intellectual difficulty it posed resulted in Duchamp assembling a series of notes that could be perused whilst looking at the work. The notes in themselves remain decidedly obscure, but, as Krauss remarks, a certain metaphoric play of photographic language makes itself present through fragments like 'We shall determine the conditions of [the] best exposure of the extra-rapid State of Rest [of the extra-raid exposure . . .]' Such a statement also corresponds with Duchamp's description of readymades as possessing a 'snapshot effect'.

In reading Duchamp's words, Krauss follows him in thinking of *The Large Glass* as a kind of photograph. While this claim might seem odd, it is justified by two lines of argument. Firstly, several of the compositional features of *The Large Glass* are determined by chance operations that are recorded and then fixed to its glass surface; in that case, the work importantly bears indexical traces of Duchamp's procedures in a manner that is akin to photographic

documentation. Secondly, Krauss concurs with both Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes in contending that photographic images are inherently empty or ambiguous when it comes to meaning, and therefore require a supplementary textual element—captions, for example—to fix a determinate signified to the work; in that regard, meaning is not intrinsic to photographs, rather photographs are *bearers* of meaning through the imposition of a text in much the way that *The Large Glass* requires Duchamp's notes in order to 'decode' it.

The deep linkage between indexes and photographs would seem to legitimize further the connections Krauss draws in thinking of *The Large Glass* as a 'kind of photograph'. But as one reads through both parts of 'Notes on the Index' the sense incrementally grows that it is the logic of photography acting as the unifying anchor for the pluralistic 1970s artworld rather than the index per se. Or to put the matter another way, Krauss is seemingly less concerned with photographs as being particularly emblematic instances of indexical signs than she is with the semiotic category of the index being underwritten by the medium of photography. The foremost consequence of this reversal is that it is photography as a logical operation, a way of thinking, rather than as a technology that determines and structures a wide range of artistic practices. And just as she suggests with Duchamp's *The Large Glass*, Krauss implicitly invites the reader to construe the works discussed in the second part of her essay—for example, Gordon Matta-Clark's architectural 'cuts' or Lucio Pozzi's abstract paintings—as photographs despite the literal non-presence of photographic technologies (cameras, light-sensitive film or paper, lenses, etc.). Thus she speaks in the second part of the essay of 'a jettisoning of convention, or more precisely the conversion of the pictorial and sculptural codes into that of the photographic message without a code'.

In the short run, Krauss considered the argument she built as demonstrating that the advanced art of the 1970s refused modernism's orientation towards

medium specificity; thus what would be needed was a new set of theoretical coordinates to map the new paradigm. Two years later, starting from her essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', she began to place the new work she was engaging under the rubric of postmodernism, and her famous diagram of 'the expanded field' was a means for picturing how art mediums (sculpture, for instance) were no longer determined by autonomous elements specific and integral to themselves (*a la* modernist medium specificity) but instead are dialectically structured by elements outside of themselves whilst also being capable of structuring those outside elements in some measure. If Krauss in the last decade-and-a-half has significantly revised this theoretical stance so that the medium's specificity is now a matter of the contingent field it is always already part of, then it should be clear how important the notion of the index aligned with the work of Duchamp has been for reaching that point. By tackling the notion of index, and setting it in motion with Duchamp's enormously important reconceptualization of art, Krauss has managed to unlock a more rigorous comprehension of what constitutes an art medium.

And so we return to the landscape, on Aldeburgh beach. Jane Watt is using the beach not so much as an outdoor exhibition or performance space, as a place where art happens; instead, the logic of the index-photograph is playing a determinate role. Daylight, wind, people—all the contingences of the landscape are being recorded. It is not just the cyanotypes that count here; what is happening outside of the Lookout is being itself answerable to the photographic condition. The landscape itself, in its way, is being transformed into a photograph of some kind.

Matthew Bowman

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