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**Counting the Teeth:
Photography for Philosophers**

by A. D. Coleman

I lay no claim to the status of philosopher. I function professionally on a much less lofty and far more mundane plane, working primarily as a critic, historian, and (lately) curator of photography, which puts me in a territory triangulated roughly by media studies, visual culture, and art history. This leads me at times to address theoretical issues related to photography.

That I don't consider myself a philosopher doesn't mean that I don't read philosophy, both for my own enrichment and because some of the ideas therein deepen my understanding of the evolution of photography. Thomas Kuhn's analysis of the growth of knowledge in the physical sciences, and his concepts of the paradigm and the paradigm shift, pertain usefully to any discipline (even though Kuhn has disavowed responsibility for the application of his ideas to any field beyond the hard sciences). Karl Popper's discussion of "objective knowledge" — by which he means *objectified* knowledge, knowledge encoded in durable, transmissible physical forms — illuminates the cultural function of the photograph as a communicative artifact.

For obvious reasons, I pay special attention to philosophical writings directly related to my own field. So I'm familiar with pre-photographic commentaries from philosophers on imagery and visual perception going back to the Chinese philosopher Mo Ti's observations on the camera obscura from the 5th century BCE, as well as the contemporary work of Nelson Goodman and W. J. T. Mitchell, not to mention Richard Rorty's meditation on photography. Of course Croce referred to photography intriguingly, albeit briefly, in his *Aesthetic*, as did Peirce and Bergson around the same

time. Locke, well before them, offered a discourse on the camera obscura. All food for thought, surely.¹

Because I have taught surveys of photography criticism, in which I attempt to lay out the full spectrum of thinking about the medium, I've spent time with the 20th-century contributions of André Bazin, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Krakauer, Stanley Cavell, and Vilém Flusser — and, it should go without saying, with the pertinent work of Barthes, and other contemporaries (as much of it as I can find in English and the several other languages that I read).²

Both out of interest and as a professional necessity I engage with my colleagues in criticism, of course — especially those who write about photography and/or "photo-based art" by "artists using photography." Since such activity has virtually taken over the contemporary art world, most art critics nowadays have to grapple with photography willy-nilly, and their visible discomfort with it much resembles that of philosophers forced to the same challenge. For example, the U.S. philosopher Arthur C. Danto has written periodically on photography in his role as a critic of contemporary art (I'm not sure he's addressed the medium formally in his role as philosopher). Though I respect his insights into other forms of art, Danto turns inexplicably simplistic and literal-minded whenever he discusses photography, apparently unable to address anything save the literal subject matter of the photographs in question — roughly equivalent to assessing a Cézanne still life on the basis of your attitudes toward fruit.

So I come to the project of others' philosophizing about photography with an outsider's perspective and a critic's predilection: that is, with the goal of putting that project in crisis, by finding ways to perturb the philosophers' frequently ill-informed assumptions and mindless consensus. In short, I'm inclined to make trouble, and I hope

¹ In fact, in an ongoing project of mine, a cultural history of the pre-photographic impact of the lens as a technology, I examine the influence of the lens on philosophy prior to the invention of photography. See "Lentil Soup: A Meditation on Lens Culture," *Impact of Science on Society*, No. 142 (Fall 1986), pp. 213–22, reprinted in Coleman, *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media and Lens Culture* (University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 113–131; and "Rationalism and the Lens," *Impact of Science on Society*, No. 154/39:2 (1989), pp. 101–12.

² To my surprise, with the exception of predictably frequent citation of the semiologists, structuralists, and postmodernists, I find few of the figures I've just cited even referenced in what many of my colleagues refer to as "the discourse." I must assume they've all been discredited without my becoming aware of it.

to achieve that here.

In reading philosophy, I consider it always useful to keep in mind that Aristotle's reasoning led him to conclude that adult women had fewer teeth than adult men, and that his hermeneutics never required him to test this hypothesis by looking into a human female's mouth and counting. I also think it helpful to ask myself the significant question articulated by the American pragmatist philosopher William James: What is the experiential life return of holding (and living by) this or that belief? And, like the U.S. poet William Carlos Williams, I find myself drawn to operate according to the proposition "No ideas but in things " — in other words, I choose to work under the assumption that, once I have enunciated my hypothesis, I'm obligated to look into a woman's mouth and count. With those three guideposts at hand, let me use this opportunity to sketch the following:

1. What I would hope to discover in either an individual or collective "philosophy of photography."

2. If we consider this set of essays now in your hands as a collectively generated scholarly dissertation on its chosen theme, "the weight of photography," what I would expect to find in an imaginary concluding section devoted to "questions meriting further study."

*

Appropriately or not, my expectations of a hermeneutically coherent "philosophy of photography" include the following:

- * I would require such a philosophy to begin by offering working definitions of the terms *photograph* (in both its noun and verb forms) and *photography*.

- * I would expect such a philosophy of photography to discriminate among and assess in turn different primary classes of photographs as objects. One such distinction would distinguish between the direct-positive image vs. the image made by the negative-positive process. A second would separate lens-derived imagery from such lensless forms as pinhole-camera images and photograms. Another would involve the differences between representational and non-representational but light-generated photographs (examples of the latter would include Frederick Sommer's prints from

smoke tracers caught on glass, or Lotte Jacobi's "photogenic drawings"). Yet another would distinguish between images like those just mentioned and images produced by such means as painting on photographic paper with developing chemicals or burying photographic paper in the earth, allowing heat and life forms and the elements and time to alter it, and developing the results. Any objective scientific analysis would classify all of the objects just listed as photographs. Yet they have radically different relationships to both reality and actuality. Since semiotics claims scientific (and not scientific) status for itself, it must acknowledge scientific evidence and incorporate it into its methodology, while at the same time engaging with these substantive differences among types of photographic objects.

* I would require a philosophy of photography to address the profound epistemological differences between a photograph made with a direct-positive process (e.g., daguerreotype, ambrotype, tintype, Polaroid) and one made via any of the negative-to-positive processes (e.g., calotype, platinum or silver-gelatin print), since the first kind constitutes an interpretation while the second constitutes an interpretation of an interpretation — surely a noteworthy distinction, from a philosophical standpoint.

* I would demand of a philosophy of photography that it recognize the profound implications of the different orders of knowledge embedded in the negative and any subsequent print positive, considering both the interpretive bias inherent in the act of negative exposure and development and the interpretive bias implicit in any positive derived therefrom. This would also require questioning the issue of the substrate in any negative or positive and its relation — neutral or interferential — to the superstrate.³

* Since there already exists an extensive body of research into what is called the "philosophy of science," it seems to me that anything aspiring to the status of philosophy while addressing a technology (such as photography) rooted in science and operating at least in part according to scientific principles has some obligation both to engage with the philosophy of science and to address itself to the scientific aspects of

³ Indeed, the negative — heretofore treated by historians, critics, photographers, and philosophers primarily as a mere necessary functional step toward the positive — constitutes an extremely fertile ground for investigation of the relationship of such a photograph to both fact and truth. I would expect philosophers to find it particularly attractive and rewarding in that regard; it surprises me that no philosopher has addressed this issue.

the medium of photography itself.

* This strikes me as particularly the case when the discipline that many contemporary philosophers of photography consider as their bedrock, semiotics, defines itself as a "science of signs."⁴ Laying claim to the status of a science carries with it a burden of proof — proof of acceptance of the rigors of scientific procedure. Thus I'd look to a philosophy of photography for evidence that those promulgating it (at least those who subscribe to a semiotic approach) have a clear understanding of the differences that scientists in all fields have established between hypothesis, theory, and law, and that they hold themselves rigorously accountable to those distinctions.⁵

* I assume any informed philosophy of photography would reject and actively contradict any assumption of the photograph as a neutral and uninflected object, understanding and positioning it instead as an artifact generated via a culturally loaded technology — in short, as an utterance of the individual who produced it, as a manifestation of that individual's particular culture, and as evidence of the culture(s) from which sprang both that that individual and the technology employed. Thus this philosophy would construe the photograph never as transcription but always as description, with bias inherent at and inevitable in each of the three levels just cited.⁶

* I would envisage such a philosophy as eager to engage with the various tendencies, morphological shifts, and formal movements in photography — such as (in the nineteenth century) the contest between realism and naturalism, and (in the twentieth) that between pictorialism and purism or straight photography — instead of restricting itself narrowly to the development of postmodernism from modernism. As each of these earlier phases and approaches has a different epistemological (and, in

⁴ This claim, famously, comes from the founder of semiotics, Roland Barthes himself. The "scientific" qualifications of postmodern theorists of course has come into question as a consequence of the Alan Sokal/*Social Text* scandal that erupted in 1996 and has continued since then. See Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), and Sokal's homepage, <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/>, for more on this matter. Perhaps significantly, I know of no teacher offering classes in the "theory of photography" who assigns Bricmont and Sokal as required reading.

⁵ One can find these differentiated clearly in W. I. B. Beveridge's classic text, *The Art of Scientific Investigation* (New York: The Modern Library, 1957). Based on Beveridge's definitions, it appears that most of those non-scientists who claim to be "doing theory" are in fact still at an earlier stage, that of "doing hypothesis." The latter, I must admit, does not sound nearly as impressive as the former.

⁶ For more on this, see my essay "The Image in Question: Further Notes on the Directorial Mode," in *Depth of Field*, pp. 56-57.

some cases, ontological) set of premises, the differences among them demand assessment.

* This means that I would expect any philosophy of photography to come to terms with the observations and insights and beliefs of the medium's practitioners, from Talbot to Nadar to Man Ray to Edward Weston to Diane Arbus to Hollis Frampton and on into the immediate present. Should a philosopher in considering photography not have to grapple, just for example, with the photographer and filmmaker Frampton's assertion in regard to photographic print-making that "to a mind committed to the paradoxical illusions of the photographic image, the least discernible modification (from a conventionalized norm) of contrast or tonality must be violently charged with significance, for it implies a changed view of the universe, and a suitably adjusted theory of knowledge"?⁷

* I find it noteworthy in this regard that the only photographer whose voice is heard at any length in the present collection is Lynne Cohen. Most photographers do not qualify as philosophers, though they certainly think, and in many cases read philosophy and derive understandings therefrom that they apply to their creative work. By the same token, most philosophers do not qualify as photographers, though they use their eyes to look at world and at photographs, and sometimes even make photographs themselves.⁸ While it may seem a bitter pill to swallow, philosophers need to consider the possibility that those who actually practice a given craft or discipline on a professional level may have understandings of and insights into it — including its philosophical ramifications — unavailable to the non-practitioner or the casual amateur.

⁷ Frampton, Hollis, "Meditations around Paul Strand," in *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video, Texts 1968-1980* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), p. 133. This text was originally published in 1972, on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition of Strand's work.

⁸ I include in this category the late Jean Baudrillard. That a philosopher makes snapshots, and even exhibits and publishes them, no more makes him a photographer than my writing down and publishing these thoughts makes me a philosopher. Notably, in an essay published in 1999, Baudrillard put forward a way of thinking about the photographic act that almost exactly paraphrases the approach proposed from the 1950s through the mid-1970s by the late photographer, teacher, editor, and curator Minor White in his workshops and tutorial writings. I assume that Baudrillard didn't know he was paraphrasing White almost word for word, since if he knew White's teachings I'm sure he'd have provided the obligatory footnote acknowledging his predecessor's thinking and teaching. See Jean Baudrillard, "La Photographie ou l'Écriture de la Lumière: Littéralité de l'Image," in *L'Échange Impossible (The Impossible Exchange)*. Paris: Galilée, 1999: pp. 175-84. An English translation thereof, "Photography, or The Writing Of Light" (translated by François Debrix) appears online at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard- photography-or-the-writing-of-light.html>.

* Which is to say that just as any self-respecting "philosophy of poetry" would have to contend with at least the variant poetics enunciated by literature's major schools, an authentic and thoroughly researched philosophy of photography would consider seriously and at length — rather than dismissively or derisively — the full range of beliefs and ideas actually held by experienced practitioners of that medium, as reflected in their published theories, credos, manifestos, critical and historical writings, and tutorial texts, as well as their ruminations in their journals and correspondence. The goal, logically, would be to extract any potentially valuable insights and concepts from those whose ideas are grounded in the actual full-time engagement with praxis.

* This implies, as I see it, the possible existence of something I call the hermeneutics of performance: those understandings of a medium that derive explicitly and exclusively from the feel of craft as absorbed by a medium's committed performers.⁹ It also implies — and I recognize the temerity in this proposition — that philosophers need to have an awareness of the actual issues of performance in any communicative or creative medium about which they opine, and that the glaring absence of such awareness inevitably weakens their work.¹⁰

* Beyond addressing those writings by performers in the medium, philosophers of photography — if they seek credibility amongst any but other philosophers — need to familiarize themselves with the writings of the medium's various historians, critics, theorists, and other close observers, past and present, on the assumption that, even when not officially certified by any academy as philosophers, those who pay close attention to a medium for decades may have something to offer the discourse. Aside from what are now a small handful of the mandatory "usual suspects" in academic-paper footnoting — Barthes, Burgin, Sekula, Berger, Sontag — it's rare to find such a commentator even referenced, much less addressed at length. One would not know from this that photography has a rich and diverse literature whose almost complete

⁹ To give just one example, every working photographer knows — and every tutorial text in photography teaches as one of its first lessons — that the photographer's raw material is not the stuff of the physical world but the light that reflects from it. Does this percept, with its obvious evocation of the parable of Plato's cave, not merit some philosophical acknowledgement and investigation?

¹⁰ I do not intend here to suggest that philosophers — or historians, or critics — of a medium have an obligation to acquire craft experience therein. A knowledgeable observer of film can identify a tracking shot, and distinguish a virtuoso and/or inventive one from a journeyman effort, without ever having

absence from "the discourse" suggests that it's considered entirely irrelevant to philosophical scholarship. If that's the case, then philosophers should have the courage and honesty to assert and defend that claim forthrightly. If this gap results from ignorance of that literature, then of course that too requires enunciation — and explanation.

Next, some questions that I would put to philosophers regarding their considerations to date of photography:

* I note with interest that, although you take great pains to define most of your terms, none of you feel any obligation to define the words *photograph*, *photography*, or *photographing*. The absence of any definition of your basic subjects seems to me fundamental, to the extent that it could be considered to impeach all your commentaries. Can you explain and justify this curious lacuna?

* I feel sure that, as trained and certified philosophers, you are not so naïve as to assume that there is only one kind of photographic object, one form of photography, and one way of photographing. Yet the tacit definitions of the above concepts commonly assumed in your texts apply only to lens-derived imagery of recognizable objects as represented in negatives encoding only a single short exposure and subsequently rendered uninterpretively¹¹ in a print embodying only that lone exposure (or a comparable direct positive, such as an SX-70 or daguerreotype).¹² Thus the notions you put forward, by and large, do not engage with or even pertain to much or all of the photographic work of Man Ray, Ellen Carey, Minor White, Michal Rovner, Andreas

handled a movie camera.

¹¹ By this I mean without any deliberate nuancing of the print intended to affect the viewer's understanding of the image. Any act of printing from a negative is by definition interpretive behavior.

¹² The term "slice" or "cut" is often applied to all photographs — you'll find it used thus generically in this volume — but I think it was originally intended to refer to such photographs as I've described in the previous sentence. I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with that metaphor, implying as it does a surgical exactitude, deliberation, and precision that might fit some picture-making approaches in photography (that of Edward Weston and the Group f/64, for example, or of the studio still-life photographer), but simply don't engage other forms of praxis: long time exposures, in-camera multiple exposures, photomontage, photocollage, images during the exposure of which the camera is moved deliberately, images not sharply focused, small-camera sociological observation, etc. I prefer nowadays to think of the photograph not as a *slice* or *cut* but as a *scoop*, with the imprecision and accidental gathering of unexpected (and even unwanted) elements implied by that coarser extractive tool. This concept also serves as a useful positioning device, allowing me to identify certain photographic and critical tendencies as *scoopophilic*, others as *scoopophobic*, and my own as *scooposkeptical*.

Gursky, Barbara Kruger, Marcel Breuer, Joel-Peter Witkin, and a host of other photographic picture-makers past and present. In effect, your thinking is almost entirely irrelevant to much historic praxis in photography and a wide spectrum of contemporary praxis — especially postmodernist praxis. I assume this is purposeful, not an oversight. If purposeful, should its premises not be articulated and explained?

* Perhaps this situation results in part from the fact that in his well-known 1961 essay "The Photographic Message" Roland Barthes addresses photography only in its photojournalistic and advertising usages. This makes Barthes's essay, and any discourse premised on it, roughly equivalent to one addressing written and spoken language that considers exclusively the language of advertising and mass-media reportage. But that's a radical delimitation, since of course there are dozens if not hundreds of other uses of the word. Similarly, there are many other kinds of photograph, many other forms of photography, and many other ways of photographing than those singled out by Barthes. Nonetheless, it becomes clear from countless citations in postmodernist texts on photography that this essay by Barthes functions as a cornerstone of postmodern discourse on photography in general. Do you not feel that the limited sphere of his concern — and of subsequent citations of his text — excludes a great deal of photographic activity worldwide? And should those who cite him not be obligated to point out the restrictions of his concept, i.e., that Barthes meant his ideas to apply only to advertising photography and photojournalism? After all, a philosophical consideration of either "language" or "speech" that concerned only commercial and media uses of either would have to at least acknowledge and demarcate the vast areas of linguistic activity left out as a result of that arbitrary decision, since — in the present instance — this means that Barthes's methodology is self-confessedly useless as an analytical tool applied to (just one example) any photographs intended to function as art.

Which brings us to the unbearable lightness of seeing. John Berger has written, "What we habitually see confirms us. Yet it can happen, suddenly, unexpectedly, and most frequently in the half-light of glimpses, that we catch sight of another visible order which intersects with ours and has nothing to do with it." This statement comes from a gentle, affectionate meditation on the work of the Finnish photographer Pentti

Sammallahti, an elegant little appreciation in which Berger considers at length the dogs who appear as protagonists in so many of Sammallahti's images — always, miraculously, in exactly the right place at the right time. Berger proposes that "It was probably a dog that led Sammallahti to the moment and place for taking each picture."¹³

As it happens, I can speak with some authority here and say that Berger is precisely wrong on that score. Perhaps the following anecdote will help to explain what one can learn about photography when one deigns to speak about it with actual practicing photographers, and how that's useful to critics (conceivably to philosophers too).

Having visited the Nordic countries often, I'd known and respected Sammallahti's photographs for some years — and of course I'd noticed those dogs: chance does favor the prepared mind (and eye), but nobody gets that lucky that often. When I finally met this photographer for the first time at Houston FotoFest in spring 2000, he was one of the discoveries of that Texas biennial festival, besieged by new admirers. However, at his opening in a downtown warehouse we found a moment to chat quietly just between ourselves.

I may have spent more time speaking with more photographers than Berger has, or may have a less imaginative and poetical nature than he. Possibly I'm not so philosophically inclined, or merely more suspicious, because after exchanging a few pleasantries I asked bluntly, "How do you manage the dogs?"

Sammallahti gave me a slow, sidelong, evaluative glance, decided I merited a straight answer, lowered his voice, then replied, "Sardine oil."

Turns out that Sammallahti does a lot of his photographing on long field trips, bringing along a supply of canned sardines and crackers for quick meals. The smell of sardine oil, he's discovered, fascinates dogs; they will nose into and linger around it for some time. So this documentary photographer saves in a bottle the sardine oil left over from his snacks. Whenever he's framed a scene in the viewfinder to his satisfaction and needs a dog in the image as an actor or a visual nexus of arrest, he pours some of the oil on the ground exactly where he wants the dog to appear in the frame and whistles up

¹³ John Berger, "Dog Days," in Pentti Sammallahti, *The Russian Way*, Opus 31 (Helsinki, 1996). This is a self-published limited-edition portfolio of prints by Sammallahti. Berger's essay appears online at

the nearest canines. Dogs — *pace* Berger — don't necessarily lead Sammallahti to his vistas or his images; rather, at least some of the time, he entices dogs into his frames, for the purpose of ensuring their presence in his pictures.

In announcing this I take full responsibility for changing forever the reader's perception of those pictures of Sammallahti's, and I choose to make us all pay that price in order to put a finer point on a core conundrum:

No photograph transcribes the actual world. Photographs — at least of the kinds that we generally refer to when we use that word — *describe*. Of those photographers who use cameras, some seek to describe in their images the ways in which the world performs itself before their eyes and lenses. Some actively evoke performances from the world.¹⁴ We cannot necessarily tell which is which in any given image, or even in an entire body of work.

Thus the relation of the photograph to both truth and fact is slippery, and equivocal at best. Therein lies the ultimate challenge to photographer, audience member/average viewer, critic, and philosopher alike. No ideas but in things. Requiring that one look into the woman's mouth and count her teeth represents photography's gift to philosophy. Philosophy's gift to photography awaits its unveiling.

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<http://www.finlit.fi/booksfromfinland/bff/398/berger.htm>.

¹⁴ See the essay "The Image in Question," *loc. cit.*, and its predecessor, "The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition," *Artforum*, 15:1 (September 1976), pp. 55–61, reprinted in Coleman, *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings, 1968-1978* (Oxford University Press, 1979; second edition, University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 246-57.