

# Form and Feeling in Photography

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The history of philosophical thinking about photography is permeated by worry about photography's status as an expressive aesthetic medium—that is, photography's manner of being artistic in the sense of the other arts. As Walter Benn Michaels points out in his recent essays on art, photography, and philosophy, a specific idea of the photographic camera often undergirds this philosophical worry: the camera is a mechanized, automated instrument that in the philosopher's mind can become independently generative or generating of photographs. The worries about photography's expressive powers thus stem from this conception of the camera as vitally animated by the ability to become the agent in the act of the making of a photograph. Unlike manographic arts such as drawing or painting, photography has a hand, it is thought, that emanates from a mechanical, nonliving agent, and it is in possession of a primordial or thoroughgoing agency in the act of capture. Like magic, it snaps the part of the world laid out in view. Photographs, in addition, not only can be made automatically or semi-automatically in this way, but they also include within the frames they instantiate accidental and incidental details of the world, ones that the artist could not have *meant* to include. Photographs are thus uniquely open to—or vulnerable and susceptible to—what the photographer did *not* intend.<sup>1</sup> As Michaels puts the idea, “in photography the question of *what* was meant can be shadowed by the question of *whether* it was meant.”<sup>2</sup>

In his recent essays on art, philosophy, and the concept of *intention* in criticism—essays that are at once attentive and courageous, as notable for the force of their readings as for the insight of their ideas—Michaels suggests that the “opacity” of a photograph with regard to the photographer's intention, and photography's taking up *intention* and *chance*

as central animating problems, account for the medium's increasing art-historical importance over the last several decades.<sup>3</sup> In what specific and concrete sense, Michaels asks, is the taking of a photograph an intentional act? If it is not in the collection or aggregate of things pictured in the frame, and if it is not in the mechanics of capture, where in the art of photography does the artist find room for the intentionality of her act to take shape and form?

One way to underline the originality and critical significance of the path Michaels travels into these questions in his essays on art and the philosophy of G. E. M. Anscombe is to say that Michaels shows that artists in the postwar and contemporary periods overwhelmingly are better and more incisive thinkers on these questions than philosophers and literary theorists. In an exemplary instance of the spirit of a certain kind of work emerging today at the crossroads of literature, philosophy, criticism, and the arts, Michaels allows the labor and the insights of "thinking" on the topic of art and intention to belong to artists and to reside in the contours of their artworks. For as he shows in the series of essays dedicated to exploring the implications of Elizabeth Anscombe's philosophy for understanding certain works (the street photographs of Garry Winogrand or the *Blind Time* pieces of Robert Morris) and certain kinds of art criticism (Michael Fried), art animated by a creative tarrying with *intention* evinces a clarity and incisiveness on this topic, one whose exposition and exploration traditionally has belonged to philosophers and theorists. It may be the conceptual failings and disappointments of the latter, in fact, that at least implicitly account for Michaels's continued attraction to *intention* as an old topic to be productively renewed again and again. In the essay "'I Do What Happens': Anscombe and Winogrand," Michaels summarizes his project in just these terms: his ambition, he writes, is to show "the ways in which the practices of some photographers have themselves functioned as efforts to think about intentional acts."<sup>4</sup> Later he is even more forceful in recruiting art for the project of thought when he claims that photography in recent decades becomes "a medium in which to think about some problems in the theory of action."<sup>5</sup> In short, we can learn a lot about *intention* by looking closely at the works and practices of the artists Michaels singles out, and we stand to learn a lot about the social and aesthetic significance of *intention* as a persistent question for art generally, and as a special question in the context of late capitalist cultural production, if we allow

Anscombe specifically to guide us toward an understanding of what intention in art and in life is.

Anscombe's philosophy thus guides Michaels toward an orientation in reading that lets him see *intention* in dimensions or aspects of artworks that are not often invested with the weight of human intentionality. This is a real reward in the essays, a way of reading that is both conceptually and aesthetically satisfying—a new way of thinking and looking at once. Anscombe is useful for Michaels because her ideas sever *intention* from an inner willing or wanting and align it, instead, with consequence and happening (“what happens”). Anscombe explains at the conclusion of her book *Intention*:

Of course we have an interest in human actions: but *what* is it that we have a special interest in here? It is not that we have a special interest in the movement of these molecules—namely, the ones in a human being; or even in the movements of certain bodies—namely human ones. The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question “Why?” did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question “Why?” So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question “What does it say?” It is of a word or sentence that we ask “What does it say?”; and the description of something as a word or sentence at all could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning. So the description of something as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question “Why?”, simply as a kind of utterance by which we were *then* obscurely prompted to address the question.<sup>6</sup>

As Michaels argues, the significance of an action for Anscombe is not exhausted by, explained by, or caused by the phenomenon—a real, objective phenomenon—of human

intentionality, of someone's intending to do some concrete thing. Surely we have an interest in human actions that are intentional, she writes, and these actions are interesting or important to us precisely because of the human intent they bespeak. But it does not follow for Anscombe that *intention* acts only as a primary cause or controlling agency within the field of action. To follow Michaels's very instructive parallels, the hand's action of drawing something specific or the person's intention to draw some concrete object or scene are not the only ways that one can make a drawing with intent—that is, not the only ways to draw. Anscombe thus not only cuts off the philosophical concept of *intention* from an intangible inner wanting-to or wishing-that, as in the tradition of Wittgenstein, but she also—even further—makes central to human *intending* an objective field of resonance, material consequence, and actual happening that both precedes one's having any intent and then exceeds the foreseeable scopes of that intention. Thus while Anscombe's philosophy of intention is not anchored in aesthetics, it is for this reason that for Michaels she is nonetheless the most useful philosopher to approaching several contemporary art practices.

The payoff of this remarkably insightful conjunction of Elizabeth Anscombe and contemporary art is in the readings Michaels offers that demonstrate just how much we need this sharp and capacious conception of *intention* to understand not only what certain contemporary artists have done but also, we might say, what they are up to. Michaels's recent essays take up artists who give up or refuse drawing just as they continue making marks and drawing things; or photographers who avoid the viewfinder or give up controlled perspective altogether just as they carry on deliberately taking photographs. As Michaels so convincingly shows in his readings of Robert Morris or Garry Winogrand alongside Michael Fried, what results from practices like these that disavow the traditional crafts of picture-making is not at all randomness or incoherence. It is important to note in the context of Michaels's larger projects in cultural theory that such contrary practices also emphatically do not serve to affirm the nonagency of the artist or the final relinquishing of the ghost of classic authorial intent. Instead, in Michaels's care, artists like Winogrand and Morris offer reflections, in the form of art, on intention and meaning in art within a context—possibilities, fractures, and novel ways of reaching with intent, of having something to say and show and then of making it count *as* that having-

something-to-say-and-show. And Michaels, in turn, offers forms of reading sensitive to what such artworks actually *want* to say.

The example of Garry Winogrand's photographic practices stands out for me as a case that Michaels illuminates with a special vividness and sense of discovery; one has the feeling that *this* artist needed *this* critic. The case thus highlights the immense rewards of Michaels's readings and what I will suggest in conclusion perhaps also indicates a limiting horizon beyond which to continue exploring and thinking at this crossroads of art, philosophy, and criticism. Winogrand's practice of taking mountainous numbers of photographs and waiting several years before beginning the process of selection and developing his film represents his aim, in his own famous words, to take photographs in order *to find out* what something will look like photographed. As Michaels puts it, what Winogrand sees at the moment he is taking a photograph is not what he will see later on when he selects the "work" from the pile of photographic film years later. Winogrand's interest in photography thus cannot be established by or anchored in his interest in any particular or single photograph. Why or how a photograph comes to interest him years later or comes to the foreground within the mountain of possible photographs is a matter of his own discoveries, and it is not at all determined by his intention in the moment of taking the picture. Meaning in his artistic practice is thus not something going on "inside the photographer's head" but rather a purposeful contortion of and meaningful agility with photographic processes. Explicitly echoing several moments in Michaels's illuminating readings, we might say that intention in Winogrand's photographic process is first suspended and then years later overlaid onto the photographic image as though it were an aftereffect, the nonintentional act transformed by a process that Michaels sees as allegorical of all art—the rendering of something as *intentional*.<sup>7</sup> Like Morris's *Blind Time* drawings that expose and document the distance between what the artist hoped he might be doing and what he actually does, separating intent and outcome structurally, Winogrand's photographs too insist on the gap between intention and formal artwork.<sup>8</sup>

The introduction of a distance between what you want to say and do (intention) and what you have said and done (artwork) is definitional for Michaels of art's situation in the context of late capitalism. This is a line of thinking in the recent essays that follows from

his earlier work and investments. Meaning in art (what you have actually done and said) slips away from the artist's ranges of control within the environment, for example, of the unprecedented circulation of commodities. But instead of allowing meaning and intention to be coopted, predictably and inevitably, the artists Michaels admires evacuate the work of emotional, affective, or personal forms of address preemptively, as though anti-pathos and anti-sentiment were a shield or defense. In his earlier *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, Michaels already identifies this tendency specifically in contemporary photography as its explicit anti-pathos, "making it impossible for us to identify," he writes, "by giving us no one to identify with"—an art that precisely "doesn't reach out" and declares the irrelevance of our feelings or concerns. In that book, Michaels's stake is in locating the social force and social-economic insights of an art that "refuses the politics of personal involvement."<sup>9</sup> And even earlier in the seminal *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels had already outlined his allegiances in these terms:

So the address to the subject becomes the appeal to the subject's interest, while the address to the spectator appeals to his or her sense of what is good, of what compels conviction. And if one more or less inevitable way to understand this distinction between paintings he likes and paintings he doesn't, Fried's insistence that good paintings compel conviction seems designed precisely to counter this objection, to counter the criticism that the difference between interesting and convincing objects is just the difference in our attitude toward those objects. For what makes conviction superior to interest is the fact that interest is essentially an attribute of the subject—the question of whether we find an object interesting is (like the question about how the waterfall makes us feel) a question about *us*—whereas objects that compel conviction do not leave the question of our being convinced up to us. Compelling conviction is something that work does, and it is precisely this

commitment to the work—*it is good regardless of whether we are interested—that Fried wants to insist on.*<sup>10</sup>

The numerable Kantian echoes in this passage (subjects, objects, interests) draw attention to the role that a perhaps too-strict formalism plays in Michaels's understanding of his larger aesthetic-political project in reading. As in his recent essays on art and philosophy, feelings and emotions in this early passage are understood as and thus reduced to likings or interests: attributes of the subject that, as in Kant's third *Critique*, must be suspended for meaningful aesthetic judgment and response. Personal interest, after all, is for Michaels precisely unconvincing. Questions about art, as he writes here, should not be questions about *us*.<sup>11</sup>

Yet questions about art are always questions about us, and this constitutive fact about artworks—that they are made by us and are not otherwise objects or things merely in the world—seems to me in fact the very starting point for the incisive readings, guided by an investment in art as an intentional practice, that are so distinctive of Michaels's work and critical perspectives. As he writes, if you treat the painting as unintended, “you will not be seeing it as a work.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the tension between Michaels's investment in the category of *intention* and his full refusal, one which I sense is both intellectual but also instinctive, to consider with a more complex vocabulary how we become engaged in and attentive to art as the very people we are is what I might mark as a limiting horizon in his project. For there are surely ways of understanding art's forms of address and appeal that do not rely on a strict contrary between form and human feeling, aesthetic composition and personal responsiveness. One senses in these essays especially Michaels reaching for a vocabulary that finds a hyperpersonalized term like *desire* as deficient as the impersonal term *affect* and, having given up, settling for something else altogether: *form*.

But just as art photography takes some of its most interesting shapes by harnessing the medium's inherent chance and automatic capabilities, it also tangles itself in interesting strains in domestic, pornographic, sentimental, commercial, journalistic, and documentary forms—those everyday genres that in all instances *want* something from us.

It thus seems to me worthwhile for criticism, on the whole, to develop a vocabulary in reading that register the entreaties and appeals artworks can make on us with a complexity that is faithful to the complexity of human responsiveness to art.

As an instructive example, John Lysaker writes about artworks as solicitations that petition us, like invitations that radiate an ethos and that hold up their own bearings and values through a second-person, address-like appeal.<sup>13</sup> Michael Fried's conception of the antitheatrical tradition in Western art might point in an exemplary direction in this regard too. In his readings of Fried's art criticism, Michaels argues that the figure of Fried's beholder when standing before a work of art discovers "the irrelevance of her own position in real space."<sup>14</sup> Yet Fried's actual emphasis differs in a manner that points us toward a more complex sense of the responsiveness involved in aesthetic appeals. For Fried is concerned in all of his art-historical writings with the active formal work involved in the artwork's ensuring that it is as though the beholder were not there—not "irrelevant" but *not there*.<sup>15</sup> The artworks in the tradition of absorptive realism that interest Fried are engrossed in their own worlds, as though self-enclosed and self-sufficient universes. These artworks insist on the world-apartness of the world they depict from the space or world that the viewer occupies. Direct signs of address to the beholder—signs of confrontation, desire, calculation, conscription—all threaten to puncture the integrity of these aesthetic worlds. But Fried underlines that when the artwork in effect turns away from the beholder and negates her in this manner, it *thereby* manages to address, arrest, spellbind, and thus absorb her as a viewer of art too. It is not her personal involvement or the particularity of her existence that the viewer leaves behind on Fried's account but her physical presence, which is "counteracted" by the painting or work that in turn relies on the "fiction" of her absence.<sup>16</sup>

The imagery throughout Fried's criticism is thus not of making the beholder irrelevant but, precisely through an appeal to her cares and investments, making her capable of imagining something other than her own world and position. But in order to do anything like this, as Fried writes, the artwork has to set in motion a set of felt, lived contrasts between the world she lives in, the one she perceives and moves within, and the one the work holds out, reflects, or constitutes. That sealed realm is closed off from the viewer,



structurally, but its aesthetic conviction nonetheless lives and dies on the actual engagement of her absorbed capacities.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. On this point, see also Charles Palermo, “Photography, Automatism, and Mechanicity,” *nonsite.org* 11 (Winter 2013/14); and “Action and Standing Around,” *nonsite.org* 19 (Spring 2016). Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen also underline that photography’s potential as an artform historically has harnessed both the nonart and the automatic properties of the medium (“Introduction: Photography between Art History and Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Summer 2011), 679-93).
2. Walter Benn Michaels, “Anscombe and Winogrand, Danto and Mapplethorpe: A Reply to Dominic McIver Lopes,” *nonsite.org* (2016).
3. Walter Benn Michaels, “‘I Do What Happens’: Anscombe and Winogrand,” *nonsite.org* 19 (Spring 2016).
4. Ibid.
5. Michaels, “Anscombe and Winogrand, Danto and Mapplethorpe.”
6. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1957), 83.
7. Michaels, “‘I Do What Happens.’”
8. Walter Benn Michaels, “Blind Time (Drawing with Anscombe),” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 35 (Dec 2019), 49-60.
9. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 41 and 172.
10. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 87.
11. Michaels here also uncovers a parallel between Kant’s foundational texts in philosophical aesthetics and Michael Fried’s art-historical criticism that I have also followed and explored. See my “Kant with Michael Fried: Feeling Absorption, and Interiority in the Critique of Judgment” (*symploke* 18.1-2 [2010], 15-30):

    | In the same way, then, that the spectator before such paintings is not asked to empathize or is not moved to excitement, identification, consideration,

or any other symptomatic affect but is instead *negated*, as Fried puts it, from before the painting, the subject for Kant before the object of reflection must renounce all liking, passion, deliberation, ethical feeling, and must in a particular sense take himself or herself away from before the object—or must remain what Kant in the text calls disinterested. (29)

See also “The Aesthetics of Absorption,” in *Michael Fried and Philosophy: Modernism, Intention, and Theatricality*, ed. Mathew Abbott (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 171-88.

12. Walter Benn Michaels, “ ‘When I Raise My Arm’: Michael Fried’s Theory of Action,” in *Michael Fried and Philosophy*, 33-47; 40.

13. John Lysaker, “Finding Our Bearings with Art,” *nonsite.org* (Summer 2016).

14. Michaels, “ ‘When I Raise My Arm,’ ” 38.

15. For an elaboration of this point that places Fried’s abiding art-historical concern with spectatorship in the context of classic philosophical aesthetics, see my “The Aesthetics of Absorption,” in *Michael Fried and Philosophy*.

16. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 67 and 103.

17. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 123.

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*Persuasion* (Modern Language Association, 2020), *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson: Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford Studies in Philosophy and Literature, 2021), and *Wittgenstein and Literary Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). She is currently at work on a book-length study about literature, art, and the interior lives of persons in the nineteenth century and after. She has taught at Rhode Island College, Boston University, and Florida Atlantic University.

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