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**PHOTOGRAPHY AND MUSEUMS:
A CASE STUDY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE**

ABSTRACT. In France, in nineteenth century, photography wasn't considered an art and therefore it was impossible to show it in official artistic expositions like the *Exposition des Beaux Arts*, together with other art works, normally considered – on the opposite – as results of artistic genius. The organizational structure of photographic exhibition in France in nineteenth-century reflected a polarization between *photography* and *art*. The first photographic exhibition in which photography received a prestigious spot, alongside with the more traditional arts such as painting or sculpture, was organized by James Craig Annan in collaboration with Alfred Stieglitz and exhibited in the rooms of *New Art Gallery & Museum Building*. It is probably not a coincidence that the break between European and American photographic Pictorialism was coming nearer: in 1902, after a valedictory speech in Camera Notes, Alfred Stieglitz organized in March of the same year the popular exhibition which brought together the artists of Photo Secession, a group to which is usually ascribed the origin of modern photographic art.

In this report, we attempt to analyse the role of museum hierarchy in the process that gave birth to an idea of *photography* which was finally compatible with the aesthetic reflections on the concept of *Art*. The most common subject of investigation regarding the relationship between “photography” and “museum” is the influence of photography as reproduction instrument on museum. The focus of this discussion will primarily be the entrance of photography in museums as an art-work.

The exhibition of 1849

In 1849, Gustave Le Gray exhibited some photographs in the *Exposition des produits de l'Industrie* (EPI), getting only a bronze medal. The artist was penalized by the parameters inadequacy involved in an exposure finalized to industry works (and not art works).

The photographs were judged based on rules which rewarded, as well as the artistic touch, features that normally were not considered relevant in judging art

works, such as the economic efficiency of the method used, candidate's aptitude of teaching and creating a group of students, etc.

Le Gray won the bronze medal thanks to the *precious and flattering fidelity* (De Laborde, L., 1851b: 14) that the artist, with *rare intelligence and precious perseverance (ibidem)* showed in his images. It's the same honour bestowed on M. Warren Thompson, M. Vaillat, MM. Guillot Sagnez, M. V. Maucombe, MM. Mayer brothers, but –to each of them– for different reasons.

Comparing the verdicts of the jury (AA. VV., 1850 t. 3: 535-542), we observe that, even though it admitted that Thompson hadn't been able to dominate optical aberrations, neither the quantity and quality of light to be directed toward the model, he anyway deserved a medal due to *size, clarity and general success* of his images. M. Vaillat, instead, was rewarded because he was *able to obtain detailed image at an average price of 10 francs* and he was *persevering in following the technological advancement* of the new art (*ibid.*: 535-536). MM. Guillot Sagnez had the merit of having impressed the sun rays with great vividness and clarity despite poor lighting conditions, so that they could even give clarity to the shadows (*ibid.*: 539-540). The verdict on M. Maucombe was very interesting, in that he was rewarded for his studies on photographic colour: it seems that the photographer was able to reproduce the prism of colours, but not to fix it; the undertaking, according to the jury, was certainly positive from an industrial point of view, but questionable from an

artistic point of view (*ibid.*: 340-341). Finally, MM. Mayer brothers were awarded for the speed of execution and the brightness of colour (*ibid.*: 341).

The two silver medals went instead to M. Bayard for high definition, purity of contours and size of its images; and to M. G. Schiertz for being able of building black rooms, tripods and various photographic tools with great scientific precision and rare intelligence.

Examined verdicts show us a deep heterogeneity: artistic, industrial, technology, even teaching merits were all together in one exposition. The entrance of photography in official exhibitions created, since the beginning, categorization issues.

The exhibition of 1859

In 1850, Gustave Le Gray proposes nine photographs for the *Exposition Universelle des Beaux Arts de Paris* (EBA). These are, at first, accepted, but then a sub-committee decided to withdraw Le Gray's photos from exposure. Why? "The first judges considered them art works, the others classified them among the products of science" (Wey, F. 1851a: 2). In the preface of his *Photographie* (Le Gray, G., 1851), Gustave Le Gray argues that photography is an art in every aspect and what it needs is an educated public who can discern among good and bad pictures. The task of educating the public is responsibility of the museum.

The necessity of a legitimacy became urgent: stronger action came in 1856 by Nadar, which, during a meeting of the Société française de la photographie (SFP), raised the issue with a letter that became famous: “Gentlemen, photography has been forgotten in the EBA program of 1857, until now. This omission seems harmful at the same time for art and for Your interests [...]. I have the honour, in supporting my position, to attach these few lines that I will publish on this subject and I will be happy to provide you with my participation in press, as can be weak” (Nadar, 1856: 325).

SFP, with great efforts, obtained in 1859 an exposition parallel to the EBA. According to the reconstruction made by photography historian Paul Roubert, it was just thanks to members’ knowledge of worldly and influent people (Roubert, P., 2000). The exhibition was set up in a building next door, but it had a separate entrance and a separate ticket, much more expensive than the EBA one (*ibidem*). Why? Which were the problems to accept the presence of photography in the EBA?

A paradigmatic position on this was the one expressed by Philippe Burty (1830-1890), critic and art collector who published in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* an article dedicated to the SFP exhibition, in which he argued that the solution was optimal and photographers couldn’t and –for the moment– hadn’t to ask for more. He recognized to photography a great quality: it reproduces with extreme fidelity the subject, and so it’s perfect for everything that does not involve

interpretation, but nothing more than it; “Photography is impersonal; It doesn’t interpret, It copies, and this is its weakness and its strength, since it renders with the same indifference every smallest detail and this nothingness, barely visible, barely perceptible, which gives the soul and renders resemblance. [...] It stops at idealization, and this is just the point in which begins the role of talented engraver or lithographer” (Burty, P., 1859 t. 2: 211).

According to Burty, photography is ontologically a mechanics, it does not allow it to be more than a tool. The most suitable application of this technology regarding the arts is the reproduction of art works, service in which, this tool is unrivalled, both from an economic and a practical point of view.

Critic’s thesis has some contradictions: when, in the same article, Burty gives his opinion on displayed photographs, he does it by assuming, for most part of the old works, parameters very similar to those generally used by the juries of EPI. A paradigmatic case is the critical assessment on M. Cuccioni’s photographs which, being urban landscapes and art works reproductions, should have been (according to the submissions of the same article), in terms of choice of subjects, the most suitable application of the new *medium*. However, Burty simply says: “The enormous photographs taken in Rome by Cuccioni, representing the views of Colisée and of Forum, the group of Laocoon and the Arch of Constantine, are important both for their extent and general success and for the greatness of memories that they awake” (*ibid.*, p. 214).

However, the critic reserved an entirely different treatment to Nadar's photographs. Here, in fact, Burty claims that, even if the photography isn't a complete art, the photographer can also be considered, in some cases, an artist: "They [Nadar's photos] demonstrate that an intelligent man uses his brain as much as his instrument, and even if the photography isn't a complete art, the photographer still has the right to be an artist" (*ibid.*, p. 216). In his view, Nadar's portraits are true art works: "It's undisputed that Mr. Nadar turned his portraits in art works in any sense of the word and that by the way he enlightened his models, the freedom of movements and appearance that leaves them, the search for typical expression of traits on which he is concerned. [...] The sun is the practitioner, Mr. Nadar is the artist who give him to work" (*ibid.*, p. 111).

Photography wasn't considered Art in France in nineteenth century

Burty's contradictory attitude was very common in nineteenth-century in France: the resistance to admit that photography could be considered an independent art form, like painting, sculpture, poetry, was very strong.

As Rosalind Krauss points out, the history of nineteenth-century photography that we study today, was artificially readapted to typical concepts of art domain, not without incoherencies.

Many photographers that today are typically considered artists (such as Gustave Le Gray, Roger Fenton, Henri The Secq, Auguste Salzmann) had, like photographers, an atypical career, devoting himself to photography for less than a decade. But, continued Krauss, the notion of *artist* is often linked to the concept of *vocation*; the artist is always in quest for Art; so, considering these photographers *artists* in all respects creates sometimes inconsistencies with the concept of the traditional *artist*. With Rosalind Krauss, we also find that the landscapes immortalized in the nineteenth century, were indicated by French term *vue*, “view”, which is very different from “panorama”, “the view doesn’t claim the projection of an author’s imagination, but the legal protection by copyright” (Krauss, 2000: 38).

A similar reasoning can be applied the concept of *work*. The critic particularly refers herself to the *Museum of Modern Art of New York* exposure entitled “Atget and the art of photography.” It’s a collection of about 10,000 photographs. Each photo was numbered. This coding system was added by Atget and it remained mysterious until 1980, when Maria Morris Hambourg finally deciphered it and found that it was simply a cataloguing of the committee. This episode is, according to R. Krauss, important because “the museum, which was launched itself in an aesthetics deciphering of code numbers of Atget’s negatives to discover an aesthetic consciousness, found a catalogue instead” (p. 48). Even the analogies with other photographs, such as

those of Charles Marville, in which we can find stylistic affinities, which are lost today, with the knowledge of Atget's respect of cataloguing standards canons, the demonstrative value that was sought to extort them. In other words, in this case, to speak about *artwork* of *author* and not about *archive to be archaeologically investigated* (*ibidem*, p. 48), means to force excessively the historical truth.

Photography at EBA. Why a hostile welcome?

Social reasons. Behind the grant or not to display photography next to the other *œuvre d'esprit* there were dark power games. As Roubert assumed in the above mentioned article, for example, Nadar had intervened in the debate probably with the sole intent to promote himself in a legal battle with his brother for the property of the pseudonym Nadar. In this process, in fact, artistic potential of photography was used in defence of Felix Tornachon. This is not the place to delve into these issues, what we want here is to highlight that each participant had, in promoting or disapproving the participation of photography to the EBA, his political and economic interest. If the SFP managed to obtain a parallel exposure, was mainly due to political knowledge of its members.

In late nineteenth-century Europe, art system was firmly established on traditional practices, such as painting or sculpture, and there was a strict policy of protectionism on this system ever since eighteenth century. We can just

think, regarding this, of the destruction of six hundred wax figures collected in the Florentine church of the Vergine Santissima Annunziata which took place in 1786 (*see* Saint Girons, B., 2010: 118-119). In the end of thirteenth century, in Florence, many great personalities had booked, to be portrayed, the so-called “ceraiuoli”, or sculptors who executed portraits in wax, working directly on the model, getting, in this way, results at that time unrivalled for the verisimilitude (*ibidem*, p. 119). The practice became dangerous for the primacy of painting over sculpture and, after a series of political events, it came to aforementioned destruction.

The first person which realized that, in order to promote photography in art domain, it was necessary to break the system and that, therefore, it would be impossible to make the change from within, was Alfred Stieglitz.

The first photographic exhibition in which photography received a prestigious spot, alongside the more traditional arts such as painting or sculpture was organized by James Craig Annan in collaboration with Alfred Stieglitz and exhibited in the rooms of the New Art Gallery & Museum Building in March of 1902.

1902 is the year in which Stieglitz leaves the direction of *Camera Notes* (CN) to start Photo Secession. To the readers, he claims to have made this decision in the best interests of American Photography. According to what it says in “Valedictory” (Stieglitz, A., 1902: 3), the problem was that he could no longer

guarantee the appropriate quality and independence to the type of magazine that he wanted to make. Shortly afterwards, in January 1903, the first issue of *Camera Work* (CW) is published and Stieglitz declares in it that the journal intent is to provide the reader with a quality product. Any gains, says Stieglitz, will be reinvested in improving the magazine appearance, which will remain independent: Stieglitz's sole purpose is to promote the improvement of photographic art; "*Camera Work* owes allegiance to no organization or clique, and though it is the mouthpiece of the Photo-Secession that fact will not be allowed to hamper its independence in the slightest degree. An undertaking of this kind, begun with the sole purpose of furthering the "Cause" and with the intention of devoting all profits to the enlargement of the magazine's beauty and scope is dependent for its success upon the sympathy and cooperation, moral and financial, of its friends" (Stieglitz, A., 1903: 16).

To cross the protectionist barrier, therefore, it needed an independent magazine and it was CW, that was joined, in 1906, by an independent gallery, *Gallery 291*.

Unlike Stieglitz made in America, in France the attempt to undermine the system was operated from the inside, this was one of the reason why he had almost no success.

In his *Exposéé de Motifs pour la revendication de la propriété exclusive du pseudonyme Nadar* (Nadar 1856b), Nadar argued that photographic practice

could be learned in one hour, but in order to make an artistic photography not only the technical accuracy of the obtained images is needed, but the *feeling of light*, the *spiritual commune with the model (ibidem)* and a great series of elements essentially not measurable and abstract through which, in the art of portrait, it's possible to reach the subject psychology and represent it.

In conclusion, the refusal of photography at EBA was due to reasons of different kind. The first type of reasons were social: protectionism of artist old circles was strong and photography, because of his democratic attitude (the idea that it was possible to learn the technique in an hour is a simplification, but the concept expressed by Nadar reflected a fairly widespread belief in the nineteenth century), opened the door to too many potential competitors, which, among other things, would have easily be popular with a public obsessively attracted by the revolutionary innovation represented by photography since 1839.

Cultural reasons. In addition to social resistance, there were cultural reason to refuse photography at EBA. The introduction of photography at EBA, at the same level of painting and other traditional visual arts, would have meant to introduce completely new judgment parameters.

In *Archive noise*, essay from *Pandora's (photo)camera*, (thanks to this book the famous artist and theoretician of photography gained, in 2011, a nonfiction

award by the Spanish Ministry of Culture) Joan Fontcuberta identifies the aesthetic way of photography with a transubstantiation process: “The history of photography is the chronicle of a process of transubstantiation, is the story of how the document became art” (p. 201). In Catholic theology, transubstantiation is the transformation of bread and wine respectively in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It’s the moment in which the priest consecrates it. Exposing photography among other Fine Arts, would have meant transforming the document par excellence in an artistic –and consequently partial– representation.

According to the art historian Margaret Denton (Denton, M., 2002), the widespread refusal to accept the idea that photography could be an art was essentially a cultural phenomenon: in the aesthetics of late nineteenth century France, an object could be good or useful, but it couldn’t be both at the same time. This assumption would be a derivative of Théodore Simon Jouffroy philosophy. In his *Cours d'esthétique*, Jouffroy argued that the *beautiful* and *useful* must be clearly distinct in our mind: what we love of a beautiful object is not its usefulness; on the other hand, the search for *beauty* often leads away from the *useful*, for example in the manufacture of an object. A good example is represented by a cup to drink: a cup can be beautiful and, at the same time, used to drink; but drink in a simple glass will probably be much easier. The philosopher, however, does not stop there: in fourth lesson he tries to show that

useful excludes *beautiful*, sometimes *beautiful* can be defined as the opposite of *useful* (Jouffroy, T., 1863: 34). An object can, of course, be both beautiful and useful, however, when you, in perceiving it, turn your attention to its utility, you don't perceive it in terms of aesthetics, "the sentiment of *beautiful* destroys, smothers, at the same time in which it born, the feeling of *useful*. Any of these two sentiments products a stop in the other, in the moment in which it is produced" (*ibidem*, p. 36).

Photography, as it is known, was bought in 1839 by France through diplomatic operation carried out by Arago. The famous physicist, in order to get round the system based on patent, which would have prevented Daguerre from obtaining substantial gains, tried to convince the governing bodies of the photography usefulness. Since the beginning, photography, although historically is a derivative of artistic (and not scientific) research, was associated with *automation, utility, speed, clarity, visual accuracy*. All *useful* features.

Cultural juxtaposition between *beautiful* and *useful* was an obstacle for the introduction of photography in the EBA; however, also other factors contributed to the raising of this invisible barrier. One of these was inadequacy or, rather, the false perception of inadequacy in photography of concepts typically belonging to the world of art. In other words, some concepts, which are so deeply rooted in the world of art and in western art criticism to appear sometimes foregone, became questionable in case of photography. For example,

a photograph could be considered work of an *author*? The introduction of automation questioned the attribution of result to human *esprit*.

The reversal of relationship between objects and photography

If we think back to Atget's archive, to the metaphorically unlimited production of copies, to the multiple keys revisiting of the same object, it could emerge a new element. Krauss's hypothesis is certainly plausible: Atget had to build a catalogue and that was the reason for accumulating almost obsessively pictures of the same subject. However, a fact remains: these photographs were produced and, just like them, many others. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the practice of reproducing the same object from different points of view, in different moments, although for different purposes, was very common among artists and other people. Photography allowed, acting as reproductive instrument, the creation of an high quantity of sketches to study a subject. This possibility was used by painters, sculptors, scientists (in this regard, there are very famous studies on the movement of Marey and Muybridge). The consequence of this was that artists were working in an ecosystem in which the reproduction of subject multiplied itself without any brake.

In that period a change took place: every single artistic production began to be seen first of all as an artistic production. "In order to see in a classical statue

a statue, and not an idol or anything else, a Christian needs to see in a Madonna a statue before seeing the Madonna” (Malraux, A., 1957: 49). The proliferation of subject representations doesn't reflect anymore an interest on the subject, but always on something different: vision, movement, creation, beauty, etc. Each artist is looking for something different and, in doing it, he uses its subject as an instrument. As always, the art now reflects on itself, but –in contrast to what happen in the past– in modernity it's created *to* reflect on itself: “The most profound metamorphosis began when art became the only aim to itself” (*ibidem*, p. 50).

The moment in which photographers asked official entrance into the world of museums, historically coincided with a time of profound change in Museum. This moment of change was described by Malraux: “From Manet to Gauguin and more Van Gogh, from Van Gogh to the Fauves, this dissonance must consolidate his triumph, and it would reveal the rasp of New Hebrides's figures... Just at the time was dying with popular arts, pure colour has creeping itself into a refined painting that seemed to have the task of ensuring a mysterious continuity. Just from it, sprang the most profound transformation of museum. In that time, what museum collected? The classics, more Romans than Greeks, the Italian painting from Raphael, the great Flemish, the great Dutch, the great Spanish from Ribera; the French from seventeenth century onwards; the English from eighteenth century; Dürer and Holbein, on the fringes with

some primitive. It was essentially the oil painting museum. A painting which the conquest of the third dimension was essential, and for which the union between illusion and expression was a given fact. Union which wanted to express not only the shape of objects, but also their appearance and their volume (indifferent to all non-Western arts), it acts, at the same time, on eyesight and touch. And that union would also not suggest space as an infinite, like in Song paintings, but limit it by the frame that encloses it, and immerse objects like aquarium fish are immersed in water” (*ibidem*, p. 100).

Looking Le Gray’s photos, we find the same need to enclose space in the frame, to dip it in the frame. The subject of Le Gray’s photos was what they phenomenally represented. Le Gray (and like him, many other nineteenth century photographers), in using photography, used it like a museum painting. He, trying to adapt it to more traditional canons of painting aesthetic, unconsciously perverted the nature of the art that he tried to enhance.

In *La voix du silence*, Malraux argues that modern art was born with the reversal of the relation between represented object and painting, and that this caused an initial break with museum: “What the new art was looking for was the reversal of relationship between object and painting, the subordination of the object to a framework. [...] Don’t recognize more value to anything other than the eye, meant to break with museum for witch, on the contrary, landscape was

subordinated to man's knowledge; impressionist landscape remoteness wasn't a representation, but an allusion [...]. The initial intention of the modern artist is to submit everything to his own style and above all the rawest object, the most naked object. Its symbol is Van Gogh's Chair" (*ibidem*, p. 113).

Conclusions

The perpetual refusal of photography artistic assimilation to other arts, probably had a dominant role in inducing photographers to reflect on photography. In his photos Le Gray still encloses landscapes in the frame to transforming them in subjects; on the other hand, Photo Secessionism will transform itself in *straight photography*, whose main symbol is Paul Weston's *Cabbage Leaf* (1931). In it we recognize a research for beauty that transcends its subject: photography, reflecting on itself, demonstrates his artistic ontology. The rejection of photography to EBA put emphasis on the deep difference between traditional and modern art, of which photography will finally be an integral part.

It isn't a coincidence that 291 Gallery was the first to expose in USA works by Rodin, Matisse, Picasso, Cezanne and Picabia. Speculative research implicit in photography fruition entails an intellectual effort rather than immediate ecstatic gratification, and this probably was the great insight of Photosecessionists.

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