Anxiety about the real:
Art, photography and social ontology (post-digitalization)

Peter Osborne
CRMEP, Middlesex University, London

It is a familiar feature of the history of the relationship between photography and art that it has at least as much to tell us about art, in general, and the consequences and limitations of particular conceptions of art, as it does about photography, and *its* artistic possibilities and limitations. Indeed, if there is a single practice in relation to which the *development* of the concept of art over the last 150 years is most often narrated, it is (undoubtedly, I think) photography – photography in its expanded (and still expanding) sense as the *historical totality of photographic forms*, or types of images produced (in one way or another) by the inscription of light: predominantly, chemical photography, of course, but also film, television, video and now digital photography, as well as things like photocopying and scanning, and even micro-wave imaging, infra-red, ultra-violet and short-wave radio imagery. Given this historical diversity of technologies, it seems to me, there is no more reason to privilege the *chemical* basis of 'traditional' photographic image creation, in the delimitation of the parameters of the concept of photography, than there would be to constrict the parameters of 'painting' by the chemical composition of pigments used during the Renaissance. Photography, like art, is an *historical* concept, subject to the interacting developments of technologies and cultural forms (that is to say, forms of recognition) and, increasingly, developments within photography, along with digitally-based image production more generally, are *driving* the historical development of art. Not just *reactively*, as was initially mainly the case, in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (in the transformation and internal retreat of other forms of representation), but *affirmatively*, in the use of photographic technologies to produce 'art' of a *variety* of kinds. (I use the term 'art' throughout in its institutionally validated, artworld sense – which is not to say that it's delimitation is merely, positivistically, institutional, and not the product of critical judgement. There are criteria for the *form* of such judgements, but the judgments themselves are never reducible to such criteria.)

The question of the relationship of photography to art may thus to be posed in two different ways: (i) synchronically or conjuncturally, at some specific time in their related histories (specifically, for us, *now*), and (ii) diachronically, as a narrative question about the relationship between the two histories – in terms of the possibility of some unitary narrative, which might contribute to the intelligibility of each. Each of these questions presupposes an answer to the other question – the historically given; and the definition of the standpoint of the present. What is not helpful, I think, is to seek an answer to the question of the relationship between photography and art *in general* as if they were not historical concepts, in the manner of an old-fashioned analytical philosophy of art. Nonetheless, the existence of a constitutive historical dimension to these concepts does not mean that we need be positivists about history, and deny an ontological dimension to photography or indeed to art – anymore that the existence of art institutions, socially delimiting the field of art means that we need be positivist about institutional form. Rather, both

photography and art can be meaningfully discussed within the discourse of *historical ontology*. This is my basic philosophical presupposition.

In what follows, I address myself to a version of the first question posed by the organizers of this workshop, which is 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about *the nature of photography as an art form*?' But I shall modify this question in one decisive way. For I wish to problematize (indeed, to reject) the assumption underlying this workshop as a whole that what we can legitimately call 'photography' today displays the unity of a 'medium', in the broad conventional sense adopted and developed by modernist formalism (namely, a specific combination of material means and conventions governing practices of production); such that the critical task would be to update or redefine our conception of that medium under the changed technological conditions of 'digitalization'. *Certain* photographic *practices* may exhibit such a unity, but, first, this unity is not that of the photographic *tout court*; and, more importantly, second, nor is it of any *ontological* significance for the status of those practices as art – in the way in which, within modernist formalism and before, the art status of a particular practice was taken to derive from its being an instance of a *particular* art – where 'art' is understood as the art *of* a particular medium.

The concept of medium mortgages discussion of the relationship of photography and art to a particular critical tradition (modernist formalism) from which I wish to dissent. Not
only because it is, in my view, inadequate to the comprehension of nearly all the most significant developments within the visual arts over the last 50 years (as well as in the second and thirds decades of the 20th century); but also because it has come to function philosophically as the historical ground for the revival of a broadly Kantian aesthetics of contemporary art; and thereby, the perpetuation of a fundamental conflation of 'aesthetics' with the philosophy of art. This is my second problem with the way this project has been set up.

My topic is thus not 'aesthetics after photography', but rather 'art after photography'; to taken up reflectively as 'philosophy of art after (in the sense of 'in the spirit of') photography'. This is not to say that there is no aesthetic dimension to photography and contemporary art, but only that it is *not the criterion of art status*. Contemporary art is not aesthetic art, in Kant's sense of being an appropriate object of *pure* aesthetic judgments of taste. If/when there are such judgments, they are all what Kant called 'logically conditioned ' ones – about which we had nothing further to say. The question 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about the nature of photography *as an art form*?' should thus be reposed, more generically, as 'What, if anything, does digitalization tell us about *the nature of photography in art*?' I say 'the nature of photography *in* art', rather than 'the nature of photography *as* art', since the latter does not exhaust the former: photography plays an important role in contemporary art beyond what we may call photographic art, or what others might still want to call 'art photography' – as an element or component of a wide variety of different kinds of installation work, for example. One of the most important, and unresolved critical questions of the day, in my view, is what the relationship is between these different kinds of practice – that is, whether they can be subjected to a single overarching critical problematic; and what the consequences are for the concept of art if they cannot, and 'art' is therefore a fundamentally bifurcated field, in which 2 quite different sets of critical conditions apply.

In reposing the question in this way, then, my aim is to reposition the question of photography's relation to and place within contemporary art within a different critical history of contemporary art – a history that is less centred on mediums, their multiplication, problematization and *revival* (the current, belated second coming of medium-specific modernism; the Halleluhja chorus of the revival of 'aesthetics' as a philosophical discipline); and one that is more centred on mediums, their multiplication, problematization and the *definitive destruction of their ontological significance* by the combination of performance, minimalist, conceptual and other related practices of the 1960s, which changed the status and their thereby the character of the traditional 'arts' of painting and sculpture – and also, presumably – photography. This is a critical history that gives rise to a broad ontological characterization of contemporary art as a post-conceptual art. (The paradox here is that photography only gained generalized institutional recognition as an *artistic* practice *after* the destruction of the ontological significance of medium – a destruction to which it made its own distinctive contribution via its important role *within* conceptual art practice. Photography became a part of 'art', then, at the moment that 'art' became post-conceptual. In this respect, following this line of thought, photography is art to the extent to which it is itself a post-conceptual practice.)

In adopting this standpoint, I take myself to be addressing the project's interest in '*new models of art writing* that draw equally art history, theory, aesthetics and criticism'. From my point of view, the interest in such models stands in *contradiction* to the conventionality (I am tempted to say the 'traditionalism') of both the concept of medium and the reduction of the philosophy of art to aesthetics, which are the two main conceptual parameters that appear to be structuring the project, as it has been presented to us here.

Digitalization and the real (the generic and abstraction)

There is an ambiguity in the formulation 'photography after digitalization' which goes to the heart of the complexity of the role of photography in contemporary art. It corresponds to the two-fold nature of the traditional photographic process. For the phrase can be understood to refer to either or both of (i) the digitalization of the *act of photographic capture* – in the sense of the translation of the distribution of intensities of light on the sensor into the binary code of the data file, within the digital camera, in the 'taking' a photograph; and (ii) the digital condition of the *production of an image* from a data file (the so-called 'digital image' – although, as was pointed out yesterday, the image *itself* is not digital). These two processes are, of course, disjunctive and potentially separable, since the data from which a digital image is produced need not be the result of photographic capture, and so the so-called digital image is not necessarily photographic. It is the disjunction between these two processes that raises the possibility of the manipulation and transformation of 'photographic' data, subsequent to the taking of a picture, prior to its projection as an image – that is, computerized image processing. And it is this possibility that generates ontological concern about the 'no longer indexical' character of digital photographs.

There are a number of things to be said about this. The first is that the former of these two processes (the digitalization of the act of photographic capture) *retains* both the causal and deitic aspects of photographic indexicality, but without the iconic

aspect of resemblance previously inherent in the notion of a trace. (I take David Green's point here about the neglected importance of the deitic side of this – the manner of pointing to the event of inscription – ostension as a constitutive, performative feature of photographic indexicality). The ontological anxiety about the real generated by digital photography is *in this respect* misplaced. It derives, rather, from the disjunction between the two stages of the photographic process. Yet this disjunction is also a feature of traditional chemical photography, in the disjunction between the negative and the print, both of which are in principle as open to manipulation as a digital data file is. The difference thus does not concern the possibility of manipulation, per se, but rather its precise character and quality; in particular, [again, this was pointed out yesterday] the extraordinary 'fine grain' manipulation that becomes possible at the level of the pixel, which can be performed in such a way as to leave no *visible* trace – relative to visual expectations governed by conventions of photographic realism. Nonetheless, artists (and others) have been intervening into the mechanisms of the photographic processes since its inception, without generating the ontological anxiety about the real that has accompanied the advent of digital photography.

In principle, the, this anxiety appears irrational – which is, of course, no more than to acknowledge it *as* an anxiety, a free-floating anxiousness about the real that has 'latched on' to digital photography as a cultural site in which to invest, because of the *social* importance but current *uncertainty* of various of the *documentary functions* of photography. The basic source of this anxiety thus has nothing to do with photography itself. Rather, I would speculate, it has to do with the *nature of the abstraction of social relations* characteristic of capitalist societies; and in particular, the relationship between social form and the value form (in Marx's sense) – that peculiar sense in which, in the parlance of current journalistic commentary, the most decisive sectors of the capitalist economy (associated with finance capital) are <u>not "real</u>". In the last few weeks, we are told, the financial crisis has really started to feed through into the 'real' economy. There is something ontologically very peculiar about this. For it is precisely the *most* real part of the economy – in the sense of the most determinative – finance capital that is declared 'unreal'. The troubling thing is that in societies based on generalized exchange, certain kinds of abstraction (money being the most famous example) are in fact real or actual in a manner that does not correspond to the ontology of empirical realism that governs ordinary language use of the term real – hence the disjunction between the actually very 'real' economy of finance capital and everyday perceptions of the 'real' economy. This is the famously 'spectral' or inverted ontology of value familiar to readers of Marx's *Capital* for a very long time now. The reason that I am talking about this here is that, I propose, it is an anxiety about the real generated by these peculiar social forms (within which the most real appears unreal, and the apparantly real has little determinative significance) that is displaced onto and invested in the problem of the referential significance of digitally produced images. The fact that there is in principle *no necessary visible indicator* of the referential value of such an image, mimics the structure of the commodity, in which there is no necessary relation between use-value and exchange-value.

There is, then, no particular ontological problem about digital picture taking. There is, rather, a set of normative issues about the conventions governing the 'processing' of data in the interval between its 'capture' and projection/printing,

under technological conditions facilitating a *generalized* manipulation of the components of images. This de-coupling of the photographic image from its indexical ground (which is still there at the outset) obviously has a certain significance in the context of *art*, since art may be conceived as a form of *self-conscious illusion*. Might it not be the growing self-consciousness of the *potentially* illusory character of the photographic image (subsequent to its digitalization) that makes it the form of the image most appropriate to art – or at least, to a post-Romantic conception of art as self-conscious illusion.? I will return to this shortly.

This leads to my second point: insofar as there is an ontological peculiarity or novelty at issue here, it attaches to the digital image per se, and not just the 'photographically' generated one – although most digitally produced images *are* photographically based, in one way or another. It derives, I think, from the lack of *visual* 'resemblance' between digital data and the projected or printed form of the *image* it generates. Insofar as it makes any sense to talk of a digitally produced image as some kind of 'copy' of the data out of which it is made, it is a *visible* copy of an *invisible* original, since it is the digital data that plays the role of the original here, rather than the situation or event that is depicted, which is a more distant, shadowy source. This is quite different from the role of the negative as the mediator between the act of photographic capture and the print. The contiguity of the two processes is ruptured by the ontological peculiarity, or self-sufficiency, of digitalized data. On the other hand, however, we might see this as little more than a variation of (albeit an intensification of) the essentially theological character of the traditional chemically based photographic image itself.

As Boris Groys has pointed out: insofar as a digital image is a *visible* copy of an *invisible* original, 'the digital image is functioning as a Byzantine icon – as a visible copy of invisible God.'(84) Groys, however, appears to take this theological structure to be distinctive of digital imagery. Yet this is something it *shares* with the traditional photograph, albeit in a distinctively different form. Rather, I think, the digitally produced image exhibits something like a *de-temporalization* of the theological structure of the photograph, consequent upon its rupture in the continuity between the two stages of the photographic process. Its *decisive difference* lies in the attention it calls to the *multiplication of varieties* of forms of visualization made possible by that rupture, within the parameters of what are still, essentially, processes of replication.

In Barthes famous account in *Camera Lucida*, the temporal peculiarity of the photograph as in some way the literal presence of the past is understood to effect an 'immobilization' and 'engorgement' of time (91). This represents a naturalization of the theological structure of the icon, via time, because meaning participates in the real through the becoming 'carnal' of light. In the digital image, on the other hand, time is not immobilized or engorged so much as *obliterated*, insofar as any ontological significance of the physical contiguity of digital data with its process of production is negated by the rupture in its *visual* form: its translation into binary code. It is this rupture that allows Groys to figure digital data as 'invisible' and hence, metaphorically, God-like. But it is not just *invisibility* that figures divinity in this account of the digital image, but the *creative potential* of digitalized data to generate a (in principle infinite) *multiplicity of forms of visualizations*. (Although Groys does not quite put it like this himself, since he is primarily concerned with the mediating role of the curator as 'the performer of the image' (85), rather than the infinite

potentiality of the data that underlies this role. For Groys, it is digitalization that allows the curator to usurp the role of the artist.)

Invisibility and the multiplication of visualizations are linked insofar as, following the line of thought of iconoclastic religions, it is precisely *the multiplicity* of visualizations that sustains the invisibility of the Invisible. Since, were the invisible to be associated with a single, or even a few stable visible forms, the Invisible would become *identified* with them, and would henceforth be rendered visible after all.

It is thus the multiplication of possible forms of visualization/projection (screen, monitor, wall, etc) deriving from the generic power of digitalization to *free itself from any particular medium* that, ultimately, distinguishes the digital image from its chemically photographic predecessor. And it is this multiplication of possible forms of visualization/projection that allows Groys to claim that, although the digital image remains in some sense a copy (a copy of its data), each 'event of its visualization is an original event' (90). Originality thus migrates, or at least, is *doubled*: moving from what it is that is copied (now, the data), to *the form* of the copy. This has significant consequences for art practice, as well as for curation. With regard to photography, though, we can say that the main function of digitalization is to place photography within the *generic* field of the digital image. This generically digitally based field is the closest thing there is to a material medium of the generic concept of 'art', characteristic of the post-conceptual artistic field. One might go as far as to propose that the *unity* of the field of contemporary art is secured, internally to its pure institutionality (which sets its ultimate parameters), by the possibility of the digitally mediated re-presentation of works.

This is not a 'de-materialization', however; but a materially specific medium of generation of an in-principle-infinite field of visualizations (the data file). If there is a meaningful site of 'de-materialization' at stake here, it does not lie in the data file, nor in the conceptual dimension of the work (the originally postulated site of de-materialization), which is actually always tied to specific materializations, but rather (ironically) in the *image* – insofar as the image is the term for the perceptual abstraction of a visual structure from its material form. Via the very multiplicity of visualizations, digitalization draws attention to the essentially *de*-realized character of the image. It is this de-realized image – supported in each instance by specific material processes – that somehow 'corresponds' to the ontological status of the value-form. The return to medium – medium as a *reactive* response to an anxiety of its own (anxiety about the end of mediums as 'arts', as a version of anxiety about the real more generally) – is the dialectical counterpart to this derealization of the image.

<u>Peter Osborne: writing on photography</u>

'Sign and Image', in Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 20–52

'Photography in an Expanding Field: Distributive Unity and Dominant Form', in David Green, ed., *Where is the Photograph?*, Photoworks/Photoforum, Brighton, 2003, pp. 63–70.

'Art After Photography, After Conceptual Art: An Interview with Jeff Wall', *Radical Philosophy* 150, July-August 2008, pp. 36–51