Circa 1930
Art History and the New Photography

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Can’t you see, my dear Roh,  
that all this writing about art irritates  
rather than advances it ...  
The few who matter ... will go their way,  
thank God, just as well without us.  
God knows we cannot change the path  
of their art and certainly not of art in general.  
– Hans Baeker to Franz Roh,  
December 30, 1925*.

1 Franz Roh, a protégé of the Renaissance art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, received this letter in response to his book Post-Expressionism (Nachexpressionismus), a survey of trends in contemporary painting that included a chapter on photography. Isolated articles notwithstanding, it was highly uncommon in 1925 for someone with a doctoral degree to write a scholarly treatise on the art of his own time. Baeker, a former classmate, had earlier fretted to Roh that to write on contemporary art meant to abandon scientific inquiry for mere ‘art news reporting.’1 The appearance of Post-Expressionism, following Roh’s debut publication (and dissertation) on Dutch painting, confirmed Baeker’s worst fear: that scholars might breach the temporal and critical distance separating art from its historical evaluation.

2 In fact, Roh would become one of a group of trained art historians in central Europe who did that and far more for photography. These advocates and enthusiasts, commenting simultaneously on contemporary work and on photography’s nineteenth-century beginnings (and in certain cases experimenting with photographic images themselves), contributed to the rapid establishment of photography as a branch of art history inquiry. Taken collectively, their investigations set the parameters for photography’s consideration as a medium – a word suddenly brought into use at this time, and one that
has stayed ever since, with all its confusing associations, as the material basis for claims of unity in an otherwise demonstrably disparate field.\textsuperscript{2}

The books, exhibitions, articles, and lectures that proliferated in central Europe around 1930 – the writings and ideas Martin Gasser has identified in his pivotal essay as the first ‘histories of photographs as images’ – developed from the simple yet remarkable premise that all images involving a photographic component belonged in a grand, unbroken aesthetic history.\textsuperscript{3} This maneuver, essentially the creation of an art history for all photography, contained a predictable bias toward fine art (whether academic or avant-garde), although insistence on this point can be overstated. Roh, for example, shared his mentor Wölfflin’s preference for anonymous makers, and held the ‘genius’ of photography to reside in ‘general lay productivity’ (\textit{allgemeine Laienproduktivität}), while his closest school chums, Hans Finsler and Siegfried Giedion – one a career photographer, one a historian enamored of camera work – likened photography to engineering as disciplines free from outmoded expressivity or personal style.\textsuperscript{4}

Charges of elitism are, in any case, not as interesting to pursue as the implications involved in claiming an encyclopedic coherence for photography’s manifold forms and uses, with work of circa 1930 as the model for such a claim. The first, most obvious implication is that modernism became the privileged moment in this unification of photography’s past and present – yet without disowning or discrediting the past. This suggests an important divergence from arguments for modernist painting, whose advocates by and large wished to jettison past conventions, particularly those of the bourgeois 1800s. The issue, however, may be less a split between the discourses of photography and fine art than a convergence between photography and central European intellectual traditions. The modernism in question here is anchored in interwar central Europe, a period and place in which reformist innovators paradoxically sought legitimization from the past. It is within this environment that, indisputably, nearly all the first image-oriented writing on photography was created.\textsuperscript{5}

The second implication of this premise of encyclopedic unity is an equivalence posited between photography as a practice and its history as an art, with both understood to be modernist enterprises \textit{when properly performed}. Avant-garde photography seemed, in this reading, to tend inherently toward the encyclopedic and the interpretative. Roh, for example, who admired László Moholy-Nagy and the New Vision above all, likened the creation of composite or otherwise evidently manufactured images, to sorting through repositories of pre-existing objects or, in the case of photomontages, of ready-made images. And he saw this activity of building or sifting through things as constituting a form of historical commentary.\textsuperscript{6} For others including Heinrich Schwarz, Carl-Georg Heise, or Helmut Th. Bossert, who favored Albert Renger-Patzsch and the New Objectivity, the influential photographs were those that seemed to ‘bear witness’ to culture in its artifacts, as did the historian. They proffered knowledge in a form that could illuminate the core character of a time, and therefore establish its meaning. In both cases, the success of vanguard projects conferred on photography a capacity for analytical omniscience contained, apparently, in the very apparatus or operations of recording.

It was a self-serving investment in photography by central European art historians, then, that led them to champion modernist work of their day; the ‘new photography’ was understood to be art history by other means. Early claims for photography as a medium were based on this equation, as are the most influential theories of photography of subsequent decades, in which ‘medium’ has been replaced by subtler ontological terms.
such as memento mori, punctum, or index. To understand this intellectual legacy, it is important to revisit its historical origins and to see that the first historians of photography as art constructed an entire field, its past and present, as a slide lecture idealizing their own profession.

The first acknowledged art history monograph on a photographic subject was Heinrich Schwarz’s 1930 study of Scottish portrait painter and photographer David Octavius Hill. Based upon field research in Scotland, and enriched by plates reproduced exclusively from the originals, as well as commentary on the subjects portrayed, the book was a pioneering scholarly effort. Its author held a doctoral degree in art history from the University of Vienna, and a curatorial position at the city’s Belvedere Castle galleries. In 1928, Schwarz had organized Austria’s first post-imperial showing of historical photographs, including a group of works by Hill and his unjustly neglected partner Robert Adamson, obtained on loan from Hamburg. He followed this effort with a reprisal in Vienna of the landmark German exhibition Film und Foto, which surveyed the past and immediate present of photography from a decidedly Bauhaus perspective. Schwarz thus had one foot in the past and the other in the present, a deciding factor in his historical approach.

Schwarz’s positivist, progressivist convictions are well known, all the more so as they typify writing on photography in his day. In his view, photographic technology is at its heart realist and eminently suited to an age of reason, science, and the belief in progress. The many and independent efforts of invention in the early nineteenth century ‘bear witness that the time was ripe; and they refer the individual act of invention back to some motive power greater than the personal, to an impulse that was strictly determined by historical forces.’ By this Schwarz meant a bourgeois social order based on a desire for ‘pictorial witness,’ in which all ‘novel aspects’ must be ‘expressed plastically in some new, unique, and especially appropriate medium.’

Also in common with writers circa 1930 on photography’s history as art, Schwarz divided the century preceding his moment into three phases, one each of ascendancy, decline, and rebirth. The ‘generation of 1840–1870,’ as everyone called it, ‘surrendered itself unconditionally to the artistic mission of photography, that most radical tool at the disposal of realism.’ Their successors of 1870 to around 1900 betrayed that artistic mission precisely by turning their backs on realism, as did their followers. ‘Not until the emergence in our own immediate past of our present artistic impulses,’ Schwarz concludes, was it again recognized that art and photography – like art and science – might be united in a common purpose. ‘Today,’ he writes, ‘it is the artists who emphatically insist, as they did during the period of its invention, that photography is a perfect medium [that word again] for the expression of their artistic ideal: an exact record of reality, an essential reproduction of nature.’

Photography’s ‘destiny’ thus lies in answering a civilization’s call for realism. Individual generations (the pictorialists, for example) might deviate from that teleology; one would not be wrong, I think, to connect such an understanding of photography to the sense of betrayal 1930s liberals felt toward the generation of their fathers, who had engineered what they saw as the colossal leap backward of World War I. For Schwarz, this destiny had nevertheless to be fulfilled. There was no historical relativism here, only ineluctable evolution. But the evolution ended in revolutionaries. In his conclusion Schwarz mentions the surrealists, about whom he clearly didn’t know much but nevertheless took to be allies in his cause; he also footnotes the work of Renger-Patzsch as a reference.
the same time, revolution involved a putative return to origins. Why, in a book on the 1840s, did Heinrich Schwarz praise the art of his own day, and avant-garde art at that? Why did he find avant-garde art praiseworthy for going back to past beginnings?

In his picture book on early photography, published almost the same week as Schwarz’s study, folk art historian Helmut Th. Bossert (also a PhD in art history) likewise describes ‘honest workers’ and their followers 1840–1870 (the period covered in his book); a trough of degenerate imitators and commercial speculators after 1870; and the rinascita of recent years. Bossert’s concluding lines contain a commitment to a particular modernist approach:

> The present time is returning to the beginnings and recognizes exemplary achievements where on the basis of the most thorough technical abilities and artistic taste, a picture arises that meets the demand for strictest objectivity [Sachlichkeit], without killing the spirit within it.”

In 1930, such qualities, and particularly the noun Sachlichkeit, point to Albert Renger-Patzsch, at the time perhaps the most widely respected figure in central Europe among lovers of fine photography. Bossert (and Schwarz, who uses nearly identical language) was not alone among art historians in elevating Renger-Patzsch to the status of a model artist-photographer. Schwarz’s close associate Carl Georg Heise, curator of the Hanseatic city museum of Lübeck, had discovered his passion for contemporary photography as art in a visit to a Renger-Patzsch exhibition in Hannover in early fall 1927. Within weeks he had purchased a group of Renger-Patzsch’s prints, opened his own exhibition of Renger-Patzsch’s work in his museum, begun a lecture and essay on the photographer, and initiated negotiations that landed the photographer a terrific contract to photograph views of Lübeck and its monuments – itself the subject of an exhibition the following year.

Heise also made Renger-Patzsch into a cornerstone of what he called the ‘Collection of Exemplary Photog-raphy’ at his museum. He bought 145 of the photographer’s Lübeck pictures and eventually some 75 other works by him. This remarkable collection, shaped mainly by Renger-Patzsch’s preferences, came to cover contemp-orary art school projects, photo-journalism, portraiture, and, once again, as a historical baseline, a large group of photographs by Hill and Adamson – whose work Heise came to know in conversation with Schwarz.

One might explain Renger-Patzsch’s success in terms of its social conservatism. Disciplined, sober, and shot through with an undercurrent of piety, his photographs eminently fulfilled Bossert’s or Schwarz’s calls for a spiritually laden materiality. Renger-Patzsch even thematized the requirement: he photographed chimneys and trees as if they were cathedral steeples and then also photographed the cathedrals; he photographed hands at work as if they were raised in prayer and then photographed hands at prayer. And he did this all with a stress on modesty and hard work that would endear him to a central European audience.

Joining such expectations was a deep-seated, if less obvious, cultural prejudice, one that connects interest in Renger-Patzsch to the deep 1930s passion for older photography and for a history of photography per se. This was his encyclopedic reach, which delighted those who sought omniscience through pictures. This ability is what led Heise to describe the photographer’s work as ‘amazing, wonderful new possibilities for photographic pictorial art’ in a letter asking the eminent literary critic Kurt Tucholsky for help in publishing The World Is Beautiful, the great picture book of Christmas 1928 that would
catapult Renger-Patzsch to fame. For Heise, Renger-Patzsch represented photography in all its singular and exceptional possibilities. Which in turn implies that photography had such possibilities, that across its infinite manifestations it was definable, that it had an essence. Listen to Heise describing, for Tucholsky, Renger-Patzsch’s qualifications: ‘He photographs in fact not only hands, machines, plants, and animals... but in the last analysis everything... from old headstones and herring nets to roof gutters and cathedral spires and everything that lies in between.’

Such claims were part of a paradigm shift in advocacy, in which image profusion, long seen as the bane of photography’s aesthetic aspirations, suddenly became theorized as the very reason to view photography in artistic terms. No longer were ambitious art photographers to aim for the exceptional single print in an established pictorial genre, but on the contrary, leading theorists and writer-practitioners exhorted them to discover ever new subjects and means of reproduction or distribution. A 1930 review of recent publications in the popular daily Berliner Tageblatt seems, for example, to be a direct elaboration of Heise’s claims to Tucholsky two years earlier:

‘The whole world is revealed in these images: snow blanketing a landscape, jets of flame shooting from smokestacks high as towers, a plane awaiting takeoff, a young girl smiling at someone... a young vine showing its tendrils, church bells, macaroni curls, piles of boards forming a fantastic image; the steel armature of a radio tower rising elegantly skyward, a smiling landscape on the Danube, slender trees casting their shadow in the Thuringian forest, a carp showing its open mouth, ... a boat resting gently at shore ... One hundred subjects caught from life itself, from an old man’s peaceable head to artful light reflections cast by an invisible lamp.’

Yet there is a great irony here. The reviewer, it turns out, is not commenting on Renger-Patzsch’s The World is Beautiful, but instead on three other works, among them August Sander’s The Face of Our Time (Antlitz der Zeit) and foto-auge/photo-eye, the picture anthology edited by Roh and designed by Jan Tschichold – two volumes quite different in content and method from the one by Renger-Patzsch. In fact, as observers of the period know, Renger-Patzsch detested photo-eye, in particular, and the experimental Bauhaus world for which it stood.

In form and content, Roh’s anthology was demonstrably distant from The World is Beautiful. Notwithstanding the idyllic tenor of the review, the world it catalogued was raucous, fragmented, politically and sexually charged and, bloody with violence toward its end. It was rife with the earlier Dada works of Max Ernst, George Grosz, and John Heartfield, that Walter Benjamin in his Artwork essay would claim were fired from a gun.

The most exuberant images, such as a plate from the New York Times picture service of a diver about to enter the water, betray an off-kilter, nervous energy, as if a happy landing might quickly skew into a neck-breaking accident.

Roh came to photography not through folk art, as Bössert, or early lithography, the subject of Schwarz’s doctoral thesis, but through contemporary painting. In the chapter in Post-Expressionism on photography, Roh wrote – as did all advocates – of the artistic importance of selection and framing, the decisive mental operations that precede any manual activity. Unlike Schwarz, however, Roh found the ultimate expression of mental clarity not in a clean and unretouched photographic print but in photo-montage. In keeping with what he called the ‘photographic pieces of reality’ found in expressionism and futurism, Roh saw work such as Paul Citroen’s Metropolis, as exemplary in its marriage of contradictions: fantasy and tenderness, tremendous artistic license coupled with pure imitations of the real world. Those contradictions in no way undermined the
work’s aesthetic and interpretative coherence: ‘Artistic work involves here the sure and patient collecting of such decisive fragments, each tied to the others, so that it is completed only when they are meaningfully pieced together.’ The steady assembly of often contrasting, piecemeal visual information into a unified aesthetic interpretation of reality – such a procedure seems remarkably analogous to that of the art historian.

20 Roh made clear in photo-eye his differences with Renger-Patzsch: ‘our book does not only mean to say “the world is beautiful,” but also: the world is exciting, cruel and weird.’ His many-hued panorama was culled largely from the 1929 Film und Foto, an exhibition masterminded by Roh’s great mentor in things photographic, Moholy-Nagy (and indirectly by Roh’s former classmate Giedion with whom Moholy-Nagy had become quite friendly). Renger-Patzsch, meanwhile, had written to Heise of his bitter disappointment when he visited the show at its inaugural venue: ‘I find the exhibition ... to put it bluntly, mediocre and unsachlich.’ He claimed that Moholy-Nagy had simply promoted himself and the Bauhaus, pushing aside those who, like Renger-Patzsch, ‘don’t fit in with that flashy stuff’ and eliminating many others altogether (the jury, it is worth remembering, included no photographers, but instead two designers and once again an art historian). The exhibition organizer, Gustav Stotz, ‘wondered why I had sent him so little,’ Renger-Patzsch reported to Heise with delicious irony, ‘and then he said that I must have many more interesting prints at home. Upon this I told him that I thought the exhibition entirely too interesting, but he didn’t get it.’

21 Much has been made of this split between Renger-Patzsch and Moholy or Roh by photo historians attentive to period feuds and, quite rightly, to formal differences. Bridging that gap in appearances, however, was a shared sense that the camera can capture the world. If anything, Moholy and Roh simply trumped Renger-Patzsch at his own game, as Roh himself indicated: they showed more of the world, and they showed it in more ways. Small wonder, then, that Renger-Patzsch, for all his differences, was asked to participate in Fifo, or that his work appeared (if sparsely) in Roh’s photo-eye. His ‘world’ had simply been swallowed by a galaxy.

22 What does this argument of profusion and universality have to do with history lessons? It is this: history is the final, the grandest dimension of the encyclopedism of this age. It is the ultimate leap into infinitude, adding, to the possibilities of subject, pose, angle, print orientation, and context of presentation or reproduction, the further universe of endless instants in time. Those instants stretch, meanwhile, into a nearly horizonless distance. In the most striking instance, Bauhaus photographer and teacher Lucia Moholy – like Schwarz a native of Prague, who had studied art history at university there before moving abroad – claimed in 1939 that a ‘desire for photography [dates] from the earliest days of mankind.’ Her book, A Hundred Years of Photography, written to illustrate her argument, is off by more than one order of magnitude. She adduces examples of putative ‘desire’ from China in the second century BC to Assyria, Egypt, and Pompeii. When she finally lands her time machine in the era of photography’s official invention, it is to declare, parroting the phrase by Schwarz, that ‘the time was ripe.’

23 Photography, strategically argued as a unified and continuously developing field (pictorialist deviants notwithstanding), was endowed, through such sweeping arguments, with a global prehistory and an unbroken historical past as well as a limitless present and future. Beyond questions of subject matter, print technique, mode of distribution, or context of reception; over and above the antagonisms of commercial professionals versus artistic amateurs, private snapshooters or domestic album makers versus a trained elite,
or even new objectivists versus new visionaries; containing and conjoining all these disparate directions is photography's unifying identity as a singular 'medium' – and that identity was capped, crowned, by the forces of history.

I turn in conclusion to Heinrich Schwarz's very first published writing on photography. It was written in spring 1929, one season after Schwarz's Belvedere show on early photography, and precisely contemporary with the inauguration of Film und Foto in Stuttgart. This essay is not, however, on photographs of the 1840s nor on Bauhaus experiments. It is a review of The World is Beautiful:

'I don't know what effect this book has on professional or amateur photographers; I don't know whether, for example, a professional or amateur photographer has decided after seeing this book to give up his activities entirely until he is able to settle the shock it has caused [and make of it] a profound, lasting experience. Or perhaps this book would mean more to the non-photographer, perhaps the beauty of its pictures would more quickly and convincingly captivate someone not looking through the hood of the specialist, but who feels and enjoys naively, without preconditions?'

Boom! The sectarianism of photography's rival métiers is dispatched with that salvo. Yet the model viewer of these pictures was not so ignorant as the final sentence implies. Schwarz quickly explains which 'non-photographer' he has in mind, and what that person's recognition is worth:

'Writers realized the creative deeds and revolutionary art of a Manet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, or Marèes earlier and more clearly, they fought for them and engaged on their behalf, while painters followed the crowds and jeered the great ones uncomprehendingly. Why should this drama not repeat itself in photography; it appears that it must be repeated, as if by law, always and everywhere.'

Stated plainly then, Renger-Patzsch might be the Manet (or perhaps the Hans von Marées) of his time, but the art historian takes at least as great a risk in supporting him. In the case of photography, the prejudice would seem to be not just against an individual but against an entire medium. Only through recourse to art history, apparently, can that prejudice be corrected. Art history makes the medium as such, and that undertaking is to be understood as a vanguard activity. The practicing photographic avant-garde, meanwhile, assumes in this reading the mantle of collecting, interpretation, and period awareness formerly worn by the art historian. It is a curious state of affairs, whose consequences and blind spots await fuller consideration.

NOTES

1. H. Baeker to F. Roh, 21 June 1925, Franz Roh Papers.
2. In her response to the 2005 roundtable anthologized as Photography Theory, ed. James Elkins (Routledge, 2006), Anne McCauley remarks on the many imprecisions in historical and contemporary discussions of what the term 'photography' designates, and what constitutes it as a medium ('Do We Know What We Are Talking About?' 409–19).
although the best commentators of the period, such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, considered the meaning of images only in relation to the industrial era, its period consciousness and its operations of capital.

4. Roh made this point in his introduction to photo-eye (1930); in English as 'Mechanism and Expression: The Essence and Value of Photography,' in Germany: The New Photography 1927–1933, ed. David Mellor, 29–34 (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978). That Roh’s idealization of ‘lay’ material left only incidental marks on his actual art historical preferences may be inferred from the follow-up publications to photo-eye, two books in an unrealized series called Fototek. A 1931 review relays the editor’s stated wish to address ‘Police Photos, Photomontage, Kitsch Photos, Sport Photos, Erotic and Sexual Photos’ (Oswell Blakeston, ‘Recapitulation. A Review of Franz Roh’s Fototek Series,’ reprinted in Mellor, Germany: The New Photography, 43). Yet the two books Roh did publish in the series were monographs on artist-photographers, Aenne Biermann and László Moholy-Nagy. Similar challenges beset the thinking of Finsler and Giedion, and indeed of Wölflin himself, despite his stated admiration for ‘nameless art history.’


6. Moholy himself came to this understanding by the time of the Fifo exhibition, under the influence of Giedion and, perhaps, Roh as well. See Olivier Lugon, “‘Schooling the New Vision’: László Moholy-Nagy, Siegfried Giedion, and the ‘Film und Foto’ exhibition,’ address given at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, June 2007.


8. Timm Starl rightly characterizes such assumptions as survivals from the mid-nineteenth century that held back the history of photography relative to writing on the fine arts as well as scholarship in other humanities disciplines; see his ‘Die Geschichte der Geschichte,’ introduction to the special issue of Fotogeschichte 17, no. 63 (1997): 2.


11. A similar judgment upon the ‘generation of 1870’ emanates from Walter Benjamin’s ‘Short History of Photography’ (Kleine Geschichte der Fotografie, 1931; in English as ‘A Short History of Photography’ in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) and much earlier essays by Josef čapek, particularly his ‘Photographs of Our Fathers,’ first published in October 1918, just weeks before the Armistice. To the ‘shapeliness, grandezza, seriousness and clarity’ of a portrait photograph from before 1870, čapek opposed in this newspaper feuilleton the ‘fogginess, emptiness ...’ and overall ‘boring,’ ‘disharmonic,’ ‘agitated’ and ‘dissipated’ tone of one made in the 1880s. The earlier picture, he observed, reflected a society that ‘respected the person,’ whereas in the ‘newer age’ Czechs (and perhaps all Europeans) ‘looked at life in a small way.’ J. čapek, ‘Fotografie našich otců,’ in Nejskromnější umění (The Most Humble Art, Prague: Dauphin, 1997), 41.


15. This argument is advanced skilfully by Olivier Lugon in “Photo-Inflation”: Image Profusion in German Photography, 1925–1945,’ *History of Photography* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 2008): 219–34.


20. Albert Renger-Patzsch to Carl Georg Heise, 8 June 1929; Renger-Patzsch papers, Getty Research Institute.


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**ABSTRACTS**

This paper explores the origins of photography’s history as art and the introduction of the word ‘medium’ as a term unifying the many and disparate fields of photographic endeavor. The art history of photography was established, to a significant degree, in central Europe around 1930 by a group of writers and practitioners with advanced degrees in art history who simultaneously...
promoted nineteenth-century work and the ‘new photography’ of their time. Innovative photography was therefore presented, perhaps surprisingly, as an expression of continuity with the past. Heinrich Schwarz, Carl-Georg Heise, Franz Roh, and others did not simply counter the traditional distance between (conventional) past and (radical) present, or between historical reflection and contemporary creation, they made photography into an ersatz form of art historical analysis – and art history into a practice worthy of the label ‘avant-garde.’

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