# Transformation in Photography: Constructing Reality

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John Berger writes, "There is no transforming in photography" . . . that "Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle." Take a stance on this statement using at least 3 other authors and 2 images that support your position, addressing how photography does or does not construct and transform.

In *Understanding a Photograph,* John Berger states his opinion that there is no transforming in photography, and that every photograph is a "means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality."[1] I am here to argue a that every photograph may be a means of testing, confirming and constructing *a* view of reality, but not a *total* view of reality. A photo can only show what's in the frame. It can imply things, but it is not a total view of reality. I will be supporting this argument using examples of specific artists and critical writings, as well as my own experiences of the world.

There are many ways photos can be transformed, and transform the way we see things. Photography has the power to construct a total view of a *false* reality. The photographer chooses what is in front of the camera. Berger himself uses the word "constructing", which in itself implies the creation of something not necessarily real. He also says that "photographs always and by nature refer to what is not seen" which could be considered transformation in the *mind* by reference; the viewer sees the photograph and thinks of something else or something not shown.

Berger says that "we think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses…"[2]. I don't think of art as any sort of evidence of a particular truth or as a likeness to something. I think of art as an entity unto itself, created from the mind and imagination. To me, a piece of art shows the viewer a new way to look at things, which is what a photograph does unless it is a redundant one.

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1 Berger, John, and Geoff Dyer. *Understanding a photograph. (*New York: Aperture, 2013): 291.

2 Ibid.

Barbara E. Savedoff references Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen's defense of photography's status in the art world in her book *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture*. They disagree with the notion that photographs directly record reality. "[There are] many ways in which the photo image diverges from what we see when we look at the world."[3] They believe that the choices the photographer is forced to make within the apparatus means that photography should be considered art. Art is an intentional thing for the most part, so when there is a choice, as even Berger acknowledges, there is a creative mind choosing how this piece of reality will be presented through the camera. There is a creative process in there, which can only signify art.

Savedoff points out that photography is generally perceived to be more closely related to reality than painting because it is a documentation of reality, but that it is not necessarily the case because photography is an act of constructing in the same way that painting is. "Our experience of paintings and photographs are very different, but our perception of photographs and reality seemingly converge."[4] People *perceive* photographs as records of reality or truth even though they understand that the photograph is a construction of the photographer.

Transformation can happen within the realm of representation. There are infinite ways to present a subject to the camera/viewer. It all depends on how the photographer wants the subject to be viewed. Savedoff uses the example of photographers who take pictures of things already represented in someway, like billboards, sculptures, signs,

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3 Savedoff, Barbara E.. *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) 48.

4 Ibid.

dolls, etc. A photograph can transform an inanimate object or thing into something animate simply by freezing it in time and flattening it into the two-dimensional realm. The viewer's brain is tricked into seeing the inanimate in the same way as one would see an animate subject in a photograph, which is also frozen and two-dimensional, because in images, there is only the option of inanimate, so all inanimate photographed things have the potential to be animate, and visa versa.[5] When a person and a sculpture are both completely still and two-dimensional, they are comparative to one another. This is true in the example of someone posing with a celebrity cut-out, the photograph turns the person posing into the same two-dimensional thing as the cutout, which itself was originally a different person posing for a photograph.[6] Painted backdrops for late nineteenth-century portraits are another example of utilizing the two-dimensional quality of the photograph to the portrait's advantage, creating the illusion that the backdrop is actually a real three-dimensional space that was transformed by the camera into a two-dimensional plane. A black and white photograph also lessens the gap between reality and image because nothing in reality is perceived as black and white, and it blurs the things that would be obvious traits of an inanimate object, like the color of the skin of a mannequin. A photograph of a mannequin and a person look relatively similar when both are in black and white, because there is no way to really get a sense of texture or realness when there is no color.

A good example of this phenomenon is Robert Mapplethorpe's work. In *Black Males*, Mapplethorpe transforms black men into sexualized objects, almost sculptures, for

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5 Savedoff, *Transforming Images*, 67.

6 Photographing a photograph, making the celebrity cutout a poor image, as Hito Steyerl explores in *In Defense of the Poor Image*.

someone to aesthetically appreciate. He strives for perfection in his photography, thus

creating a spectacle out of these men. Their glossy black skin is fetishized by our society,

as we look at them as something "different, excessive, other."[7] These photographs are also

all in black and white, which throws the men into the realm of the inanimate. They are

placed on pedestals and are posed in very specific and sculptural positions to further

make us look at them as objects. In opposition to this, Mapplethorpe's still life

photographs transform the inanimate objects into seemingly living, breathing organisms.

These are also mostly in black and white, creating the illusion that the flower petals could

be skin, and that the shadows could be in motion.
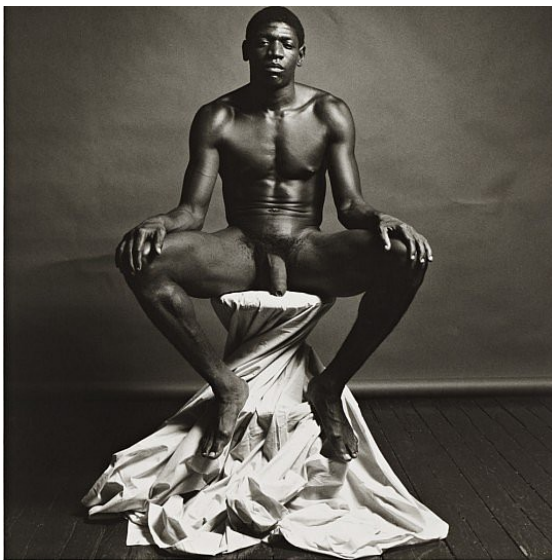


*Bob Love,* (1979)

Edward Weston is another good example of this, well known for his female nudes

that focus on a specific part of the body in each photograph, showing us the female body

in new and different ways. In this photograph, we see only the lower half of the torso,

emitting the limbs and head. It is strange to see a body in this way and therefore our

7 Mercer, Kobena. *Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. (*London: SAGE Publications in association with the Open University, 2000) 435.

minds see it as an inanimate object. Stark white contrasted against dark black, a pear-like

form floats in the black abyss. Juxtaposing the nudes, Weston photographed a lot of

sensual vegetables. Taking away the bright red, greens, and yellows of peppers and

placing them in a two-dimensional monochromatic space, Weston highlights the contours

and shadows within a pepper, creating a lively and spirited representation of a vegetable.
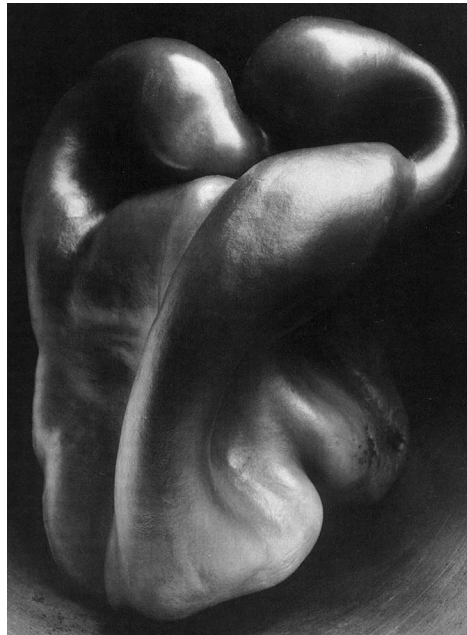


*Nu*, (1925)                                   *Simply Pepper*, (1930)

Through the reconstruction/rearrangement of his photographs, Andreas Gursky

photographs like a painter, or paints like a photographer, Photoshop serving the purpose

of a paintbrush to transform the photograph into something other than a record of reality.

Gursky will take multiple photographs of a city landscape, and layer them on top of each

other or put together parts of each photograph to create a much busier, hyper-real

landscape. He makes these photographs look as convincingly and painfully real as

possible, printing them larger than the largest available photo paper to force the viewer to fully be immersed into the world he is creating.



*Remini,* (2003)

  *Remini* shows a beach that seems to continue infinitely, creating the effect of a mass-production of beach-goers in a completely consumer culture by seamlessly piecing together the same beach over and over again in subtle ways.

*99 Cent,* (1999)

*99 Cent* shows a wonderland of American products with people scattered throughout the aisles, looking insignificant next to the mass-produced corporate paradise stacked on every shelf. These photographs look like they could be real, even though we have never seen places like these, creating a hyper reality. Gursky has transformed the mundane into a consumer slap in the face. On the other end of things, he also sometimes transforms industrial spaces into completely empty landscapes, like in *Rhine II,* (1999).



*Rhine II,* (1999)

The world of advertising is indeed one of the transformation and alteration of the real world. Even just the representation of what a "normal" person looks like in a commercial is completely skewed. Normal people don't have perfect, shiny hair, polar white teeth, perfect skin, and ironed clothing all the time. Girls on their periods are typically not as ecstatic to use a tampon as a girl in a tampon ad. Disneyland is not exactly the "happiest place on earth". Advertising creates more hyper-realities and uses Photoshop to create the exact pseudo-realistic world they want to project onto society. Another example of this is how much alteration goes into photographs of models. Usually the model herself doesn't look anything like the finished product. The advertising world sets this impossible ideal for women to strive for by creating a reality of what the model looks like out of their imaginations utilizing a computer. They have transformed our image of what a women looks like through a photograph.

In a similar sense, trick photography also transforms reality into something else. What comes to mind for me when thinking of trick photography is perspective and playing with the two-dimensionality of a photograph. People often as a joke will take a picture of themselves holding their friend in their hand while said friend is 50 feet behind them. In the photograph it looks like the friend really shrunk because they are on the same plane as the person in the foreground. If the photographic element were taken away, it would be obvious that the person was just farther away from the camera.

When virtuality is brought into the picture, transformation is even easier to come by. Just the act of looking through a screen at an image is transformational in its own right. Anne Friedberg highlights an important quote from Virilio in her *Virilio's Screen;* "The screen is the passage from something material to something that is not."[8] The subject being recorded begins as something material and three-dimensional, but then is transformed by the viewer's gaze through the "cathode-ray window" into a two-dimensional space, being the screen. According to Virilio, there is a dimension that gets lost in this translation from reality to the virtual world, the "lost dimension".[9]

As Hito Steyerl points out in *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, perspective is transformational. The way that you look at something changes the meaning of it, and with new technologies arising, there are new perspectives also arising. Steyerl says that many of the aerial views in our culture (i.e. Google maps/earth,

8 Friedberg, Anne. *Virilio's Screen: The Work of Metaphor in the Age of Technological Convergence*, (Journal of Visual Culture, 2004) 184.

9 Ibid, 186.

surveillance footage, etc) create the illusion that there is some "superior spectator safely floating up in the air". This has changed our society's attitude toward images. Our "detached observant gaze [is] ever more inclusive and all-knowing to the point of becoming massively intrusive."[10] The gaze is being transformed by the technology, in the same way as presentation transforms the gaze.

Photographs can be transformed by their context. If I see a photo of people in the holocaust by itself, I will be overcome by thoughts and feelings about the holocaust, but if I see the same photograph next to a pornographic photograph, like Gerhard Richter did in *Atlas*, I will be making subconscious connections between the two photographs and perhaps take the holocaust one more lightly. Richter is all about representation. He represents photographs as paintings and paintings as photographs. He takes away the defined stigma of the photograph being exactly a two-dimensional recording of reality, and gives it a new definition of "photo-picture", which is a representation of the world that is obviously and accessibly not supposed to be viewed as a direct record of reality. In his eyes, the photograph and its referent belong to the same world, creating the analogy of photography. The photograph and its subject are so closely related, he likes to make the separation with paint, abstracting the figurative, and adding a layer of three-dimensionality with his paintbrush, giving the virtual world a texture.[11]

Photographs transform time. The photograph is a time capsule of sorts, literally capturing a moment in time. In Richter's words, photography systematically transforms the present into the past. Once the camera's button is pressed, the moment is over. Every

10 Steyerl, Hito. *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, (e-flux, 2011) 24.

11 Silverman, Kaja. *Photography by Other Means*, (Hayward Publishing, 2007) 174-5.

moment is fleeting but the camera arrests it indefinitely, or until the photograph is erased or destroyed. We see the photograph capturing the present moment as it will be later understood, an "anticipated nostalgia". The most common purpose of photographing is for memento's sake.

It is indeed interesting that for the most part, the effect of transformation in a photograph is dependent on the viewer's assumption that the photograph is in fact a record of reality. There would be no illusion if the viewer wasn't expecting to relate what is in the frame to their own experience of reality in some way. John Berger's argument is sound, yet lacking in taking into account all that I have argued. It is valuable to be aware of the abilities a photograph holds because we are surrounded by photographs everywhere we go. From transforming time, to transforming our view of reality, photographs can be utilized in countless ways to skew what is real and *transform*.