

Jean Baudrillard - Photographies 1985-1998 = Date Ver. 1 (Hr. 2), Graz

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KAIROS AND CONTINGENCY IN PHOTOGRAPHY:
JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S PHOTOGRAPHS

(1999)

EPILOGUE

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The extraordinary impact of Baudrillard's theoretical work on the development of art in the entire world is well known. Little known is the fact that Baudrillard himself is an artist.

Twelve years ago he started to take occasional photographs during his many travels. In the past six years this activity has become especially intensive. Baudrillard does not see his artistic activity as being directly connected with his philosophy. On the contrary, he takes pictures of what he does not want to comment on, and what he photographs escapes writing. But obviously the theories of Baudrillard are a background we cannot deny while we are looking at his pictures. In this respect, the title of this book and of the exposition of the Neue Galerie in Graz (1999) already gives a hint: „Within the horizon of the object" echoes the title of his dissertation of 1968, „Le système des objets", which he wrote while he was the assistant of Henri Lefèbvre, the author of a sociology of everyday life.²

Baudrillard was thus very early attracted by objects and has claimed the equivalence of subject and object in a radical theory. Reading the texts to his photographs and looking at the photographs in this book makes it obvious that he has made this theme the basis of his artistic work. This artistic work shares a common space of ideas with his theoretical texts.

Yet Baudrillard's analysis of the system of objects is not a phenomenological one, but a semiological one, looking at it as a system of signs. Baudrillard's photographic practice is also situated in this field of a semiotic system. Therefore a brief reference to Baudrillard's theory of signs.

In 1972, Baudrillard published „Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe", a reply to Marx's „A Critique of Political Economy" (1859). In this work, as in his later writings „Le miroir de la production" (1973) and „L'Echange symbolique et la mort" (1976) Baudrillard tried to show an extension of the law of commodity value at the level of the sign with a „political economy of the

sign". This structural revolution basically relies on the illustration of how the Marxian splitting of the commodity into use value and exchange value was repeated by the Saussurean splitting of the sign into signified and signifier. The exchange of linguistic signs in the circulation of meaning follows the exchange of commodities in the circulation of financial capital. The exchangeability of all commodities corresponds to the exchangeability of all signs. In this total and general interreference and exchangeability, combination and simulation, the signifiers turn into exchange values and the signified takes the role of the use value. The free floating signifiers correspond to the abstracted and complete exchangeability of commodities under capitalism. The signified and the signifier can form a chain of signs out of links which refer to each other and can lead to a semiotic catastrophe. Baudrillard's photographs are flights out of these catastrophic sign zones, that Baudrillard the theoretician has analyzed.

There is no more real, since the signs of the real have replaced the real. Like the exchange value the signifiers can thus float freely. Thereby he created the ground for a semiotic aesthetics, which looks for its melancholic foundation between the „godlike absence of the referent of the image“ and an „aesthetics of disappearance“.

This is why his aesthetics of absence deals with the appearance of objects. Baudrillard's obsession with things is an obsession with absence. But this absence is not to be understood as an emptiness or lack. Quite the contrary: As writing for Sigmund Freud is the original medium of absence (cf. „Civilization and its Discontents“, 1930), for Baudrillard photography is the medium of absence. Freud understood writing as a medium that can bring closer or back objects and events that have passed in time or are far away, thus as a medium that can overcome temporal or spatial distance or deficiencies. In a similar way, Baudrillard uses photography as a medium to ban the disappearance of things into time. His photographs ban the disappearance of things through the image. They drive away the curse of time, at least for the moment of

the image. The coincidence (of the moment, of the presence of the photographer) is favorable to the appearance of things. Contingency is the core of Baudrillard's aesthetics of appearance/disappearance (*apparition/disparition*) because it is in the coincidence that it overcomes the disappearance of things. The unreal moment of an accidental encounter of subject, apparatus, light and appearance is the product and the aim of Baudrillard's photography. For the image resulting out of this accidental encounter bans the disappearance of the world by transferring the objectual world into a world of signs. The aesthetics of absence turns into a rescue of presence. The object itself cannot be rescued, but its trace can be saved as sign in the image. Only as images can the objects be rescued from disappearing. Images thus ban time and banish disappearance. The images themselves, however, have deficiencies that have been analyzed in Baudrillard's theory of signs. In his photographs, he nevertheless takes on the risk to break through the ban of the images, that is the ban that images speak out, but also the ban that turns against the images themselves. Does this produce a strategy of seduction or trust?

The photographs might offer lines of flight out of the semiotic disaster zone. The philosopher's eye, tied to a complex brain that has reflected on the semiotic catastrophe, the free floating chains of signs, the agony of the real and the hyperreality of simulation, is excited, awakened and only sharpened by the appeal of the objects lying beyond or before analysis, reflection and critique. Baudrillard is searching for the primal scene of the image, for the image lying before the image, for the paradox of the presemiotic state of the sign. The image before or after the sign, politics, and art is the aesthetic illusion. Perhaps we can call this the longing for the pure intuition of the object.

If it is not us looking at the objects but the objects looking at us, as Lacan said, when the objects attract the attention of the eye of the philosopher, then they reach the level of images. This is the moment of the image, the

photographic moment in which the object by itself reaches the level of the image, its ability to be an image. Precisely when the objects are not philosophical, not of a philosophical nature or of philosophical relevance, when they lie before analysis and meaning they form the primal scene of the image. In his photographs, Baudrillard tries to make appear the singularity beyond meaning, beyond the social, beyond art.

His photographic world is a world where everything can still come into appearance. This is the line of flight offered by photography; it is its magic, its illusion perhaps, the irony of technology, that it should be photography which claims and makes possible that not everything just passes away, but that everything can still come into appearance. With his momentary shots Baudrillard tries to capture the moment, this unique, singular moment which attracts his attention and which without photography would disappear forever in the solitude of an individual experience or in the black hole of the universe. The picture and the experience are chained together by the coincidence of the appearance. Coincidence and appearance of the object are chained together by the image. The image rescues the appearance from disappearing. The contingency of a moment, a picture, beyond politics and the social, the precious nature of the moment, the singularity of the instance between appearance and disappearance are captured with photographic means. The pictures serve to prevent the disappearance of a unique moment, this unique encounter and linkage of the appearance of the things, with the possibility of an image and with the subject.

At a superficial glance, Baudrillard's photographs seem like stereotypical snap-shots, like holiday or traveler's pictures, like calendar photography. But for Baudrillard, they are rather about an evolution of the possibilities of photography, themselves a condition for the possibilities of the gaze and of the observer, during his/her encounter with the world. Baudrillard thus analyzes the „photographic condition“ (Rosalind Krauss). He is interested in the

appearance of things, *hórama*, under the conditions of photography. But he does not strive for a view of everything, an overview, a panorama of objects, the whole (panorama understood as a combination of *pan*, everything, and *hórama*, the view, what is being seen, appearance). He does not strive for the spectacle of reality in droves, the reconstruction of a collective reality. To the contrary, Baudrillard looks for the one (*hén*) in photography, the particular, the individual experience of the singular, the „hénorama“, the experience of the one, or the *ouden ti hórama*, the almost nothing of the appearance. Baudrillard is the photographer of the appearance, of the accidental appearance of the one, of the experience of the accidental appearance of the one by an individual for one unique moment (now).

Baudrillard is a photographer of the *kairos*, not of the *chronos*, of the here and now and not of time. He reacts to the instance, the elusive moment, the coincidence of the image, or of colored objects that arrange and offer themselves as image, and the coincidence of the presence of the photographer.

What is the focus of the eye of the photographing philosopher after the end of history? Baudrillard's attention is raised by the „system of objects“. Baudrillard's eye strolls along the world of objects. The phenomenology of perception (M. Merleau-Ponty) extends itself to the phenomenology of objects. But as he is trained in semiotic critique, he does not look for dramatic or decisive moments, but for the *parerga*, as Kant called the trivialities of aesthetics. The *parerga* represent the building elements of his aesthetics. This places Baudrillard in the French tradition of understatement, from Cartier-Bresson to Doisneau, who also resisted the temptation to analyze and comment human situations with their photographs. Baudrillard, however, does not even take pictures of social relations, but of objectual relations. It is amazing how he shows, as a matter of course, a world of objects resting in itself. At the same time one feels a certain melancholy accompanying the laconic photographic gaze. The laconic

character prevents the transformation of the everyday object into the magic of poetry, this well known danger to which most photo artists succumb to. Baudrillard encounters the almost hostile take over of photography by art in the 20th century with the imperturbability of the neutral object. Unobtrusively, the photographic apparatus lends to the objects their appearance profile and character to the images. Thereby that remainder of the world that normally escapes the excited eyes of the artists and the sensationalist photographers but that forms the main part of the universe, gets the colors and the formal urgency which it deserves. The photographic gaze literally rests on the surface of the objects and celebrates the appearances for the eye. This results in very colorful, very composed extracts of reality offered by reality itself, without the arrangement and the mise en scène of the photographer. In this brightness of the objects which simply photography, better than the natural eye, can sometimes produce it, glistens Goethe's adoration of the moment: „Verweile doch, du bist so schön.“ („Linger awhile! so fair thou art.“). The most irrelevant and random objects inflame libidinal energies. The apparatus of photography alone yields the arena to the objects in which they fascinate (often fatally) and seduce us. The desire of the gaze is wakened just by the inconspicuous and the random. This is the photographic trap both of Baudrillard and of the object.

The lingering and the seduction is followed by the disappearance. The appearances of the objects mirror simultaneously their disappearance. An aesthetics of appearance carries an aesthetics of disappearance. The exorcism of things, the trust in the world of things is followed by the collapse, the distrust of the image. The appearance of the signs rescues the appearance of the things from disappearing. In Baudrillard's photography, the epiphany triumphs over phenomenology and phenomenology forms the frame for a melancholic critique of epiphany. The laconic character of the things is the reason for their beauty.

Baudrillard photographs this beauty in a laconic way. In art, it is traditionally the subject that puts its stamp onto the world. It directs and constructs. It places everything on expression. The subject arranges the world of objects into a form in which the perception of the objectual world does not express the qualities of the objects, but the qualities of the subject. The photographic image is the expression of the subject, not of the object.

Baudrillard turns this historical condition of photography around. The quality of the objectual world to be an image is not defined on the level of the subject, but, as it was already said, on the level of the object that, so to speak, comes to itself through the image. The pure object is the primal scene of the image, and this primal scene in reality is without image, at least without a *leitbild*. This apparent antinomy of the pictorial quality of objects before the state of being a picture, an art before art, can be illustrated by the metaphor of a „langue sans parole“ (F. Picabia). Here, as in many other cases, Baudrillard's position is closer to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School as it is usually supposed. His aesthetics of the image correlates with Adorno's aesthetics without *leitbild*, a paradox aesthetics, „parva aesthetica“.³ Baudrillard interprets this aesthetics without *leitbild* as trans-art, as art without or after art. The longing for a trans-art corresponds to Baudrillard's longing for a politics after politics, for a trans-politics. There is a peculiar form of ecstasy in his photographs, as every ecstasy is determined by its element of transgression or transcendence. This ecstatic enjoyment through the photographic image is precisely this moment beyond politics, beyond the social, beyond the media, beyond art, precisely this moment of enlightenment through transgression which is promised by the primal scene of the image, the perception before the image.

Baudrillard resolves the paradox of an image without *leitbild* by referring to the fourth instance of the encounter of image, object, and subject, namely the photographic apparatus. For him, the possibility for the object to be an image and the power of the subject over the image are

equally determined by the technical virtuality of the photographic apparatus, which has in theory already been laid out by Vilém Flusser.⁴ The image is an acting out of technology, an exhaustion of the technological possibilities and thus the virtuality of the photographic apparatus. The automatic of the virtual produces the image. The person, the subject, is nothing more than an operator of the program, of the apparatus. With this definition of the image as the virtuality of the machine and as an elaboration of its technological possibilities the object succeeds in putting its stamp on the subject and its perception. The object mirrors itself in the subject.

In the mirror of photography the objects come closer, like in the warnings that we can read on the rear mirrors of American cars: „Objects in this mirror are closer than they appear“. Objects in the mirror of photography are closer than they appear. The distance between subject and object is smaller and narrower than our illusion makes us believe. By insisting on the role of object and apparatus, Baudrillard escapes two notorious traps of photography: the art trap and the technology trap. The art trap consists in the expressivity of the subject at the cost of the object. The technology trap consists in the expressivity of the apparatus at the cost of the subject. In both cases, we deal with forms of hegemony: the conditions and qualities of the subject and of the apparatus dominate and distort the conditions and the qualities of the objects. Photography turns into a distorted mirror of the object. By escaping the art trap as well as the technology trap, Baudrillard becomes the photographer of the world of things par excellence.

Without the pathos of history, without the constructed objectivity or *mise en scène* of art photography he produces a photography of things that, for the first time, is adequate for the things themselves. Through its reduced aesthetics, his photography of things does, for the first time, justice to the things. Do the photographic portraits form a horizon in whose mirror the objects appear distorted? It is at least significant for the perception of the

philosopher that he should have chosen one sentence which can be read on everyday automobiles as a warning, as a leitmotif for the perception of images. Of what nature is the mirror of photography? Do the photographic portraits form a mirror in which the horizon of objects appears distorted? Is the human being a mirror and are the objects thus closer as they seem or do they just seem to be closer to us than they are? Does Baudrillard survey not only the horizon of the objects with his photographs, but also the distance between the human beings and the objects? Are Baudrillard's photographs the beginning of the end of antropomorph photography and pictorial art?

Notes:

- 1 *The system of objects*, Verso, 1992.
- 2 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Verso, 1992, as well as *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Transaction Pub., 1994.
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1967.
- 4 Vilém Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, European Photography, Göttingen 1985, as well as *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, European Photography, Göttingen 1984.