

“Doing Justice to the Art in Photography”

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(in) Dominic McIver Lopes

The Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy

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In *Four Arts of Photography*, Dominic McIver Lopes takes aim at the narrow focus of mainstream philosophy of photography to date. If he is right (and I believe he is) philosophy has taken a significant but nonetheless partial subset of photographic practices as a model for thinking about the whole. As a result, a small number of epistemic questions have tended to dominate discussions of its nature. In what I shall call its “orthodox” guise, the thinking runs as follows. In photography, the image is produced by a non-human recording mechanism. Unlike human beings, recording mechanisms are immune to transcription errors generated by selective attention or false beliefs. Mechanisms that are immune to these errors are especially reliable carriers of information. So photographic images are known to be reliable sources of information, simply because they are photographic, whereas images made by the human hand are not. Call this photography’s “epistemic privilege.”

But the very same reasoning has led many to believe that photography is artistically hobbled from the get-go. We look to art for just those traces of subjectivity that are revealed by a particular artist’s choices about what to thematize and what to suppress and how to do so. But these choices compromise an image’s reliability as an information carrier. So photography’s epistemic privilege comes at the cost of its artistic potential. Call this photography’s “aesthetic deficit.” As a corollary, when a photograph does succeed as art, it must be to the detriment of not only its epistemic privilege, but also its purely photographic nature. Variants of this pattern of reasoning, which posits a zero-sum contest between photography’s aesthetic and epistemic capacities, have been the basis of a recurring skepticism about photography’s artistic potential since its invention.

Four Arts of Photography intervenes in this stand off between epistemic privilege and aesthetic deficit by rejecting the narrow epistemic focus of

mainstream philosophy of photography and by seeking to show that photography's epistemic benefits need not come at the cost of its aesthetic potential. Whether or not there is a trade-off depends on how a particular photographer engages with the art form – or, as Lopes would have it, with which of the various arts of photography he or she is working in. To see this we need a more nuanced conception of photography's artistic possibilities.

The set up is both bracing and elegant. Lopes refuses to dignify skepticism regarding photography's standing as art by trying to prove that photography is an art. That skepticism is false is taken as a datum. That is the bracing bit. The kind of skepticism that Lopes focuses on is clearly of Scrutonian descent, but Lopes takes the skeptic's reasoning to be an instance of more general patterns of thinking about photography. Since there is nothing wrong with the skeptic's logic, despite skepticism being false, there must be something wrong with the skeptic's premises. If Lopes is right, there is something wrong with every premise in the skeptical argument. There are four substantive premises in the argument as Lopes reconstructs it, and he sets out to demonstrate that they are all false by isolating each in turn and showing how one of the corresponding "four arts" of the title stands up to it. That is the elegant bit.

Lopes calls his approach "methodological skepticism." The gambit is that counter-posing skeptical patterns of reasoning with different ways of practicing photographic art provides a better sense of how photography can be art and where skepticism overlooks them. The take home message, which will come as no surprise to anyone who cares about photography, is that contemporary skepticism about photographic art stems from an undifferentiated, philistine ignorance of the field – despite its puffed-up, self-important guardianship of aesthetic value in art.

Straight modernist photography, or what Lopes calls "the classic tradition," is said to stand up to the skeptical premise that "an image is a representational work

of art only if there can be an interest in it as a depictively expressed thought.” It stands up to this premise by drawing attention to a source of genuine aesthetic interest in an image that the skeptic neglects. Images produced by belief-independent feature-tracking defamiliarize the world so as to feed an aesthetic interest in revelatory seeing. That is, in seeing the world photographically, as one has not seen it before. This is revelatory because one knows, courtesy of knowing that the image has been produced by belief-independent feature-tracking, that it is the world itself that one is seeing, not some invention on the part of an artist. So understood, photography satisfies an aesthetic interest in seeing the world as transformed by its photographic depiction.

What Lopes calls “cast photography” is presented as a legacy of conceptual artists’ recourse to photography for its most banal, documentary capabilities, and encompasses a broad range of post-1970s developments in photographic art. When cast photography succeeds, it shows that representing interesting thoughts is not only compatible with, but can even cancel out, the banality of depicted scenes. Like the classic tradition, it accepts the orthodox claim that pure photographs depict solely by belief-independent feature-tracking; unlike the classic tradition, it shows that this does not preclude photography expressing thoughts by choosing between scenes available for documentation. By “casting” existing objects and scenes in this way, the second art imbues images with subjects distinct from those objects they depict through belief-independent feature-tracking.

The third art of photography, which Lopes calls “lyricism,” tackles the orthodox account head on, by disputing its most fundamental claim, namely that “a pure photograph is an image that depicts only by belief-independent feature-tracking.” Lyricism encompasses a wide range of practices focused on the material processes and procedures of photography itself, thematizing them so as to put pressure on the view that pure photography consists solely in belief-independent

feature-tracking. If there are pure photographs that do not depict solely by belief-independent feature-tracking, we have a powerful incentive to formulate a new theory of photography. Lyric photographs are made through diverse forms of mark-making – most not unique to photography – guided by information output from a “photographic event” (of recording a light image).

The fourth art of photography, which Lopes calls “abstract,” stands up to the final premise in the skeptical argument, namely that “photography is an art only if some pure photographs are representational art works.” Here it is important to recall that the methodological skeptic isolates each premise in turn and pairs it with a practice of art photography that is said to stand up to just this premise while letting the other premises pass unchallenged. Leaving untouched the cornerstone of the orthodox theory – depiction by belief-independent feature-tracking – Lopes cannot construe abstract photography as non-representational; rather, he holds that its representational character must not be what makes it art. His proposal is that abstract photography is art that foregrounds photographs’ formal properties to sustain an aesthetic interest.

So much for the “four arts” of the title. Real world cases, as Lopes acknowledges, are typically hybrid: they stand up to more than one premise simultaneously. The isolation strategy is simply a heuristic for bringing out the variety of in principle distinguishable ways photography can be art and the corresponding ways skepticism goes astray by neglecting them. From a philosophical perspective, Lopes’s way of carving up the terrain results in a fresh take on the issues that is elegantly conceived and bracingly delivered. As a bonus, it introduces philosophers to a range of photographic art practices with which many may not already be familiar.

But the goal, I take it, is also to serve non-philosophers, particularly critics and theorists of photographic art. As Lopes describes his ambition, it is to show them

that philosophical approaches to photography bring something worth taking seriously to the table, something that should be of use to them. The ambition is laudable: I am sympathetic to the goal and to the belief in the relevance of philosophical reflection for other fields. So what are the implications of Lopes's "methodological skepticism" outside philosophy? Will it do much to engender a more philosophically informed criticism? One way it might is by leading by example – by modeling from the opposite direction what a more art critically informed philosophy might look like. Does it?

Here I think the answer may be yes or no, depending on what one takes a critically informed philosophy of photography to involve. Lopes is certainly more familiar with photographic art than most philosophers who write about photography, and this can only be a good thing when it comes to showing how philosophy bears on artistic practice. Even so, I suspect that many art critics and theorists may bridle at Lopes's division of the field. Take what he calls "cast photography:" this includes postmodern appropriation and mimicry of genre conventions in the "pictures" of Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman as well as the resurgence of something much closer to a modernist aesthetic in the "tableaux" of Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky – two diametrically opposed tendencies in recent art photography.¹ Lyricism ranges just as broadly: from Richard Mosse's hot pink documents of war-torn Congo, made by exploiting the effects of infra-red on the visible spectrum, through Thomas Ruff's pixellated pornographic screen-grabs and Craigie Horsfield's enormous, meditative textiles of crowds, circuses, and fire works, to James Welling's disorientating images of Philip Johnson's Glass House. These artists are doing quite different things with technical process and thematic content. Yet for the purpose of contesting the skeptical argument their differences are moot.

Lopes is the first to acknowledge that the four arts are philosophical abstractions: they do not purport to carve the art world at its artistic or critical joints. Instead, they take the premises of the skeptical argument as an optic through which to view art world practices in a new light: “The arts of photography that can be read off the skeptic’s argument do not always align with the categories wielded in art history books, but that is nothing to worry about so long as alternative perspectives shed light on what we care about” (p. ???) What we care about is likely to vary significantly between disciplines, but one question that naturally arises is whether methodological skepticism does, or indeed could, illuminate what we care about, if it categorizes different practices as standing up to the same skeptical premises. Note that, on Lopes’s account, such differences do not count as photographic, because they do not reflect deep structural possibilities afforded by the medium. What I am calling “critical” differences fall through that mesh. Clearly, parsing the arts on the basis of the skeptic’s argument divides the field in a more coarse-grained way than criticism requires. It is compatible with Lopes’s approach that there may be greater differences within the arts than there are between them, and these differences matter, however insignificant they may seem philosophically.

Need this be a problem? It might if criticism looked to philosophy for how to go about its business, but why on earth should it do that? Criticism is fine just as it is – or, if it is not, the problem is not one that philosophy may be expected to sort out. This brings me to a rather different sense in which philosophy might matter for criticism. Criticism might look to philosophy for some analysis or elucidation of those concepts on which its practice depends that do not typically come up for sustained interrogation by critics. These concepts pertain not only to the identification and demarcation of the critical domain (“photograph,” “photography,” “photographic”) but also to what a photographer does. The latter

can be understood specifically (“expose,” “capture,” “process,” “print,” “edit”) or generically (“act,” “intend,” or “cause”). The generic set of terms is especially important because photography has always been shadowed by worries about its mechanical substrate impacting its standing as an art. The skeptical argument is a direct descendant of such worries.

The book really delivers on this front, by drawing on G. E. M. Anscombe and Donald Davidson to illuminate the gap between agency and intention. In a nutshell, intention entails agency but not vice versa: though all intentional acts are acts of agents, not all acts of agents are intentional.ⁱⁱ A plausible conception of agency cannot require that acts be intentional per se – that is, under every description – but rather that they be intentional under some description. Putting it this way creates space for us to do many things that we do not intend to do – so long as there is at least one description of what we do under which we do intend it, and so can be asked for our reasons.

How might such apparently abstruse considerations help the working critic? As Lopes demonstrates in discussing a famous image of Cardinal Pacelli by Henri Cartier-Bresson, they show that a photographer need not intend every detail in a shot, on the model of a (ridiculously overblown) conception of intention in painting, in order for the shot to count as an expression of his or her agency. Even what gets recorded solely because it happens to be in shot alongside the intended subject, and so had to be recorded, may express the photographer’s agency. Details that Cartier-Bresson could not have anticipated and probably was unaware of (he held the camera above his head to get the shot) can be subsumed under the intention to depict the Cardinal enthroned by the faithful. This small piece of conceptual machinery immediately defuses some of the standard worries about the photographer’s lack of absolute control over what makes it into the image.

Granted, depiction by belief-independent feature-tracking is not itself something I do – a machine takes care of that – but it can be part of something I do so long as, in Anscombe’s words, it is “swallowed up” by some broader description, as in the Cartier-Bresson case.ⁱⁱⁱ Were criticism to take this on board, it would no longer be periodically assailed by the kind of worries that arise from implicitly understanding photography by means of an opposition to painting. Recall the millennialism that greeted digital photography – all that talk about “photography after photography” and the “ontology of the digital image”? Were photography and painting not assumed to be mutually exclusive, the scope for manipulation afforded by digital “painting by pixels” would not have seemed to question photography’s existence. Painters typically manipulate one set of tools, photographers another, but the tools overlap and intermingle, and either can express artistic agency. This is one implication of Lopes’s approach for criticism.^{iv}

So much for what criticism might learn from philosophy. What might philosophy learn from criticism? Philosophy typically looks to criticism for a more nuanced understanding of the field, and Lopes’s references attest to wide reading in the critical literature, even if it is not always easy to put such reading to use, philosophically. Take Lopes’s remarks about Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter.

According to Lopes, Wall practices cast photography. Cast photography stands up to the claim that “if a pure photograph is an image that depicts only by belief-independent feature-tracking, then there can be no interest in it as a depictively expressed thought.” It uses casting: selecting, staging, lighting, framing – in sum, directing – objects so as to make images convey thoughts that are not exhausted by the scenes depicted. In casting, all the action is in the staging rather than the recording of the scene. The recording of the scene remains a matter of belief-independent feature-tracking, just as orthodoxy maintains. But, contra orthodoxy, feature-tracking can be a means to express thoughts in pictorial form. In Wall’s

Mimic (1982), the thought is about how “small tears in the social fabric release energy in the form of a mocking gesture” (p. ??), though this is not what is recorded. What is actually recorded is a staged interaction between three people in a Vancouver street. Lopes terms these the work’s subject and object, respectively. The photograph records the object, but it has been staged in such a way as to communicate the larger subject.

Unlike painting, as Scruton understands it, a photograph’s subject is not represented by depicting objects in such a way as to communicate thoughts about them (P depicts O as S). But nor is it because photography, as Scruton understands it, passively records objects that already represent subjects, as when actors are filmed acting (P records O and O represents S). Rather, cast photographs depict objects, and in doing so represent subjects (P depicts O and represents S). Cast photography is *doubly* representational, representing at two distinct levels. Lopes’s account of these differences is subtle, but may be harder to secure than he believes. It is not clear, given the stress on belief-independent-feature-tracking at the primary level, what transforms mere recording into depicting. Moreover, it presumably matters that Wall’s figures are depicted in one way rather than another – it is hard to imagine a harmonious group representing “small tears in the social fabric” – and given this it seems odd to deny that the communication of the thought depends, at least to this extent, on how the figures are depicted, namely, as conflicted.

If that is right, it is not clear what is wrong with claiming that this image depicts its objects in a particular light, just as (much) painting does. The racist is depicted as both menacing and cowardly, making his gesture at the outer edge of the Asian man’s field of vision. The Asian man, by contrast, is depicted as caught between two ways of responding, not sure whether to confront or ignore a gesture that he is not sure he has witnessed. The racist’s girlfriend, who has to be dragged along,

makes a point of staring straight ahead, despite the glare from a low sun. If the response is that none of this is depicted photographically, since the camera merely records three actors acting out a scene on a Vancouver street, we are back with P records O and O represents S: the photographer, unlike the painter, does not represent a menacing racist; he uses a machine to record an actor who does so. Although even new theorists like Lopes are willing to grant the idea of bare recording at the primary level of belief-independent feature-tracking, the orthodox construal will not do. To focus on the camera as a recording device is to look in the wrong direction: it is the intentions of the photographer, not the mechanics of the camera, that need to be considered. And it seems that Wall really does intend to represent O as S: the racist as menacing, the Asian man as uncertain, the girlfriend as unwilling accomplice. He simply uses a camera in order to accomplish this.

Contra orthodoxy, these representational acts do not take place prior to and independently of the exercise of photographic agency. Wall has to direct all this, and be looking through his camera for the moment at which it all coheres. The full representational act, which includes directing the actors, is completed when Wall trips the shutter, thereby endorsing what appears on the ground glass back of his view camera. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that his endorsement remains provisional, waiting upon confirmation at the light box. Certainly this would be true of images that are post-produced.^v

Richter, by contrast, practices lyricism. For Lopes this means that some of Richter's paintings count as photography in a lyrical vein. This claim is sure to elicit debate, as are Lopes's claims about lyricism more generally. Many of the practices brought together under the banner of lyricism will not count as photography if the orthodox view is correct and pure photographs are images that depict solely by belief-independent feature-tracking. Take Richter's paintings

Betty of 1988 (fig. 7) and *Lesende* of 1994. Though they might be mistaken for photographs when viewed in reproduction, it seems natural to characterize them as oil paintings that take photographs as either their source material or subject matter. That is, they are paintings of or about photographs. As is well known, this is not how Richter sees them. Richter calls them “photo-paintings,” by which he means something much stronger than paintings of or from or about photographs, but a way of making photographs by painting:

I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means: I’m not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photographs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.^{vi}

Lopes wants to take Richter at his word, and notes that it is hard to do so while clinging to the orthodox theory of photography. But the new theory provides just what is needed:

a photograph is an image that is a product of a photographic process, which includes (1) a photographic event plus (2) processes for making marked surfaces (p. ??).

This is Lopes’s pithiest statement of the new theory, and it makes a very canny move. The first clause ensures the distinction between photographs and non-photographic images by implicating a photographic event (the recording of information from a light image) in the causal history of all photographs. As a result, the second clause, concerning the use of various processes and technologies for marking surfaces, need no longer discharge this burden. Processes for marking surfaces may now include non-photographic technologies. In effect, the first clause acknowledges the causal or natural aspect of photography: the darkening of silver

salts or the generation of electrical impulses on exposure of various kinds of light sensitive surface to light. But it shrinks photographic causation to a point, the recording of the light image, without defining photography as belief-independent and without opposing photographs to images made by hand. It thereby frees up the image rendering process to be anything photographers want it to be. The crucial conceptual point is that photography is now conceived as a multi-stage image-making process that begins, but does not end, in a photographic event. All photographs implicate such an event, but further image-rendering processes are required to make the information recorded available in a form that may be visually appreciated.^{vii}

Consider *Betty* and *Lesende* in this light. The independence of Lopes's two conditions, together with the fact that both Richter paintings originate in photographic events (they are painted from photographic sources) mean that the paintings count as photographs for Lopes.^{viii} This will be enough to make many balk. But the photographic look of these images arguably obscures just how counter-intuitive a result this is. To see this, one needs to look away from images that so obviously resemble their photographic sources.

Imagine the following case. Using an opaque projector, Richter projects a photograph of Kölner Dom onto the surface of a canvas, traces its outlines, and sets about painting the image. Almost finished, he then blurs the image by dragging solvent across the still wet surface. Applying more and more solvent, but still not happy, he eventually resorts to either scraping away the image or dragging fresh paint across the canvas with an outsized silkscreen blade. How should we understand the resulting image: is it a painting, a photograph, both a painting and a photograph, or neither? The final image, which appears to be a largely monochromatic gray abstract with residual traces of other colors and some facture, is clearly a painting – what else would one call it? – but it also implicates a

photographic event in its causal history. Like *Betty*, it originates in a photographic event to which further image rendering processes have been applied. So described there is little difference between them. But if it is a photograph, what is it a photograph of? Can the gray monochrome before us really be described as a photograph, let alone a photograph of Kölner Dom?

Lopes offers the beginnings of a response to this worry. He talks at various points about marks being made “guided by” or “under the control of” information output from a photographic event, and of pure photographs being “output by processes where information in light images of pro-photographic scenes inputs into the making of visibly marked or differentiated surfaces” (p. ???) These are vague formulations; it is hard to be sure what they rule in or out. What constitutes sufficient (or merely necessary) control or guidance for something to count as a photograph on this account? Perhaps Lopes takes being “under the control of” information recorded from a photographic event to be a vague notion with fuzzy borders – if so, what counts in one instance need not generalize to others. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: Lopes cannot appeal to belief-independence to rule an image in or out without sliding back into the account he means to outflank. So as yet it seems he has offered no principled basis for saying that this is not a photograph of Köln Cathedral.

Perhaps the bullet is one that Lopes is prepared to bite. He grants that “nothing in this theory of photography restricts how the light image is formed or how the surface is finally marked.... Since a photograph might also be made through Photoshopping or drawing... there is potential for a massive loss of information from the pro-photographic scene” (p. ???). Discussing Wolfgang Tillmans, he acknowledges that “the new theory does not require that photographic processing preserve most, or much, information recorded in the photographic event” (pp. ???). Read carefully such formulations imply that total loss information, total absence of

control, would prevent the resulting image counting as a photograph. That being the case, more needs to be said if Lopes wants to stop this slope extending all the way Richter's gray monochrome.

In fact, one does not need to look far to locate the beginnings of a response to such worries. One way to go would be to place an experiential or appreciative constraint on what suffices. Set aside its causal history and focus for a moment on the monochrome before us: we would not normally entertain a gray monochrome as a picture of Köln Cathedral in anything but a metaphorical sense. Anything we would typically be willing to entertain as a picture of that august building will either resemble it to the point of facilitating a visual experience as of the cathedral, or at the very least permit us to see something that could be the cathedral in its surface. In other words, one may plug in one's preferred account of depiction at this point. Unless the thinnest recognitional requirement is met, we are likely to reject, absent special considerations in its favor, the claim that the monochrome is a picture of the cathedral. The spirit of Lopes's proposal is, I take it, that there is no reason to treat photography differently. Perhaps one should say that once its photographic genesis no longer bears on its appreciation, the canvas really is just a monochrome painting.

Is this true of my imaginary example of Kölner Dom? Critics might say that although we can no longer see it as a photograph (or a photographically-derived painting) of the cathedral, its photographic origins still matter to its appreciation. Here Lopes may face a dilemma: either the image is a photograph, and a total loss of information is possible after all; or it is not a photograph, and its photographic origins do not matter to its appreciation. The former is unpalatable, for reasons already considered. The latter is false: it makes a difference to appreciating two gray monochromes if one knows that only one was arrived at by over-painting or erasing a photo-realist image. But a third possibility is consistent with the spirit of

Lopes's approach: the image is no longer a photograph, but its photographic origins nonetheless matter to its appreciation as a painting. If that were the case, Lopes's view would turn out to be less permissive than either Richter's, taken at his word, or those critics who endorse his more extreme pronouncements.

Both philosophically informed criticism (as opposed to criticism that ventriloquizes large chunks of the critic's preferred philosophers) and critically informed philosophy (as opposed to philosophy that appeals to the same jejune examples repeatedly) remain something of rarity. Each demands a dual focus. The former requires the critic to be mindful of generally applicable conceptual distinctions despite the fact that criticism requires attention to particulars. The latter requires the philosopher to be aware of fine-grained critical differences, despite the fact that making general conceptual distinctions means rising above such differences. The aptitude, broadmindedness, and patience for such dual focus is rare: accomplished exponents of either domain tend to have mastered one at the expense of the other. Perhaps we are beginning to see this change. Once it does, philosophy may finally be able to do justice to the art in photography.

ⁱ Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* (Spring, 1979), pp. 75-88; Chevrier, “Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography;” and Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art As Never Before*.

ⁱⁱ See also Lopes, “Photography and the ‘Picturesque Agent.’”

ⁱⁱⁱ Anscombe, *Intention*, §26.

^{iv} One attempt to take up this lesson has already been made by Charles Palermo in “Automatism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41.1 (2014), pp. 166–77. For a critical response, see Diarmuid Costello, “But I Am Killing Them! Reply to Baetens and Palermo on Agency and Automatism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41.1 (2014), pp. 178–210.

^v Wall’s first use of digital montage is *Stumbling Block* (1991) and *Mimic* dates from 1982. Jeff Wall, *Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004* (Gottingen: Steidl/Schaulager, 2005), pp. 291–2.

^{vi} Richter, “Notes, 1964–1965.” Lopes cites my discussion of this in “On the Very Idea of a ‘Specific’ Medium,” where I reserve judgement as to whether Richter’s photo-paintings are in fact photographs, but argue that there is no reason not to regard them as such on Fried and Cavell’s account.

^{vii} Here Lopes is building on the influential Phillips (Wilson), “Photography and Causation.”

^{viii} In fact, Lopes would say that they are both photographs and paintings: they are paintings because Richter employed richly embodied mark-making, hand-eye coordination, and advanced motor skills; they are photographs because they implicate photographic events.