

Photographic still life

I believe that the way we relate to our inanimate environment, the most basic and humble elements of our everyday lives, which make up the routines of our existence as humans tells a lot about the ways our thinking changes historically and culturally. On the simplest level of eating, drinking, taking care of our belongings, keeping order around ourselves, we create and re-create the structures that dominate our cultures on more abstracted levels. If we take a critical look at how we treat “the things themselves”, we might realise both the effects and the very roots of our categories of thought. I would like to argue that for this reason, a strict division between the two realms that, following the terms used by Norman Bryson, I will label *rhopographic* (that of the everyday) and *megalographic* (that of acts we perceive to be distinctive), cannot hold. My area of investigation will be the domain of still life as a genre of visual art, and I shall treat that genre as a specific territory where our attitudes towards our environment reveal themselves.

To put it more precisely and to narrow down the scope of my inquiry, in this essay I would like to examine relationships between the photographic still life and its painted counterpart: I am interested in the continuities and differences between the two. By painting, in this context, I primarily mean historic painting, and when dealing with similarities and differences I am more concerned about the forces that are at work in the shaping of the image on the canvas, rather than the surface qualities of the final image

itself. More precisely, my comparison is not intended as a comparison of the formal qualities of still life painting and still life photography, but more as a comparison of the various ideologies and artistic attitudes that have shaped the way still life images have been created and looked at. I am trying to identify the locus of change, which I claim to be right at the birth of photography, and then the reason and pattern of further evolution. The analysis of the latter is limited to only a few artists here, and therefore it openly admits to be only a fragment and has no intentions of becoming a generalization.

My point of departure regarding still life painting has been Norman Bryson's book *Looking at the Overlooked*, a collection of four essays, which in the end gravitate towards a shared conclusion and therefore might rather be regarded as chapters. The book begins by making clear that its intention is to induce a theoretically relevant debate concerning the genre of the still life, a debate that has been missing from academic discussions of the topic, which have usually been highly dismissive regarding this kind of painting and only dealt with it as a decorative craft. Bryson is interested in tracing the reasons behind this dismissal and the silence surrounding still lifes. In the course of the book he examines 3 major periods in still life painting, antique *xenia*, 17th century Spanish *bodegones* and Dutch still life works of the same period. In addition, he links a few major artists to the analysis of the periods, e.g. Chardin, Cézanne, Velázquez or Caravaggio. His primary aim is not to give a summary of the history of the genre, but rather to identify ideologies in which still life painting has been embedded and which have shaped it to be admitted to the Academy, but only as the lowest of the genres.

Ancient Greek accounts and surviving Campanian examples of the *xenia*, a painting depicting inanimate objects, usually foodstuffs and objects of the table, serve as a starting point. Through the quoting of texts such as Philostratus' *Imagines* and Pliny's famous account of the 'battle of painters' in *Natural History* and also via an analysis of Campanian room frescos, Bryson comes to the conclusion that *xenia* primarily represented a transition between *natural* or *real* and *over-refined* or *represented/simulated*. From this point of view, *xenia* are far from pleasurable depictions of decorative objects, they are to be understood as vital parts of a much larger framework through which a culture is coming to terms with its own status as culture, as a series of thresholds that divide it from nature and a series of abstractions that lead towards artifice. These paintings are nature simulated and brought within the boundaries of culture. They mark the shift from equality in the face of mutual need and appetite, which lies at the heart of humanity, towards culturally refined, socially differentiated individuals putting on a feast as a way of representing their worldly status. *Xenia* are therefore extremely important in the development of still life painting as they mark out the territory of later works in the genre and they bring into play issues and dualities that remain central to still life: it will always be torn between representing the human being as creaturely, through the objects of his table and the foods serving to satisfy his appetite; and between bringing traces of social and individual distinction into this domain of humbleness. Here Bryson introduces the distinction between *megalography* and *rhopography*, the former dealing with distinctive acts of the individual

that can be regarded as milestones in history, the latter with everyday actions and the 'unassuming material base of life that "importance" constantly overlooks' (Bryson, 1995, p61). History painting is therefore perfectly suited for *megalography*, with its inherent tendency towards narrative, while still life is the genre of *rhopography*, furthest away from story telling. The reason for still life's dismissal might be grasped on the basis of this distinction: within a social and cultural framework that values acts of individuality to be the only source of fascination, it is no surprise that there is not much respect awarded to paintings working counter to this value system and focusing on objects that constantly remind us of our common, creatural origin and our submission to nourishment processes necessary for our survival. Bryson points out in his last essay that

'the opposition [of *megalography* and *rhopography*] does not exist in a vacuum: *it is overdetermined by another polarity, that of gender*' (Bryson, 1995, p157).

As Western culture has always traditionally conceived of men as superior in terms of power and intellect, it has been only natural that the domain of great achievements has been linked up with masculinity, while consequently that of routine existence with femininity. The domestic space, the space of the table, that is, the locus of still life is essentially feminine, and this is definitely a source of confusion for the male painter trying to work within the genre. Bryson refers to Freudian psychoanalysis to underline the complicated nature of this confusion: in his view, the domestic is in a sense an uncanny space for the male artist, 'peering into a zone that does not concern him directly' (Bryson, 1995, p170). It conjures up repressed memories of childhood, of

existence before separation from the mother and before self-definition. In this Freudian reading of still life, the genre, with its links to the uncanny, is as much a source of fascination with something vaguely familiar and yet unknown, as a source of fear regarding the loss of individuality if returning to the space of the mother. But not only in this sense does still life pose a threat, it is also a more general negation of most values of a patriarchal society obsessed with distinguishing men from his natural and material origins, and believing to succeed in this by awarding extreme importance to certain acts considered to be of more dignity than others.

Still life painting in Bryson's essays is therefore primarily understood in terms of attempts at resolving this paradoxical situation and justifying male intervention into the threatening but 'lower' realm of the domestic and feminine. 17th century Spanish still lifes by Juan Sánchez Cotán and Francisco de Zurbarán are interpreted as homogenising the locus of nutrition and transforming it into a space of spirituality, where the goal is to see everyday reality in a completely new way, and through actually focusing on the mundane, losing the misguided ways of interacting with the world. Similarly, in the case of paintings by Cézanne or Caravaggio that are analysed here, the still life of the table is dealt with only as a starting point for something considered to be of far greater importance: artistic greatness. Both painters use the still life as something anchored comfortably in reality, something that is a suitable base for artistic abstraction; and a comparison between the humble objects' real forms and the forms given to them by the artist will always result in a feeling of awe in the face of art's superiority. Dutch

still life painting is also unable or unwilling to deal with the objects of table from *within* their domain, the still life of luxury, which emphasises men's victory over natural limitations and material needs, also 'appropriates the table and recasts it in terms of male wealth and social power' (Bryson, 1995, p162). The tables in Dutch still life are crowded with objects that are simply on display, without any function within the household, apart from advertising the greatness of their owners, the men of the house.

In Bryson's view, these are the issues and contradictions surrounding the history of still life painting and resulting in its status as the lowest of the genres. Painting still life is confusing, and so is viewing, if one is doing so from within the boundaries of a patriarchal culture and its value systems. And even if we abandon the concept of gender, it is still obvious that within these value systems, painting humble objects as opposed to grand historic narratives has to be justified.

Let us now turn to photographic still life and examine the extent to which, if at all, Bryson's views on painting are applicable to it.

I would like to propose that during its history, photography has been, in turns, moving away from and then again moving towards the depiction of the object as object. As we have seen with painting, it has always been suspicious towards dealing with the humble world of the table and has therefore found various ways of appropriating it and painting it as something else. In photography, we have similar tendencies, but at the same time, there are certain aspirations towards grasping the objectness of the objects.

Right at the birth of photography, still life started to play an important role; this was of

course partly for technical reasons, as objects were much easier to correctly photograph with the long exposure times early photographic processes necessitated. But there were other dimensions to still life's significance: first and foremost, along with conventional genres of portrait and landscape, it functioned as a starting point for photographers aspiring to establish their craft as fine art by looking at the grand ancestor, painting. Still life in photography has been conveniently nestled within the reassuring bounds of fine art, and those looking at painted still lifes and then producing their own, photographic versions of them have never actually had to face the confusion that the still life painter had to face; justification for photographing humble objects - that originally lied outside the domain of *megalography*, outside the domain of masculine power – justification comes from still life painting itself. Still life painting has 'elevated' (if we remain within the terminology of the fascination with *megalography*) these objects and when viewed from the perspective of photography, a then new medium aspiring to be art, they are perfectly valid subjects, validated by the superiority of painting. In the work of Roger Fenton, for example, along with landscape images, lush still lifes 'reinforce [cultural assumptions] in a way that eighteenth-century painting did for its wealthy patrons (...) A still life, like the portrait, was to be understood through terms of reference drawn from painting' (Clarke, 1997, p45).

However, right from the very beginning, there has been another attitude present in photographing inanimate material:

'There was, though, a clear distinction between still life and objects. (...) The imaging of objects for their own sake (...) is part of an unstructured probing of the external world. The camera is an eye which seeks out things, rather than a frame of reference which reads things according to a predetermined hierarchy of significance' (Clarke, 1997, p45).

What we see here is the emergence of two radically new attitudes to the subject matter of mundane objects: in the first one, represented by, among many others, Fenton, photography is seen as third order reality, an abstraction even when compared with painting, exactly *because it is* to be compared with painting as its primary point of reference. Therefore the objects in early still life photography of this kind are present not as objects, not as themselves, they are definitely not photographed for their own sake. Consequently not only from a formal point of view, but also in this sense, the strategy of still life painting is present in these images, that is, the strategy of dealing with the mundane in terms of the *megalographic* and not on its own level of *rhopography*. But at the same time, depicting the mundane has lost its embarrassing connotations, and its justification is not so central anymore, exactly because it is so deeply rooted in painting, which gives it a respectful air. By contrast, the (other) new attitude towards still life emerging with the birth of photography reverses this strategy and can be interpreted as a move towards pictorial representation of objects as objects:

‘Daguerre’s famous *Shells and Fossils* of 1839 (...) reflects both the developing museum culture, and the way in which the photograph was seen as an analogue of the real. The objects in such photographs display a fierce insistence on their own authenticity (...)’ (Clarke, 1997, p45).

Daguerre’s image, along with photographs by Hippolyte Bayard and others, is the first step towards a clear representation of the mundane object taken without any intention of dislodging it from the plane of everyday reality to which it belongs.

From early modernist photography onwards, these tendencies start to intertwine. Still life in modernism is primarily formalist, a result of avant-garde claims for purity and a

specific language for photography. Photographic formalism examines the objects essentially as pure form, as possible territory for the play of light and shadow as that play being in some way the essence of photography. In his work from the 20s, Edward

Weston, for example, manages

‘to strip away from his art any references beyond the four edges of the pictures, to free his art from allegory, from any allusions to painting or print or photograph made before, from narrative and the sentimental, from history’ (Pitts, 1995, p32).

Weston’s pictures of vegetables, Kertész’s images of objects in his window sill, or Man Ray’s experimental short films of various animated items, embrace the genre of still life and transform it into photographic still life. Modernism is very anxious about removing all painterly references, but it is rarely concerned with the object itself. The object is passive, looked upon from the photographic perspective: ‘the photographed object [is turned] into a photographic object’ (Mora, 1995, p23). It is a similar ‘exploitation’ of the mundane for the sake of art as we have seen in Bryson’s discussions on Caravaggio and Cézanne: the object is pure form and a mere tool in the artist’s hand for the expression of his vision. It is especially explicit in Weston, who looks at vegetables, various natural textures and female nudes with the same eye and strips them from allusions outside the field of his photography. In modernism therefore, the tendency is twofold: when photographing objects, the objects themselves are rarely dealt with as objects, but at the same time there *is* a grown interest in depicting inanimate subject matter, and that depiction is usually freed from painterly imitations, therefore the convenient frame of reference for still life is gone. For modernism, however,

photographing the *rhopographic* space is well grounded within an interest in form and consequently it remains intelligible even from the point of view of traditional, *megalographic* views on art.

From the 1960s onwards, with conceptual art, still life's role in art photography has changed radically. Similarly to most previous examples, conceptual art did not actually deal with the object itself; quite the contrary, as it employed the mundane item only to frustrate the viewer and make him/her reflect on the nature of artistic representation by questioning *why* such an everyday object would become the focus of artistic attention:

'The viewer will (...) have a different response from that engendered by traditional virtuoso masterpieces in art history. Rather than asking how and by whose hand the work of art was made, the question becomes: How did this object come to be here? And what act or chain of events brought it into focus?' (Cotton, 2004a, p116).

As exemplified by works such as *Quiet Afternoon* by Fischli&Weiss, conceptual still life relies heavily on earlier connotations of the genre, and brings to the surface the question lying at its heart, the contrast between the artist's sophisticated eye and the fact that it is turned on objects of the domestic realm. Here however, no answer lies in form, as did in modernism, because the objects are photographed with a bare aesthetic, and we are therefore forced to assume that the solution lies somewhere beyond the surface of the picture.

It is this strategy that most postmodern photography sets out from when producing still life images. Its working mechanisms can be entangled through a closer look at the work

of Olivier Richon. Richon's still life imagery seems to be the furthest point away from depiction of humble objects for their own sake. Richon is not only neutral towards the objects themselves, but also towards the genre of still life, in the sense that he is not engaged with its issues, still life is simply one of the many cultural sign systems that he is quoting within his work.

'...the idea that any given component is significant collapses, and an Olivier Richon becomes a set of operations, formal and critical, that might be enacted on a range of possible objects' (Soutter, 2004, p46).

In Richon, still life loses its objects completely. Still life painting, contrary to all its aspirations of hiding the fact, has been fascinated by their forms, although never fully managed/dared to explore their rhopographic world. Richon abandons the surface of the objects, they are present only as pure signs, and their significance lies in being able to conjure up associations of the sign systems to which they originally belong. Richon appropriates the still life as a whole, and also its objects, just as he appropriates other pictorial elements from various sources, but the nature of this appropriation is completely different from that of, say, Dutch masters' displaying objects of the table as objects of wealth instead. Richon leaves the domain of *rhopography* completely behind.

It is, I believe, in the work of Laura Letinsky, and, maybe even more significantly, Wolfgang Tillmans, that the (post)modern enslavement of objects to forms and ideas ceases to be dominant, and their world unfolds more directly.

Letinsky in this sense marks a transition. Although she uses, for example, Dutch

painting as a reference point, her work is far from being a play of signs borrowed from its system.

'I saw Dutch painting as a parallel [to my own work] in the attention that is given to the table as a visual space as well as how the still life acted metaphorically as a morality tale (...) I wasn't interested in the seventeenth-century symbolism per se because the fixing of referents is no longer possible in the way we look at still lifes. But I am interested in narrative and metaphor and how these spaces can be used to suggest states of mind' (Cotton quoting Letinsky, Cotton, 2004b, p47).

As she explains, her main interest is how the objects and their positioning within the composition are imprints of human action; how they are possible sources of the construction of narrative (Cotton, 2004b, p47). In Letinsky, inanimate subject matter is given narrative potential, which is a radically new phenomenon, especially if we contrast it with Bryson's words:

'While history painting is constructed around narrative, still life is the world minus its narratives, or better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest' (Bryson, 1995, p60).

Letinsky's work opens up the domestic space of the table, and, as opposed to, for example, the strained focus and motionlessness, that is "the mark of human absence" (Bryson, 1995, p66) in Cotán and Zurbarán, allows it to show its tactile nature, which marks out traces of stories.

Tillmans continues working along this line, but apart from the obvious narrative potential, gives even more freedom to his objects. Tillmans's still lifes are almost exclusively *found* still lifes, a category unique to photography, and pioneered by his work: '[h]ere, fruit, flowers, cigarette packs (...) freely fall into place (Verwoert, 2002, p40). There is not a trace of the strain to keep objects of the mundane world under

strict control by perfected composition, strained focus and a forced order originating from a fear of the everyday, the *rhopographic* and its power to counter the importance of distinctive human achievement. In his work, still lifes become equivalents of every other possible subject, parts of his visual research:

‘Exact observation of the surface of things is the key of understanding anything in this world. (...) Start with observation, the result will follow. I observe with my eyes, then use a camera to shape an image that resembles what that observation looked like as closely as possible. (...) A predetermined outcome in visual research usually yields bad results.’ (Tillmans, 2005, p72).

His treatment of the genre is the complete opposite of Richon’s:

‘(...) his approach differs widely from the method of quoting genre stereotypes that has come to be understood as typically ‘postmodern’. Tillmans does not “appropriate” genres. (...) He treats genre (...) as a form in which reality chooses to present itself. In this sense, a basic proposition that Tillmans makes in his work is that the difference between reality and its image is blurred – that the image is already inscribed in the world’ (Verwoert, 2002, p41).

When Tillmans photographs still lifes, it is not actually a still life that comes out as the result of the image, it is always a photograph of *the object*. He is looking for situations where objects present themselves freely in their object hood, within their mundane and domestic realm, and without fear or hesitation, he frames and captures these spontaneous compositions without an attempt at forcing an external order on them, presenting them as something else, or rationalising their depiction in any other way. His work comes closest, probably in the whole history of still life, to depicting the objects of the everyday as objects of the everyday. This is possible because throughout his work, Tillmans never looks at humans from a *megalographic* point of view, but always as inherently equal, as members of ‘a utopian ideal of a “family” of protective friends’

(Verwoert, 2002, p53), and through this attitude the repugnance towards *rhopography* is negated. At the same time it is through his images that still life actually becomes *photographic*, in the original sense of the word, that is, instead of staging a composition, selecting an element of reality and inscribing it on photosensitive material.

His photograph of a Zurbarán painting at the National Gallery perhaps explains how his work puts and end to the conventional representation of still life in photography. He makes no attempt at *recreating* the painting, not in the sense Richon would, he photographs it as a painting, with respect and attention, a painting that deals with similar subject matter as *his* still life images, but deals with it in a completely different way.

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