

JAMES CUNNING HOLLAND

Exhibition Review: *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman*

Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA: November 6, 2019–February 16, 2020.

Worcester Art Museum's recent exhibition *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* allowed viewers to revisit the technological and aesthetic transformations, and the cultural tumult, of the 1960s through the 1980s. In addition to functioning as a conventional exhibition of historical works of art that are sequentially ordered, each accompanied by didactic text, discrete works in *Photo Revolution* blended together in a visual conversation that was greater than the sum of its parts. Chiefly comprised of artworks drawn from the museum's permanent collection, *Photo Revolution* aimed to give viewers a direct experience of, in the words of the show's curator Nancy Kathryn Burns, "what it would look like to holistically integrate photography's ascent into the broader themes and trends" of mid-twentieth-century art.¹

It turns out that photography provides a perfect foundation for discussing the artistic and cultural vicissitudes of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Toward the beginning of this historical window, photography had just graduated to being considered a fine art in the eyes of most museums and collectors. Worcester Art Museum, for its part, began hiring photography curators and collecting photographic works in the early '60s. Since its founding in 1896 until today, the museum has assembled more than 38,000 objects, spanning more than fifty centuries, including European and American paintings and sculptures, and continues to build its collections with contemporary artworks from around the world.²

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that the decision on the part of major institutions to finally accept photography into their collections ends up supporting, rather than undermining, photography's "revolutionary" potency. It meant that the pendulum had officially begun to swing toward the inclusion of non-traditional media in the evolving canon of contemporary art. The ultimate inter-discipline, photography by turns transformed, and continued to be subsumed by, a host of other disciplines, and can be considered emblematic of the challenge leveled against the modern aesthetic notion of autonomy by artists of the day. In the words of critic Hal Foster, "Autonomy, or the notion that each art stands apart, in its own area of

1. Nancy Kathryn Burns, *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (New York: ARTBOOK|D.A.P., 2020): 12.

2. Press Release for *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 2019).



IMAGE 1. Installation view of *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* at Worcester Art Museum.

competence, is the first principle of modern aesthetics, in place at least since the time of Kant. . . .³ Prior to photography, traditional art forms, such as painting and sculpture, were the preeminent modes of faithfully rendering reality according to aesthetic norms. But the boundary-blurring effects of photography on the other disciplines didn't begin in the historical moment under consideration here.

Impressionism sprang in part from an attempt, like photography, to capture and render the passing, ephemeral moment in aesthetic form, but nonetheless in a manner that photography, in its infancy, could not. And again, in part due to the unique cultural reverberations of photographic practice, the historical period upon which *Photo Revolution* focused, the highly rational, formalist approaches to aesthetic experimentation (in painting, Minimalism comes to mind) eschewed subjectivity in the name of a kind of content-averse abstraction. It may be a stretch to claim that such transformations were caused by the rise of photography, but it is nonetheless clear that photography played an important role. And unlike the Minimalist impulse to remove the referent entirely from the work, photography showed itself in *Photo Revolution* to be the perfect means through which to explore, and to experiment with raw materials derived from, content-drenched realities of the time. Among its many thematic undercurrents, *Photo Revolution* renders palpable the aesthetic and cultural transformations playing out in the context of the everyday life of the time in ways that only photography could.

Beyond hoary speculations of content versus avoidance of content, or realism versus abstraction, however, the broad spectrum of the transformations on view in *Photo Revolution* effectively demonstrates photography's leveling of the then-burgeoning concept of reproducibility against the classical principle of originality (in effect helping to jettison what critic Walter Benjamin termed a work's singular "aura"). It is in light of such fundamental

3. Hal Foster, *Running Room* (Widworthy Barton, Honiton, Devon: Notting Hill Editions, 2013), 41.

alterations to regimes of representation that determinations by museums and art institutions to accept photography on its own merits, rather than for how other media forms adopt and utilize photographic processes, are so significant.

Photography's unrivaled trans-disciplinary usefulness means that, even as it remains anchored to the body of the still camera, its historical role has often been to be seamlessly absorbed as an essential component into other forms of inquiry. Thus, in addition to screen prints, films, and photographs by Warhol, and photographs by Sherman, *Photo Revolution* included a dizzying array of seminal artworks by such diverse and luminary artists as Vito Acconci, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Dara Birnbaum, Chris Burden, Victor Burgin, Chuck Close, Rosalyn Drexler, Elliott Erwitt, Richard Estes, Robert Frank, Leon Golub, Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Douglas Huebler, Alex Katz, Robert Rauschenberg, Martha Rosler, Dieter Roth, Lesley Schiff, Stephen Shore, Tom Wesselman, Gary Winogrand, and many more.

The show comprised more than 225 artworks that retain the resonance, if not the “aura,” of artifacts unsealed from a time capsule. In addition to works made by conventional photographic means, works made utilizing time-based media forms included television, film and video, expanded cinema, performance art, installations, earthworks, scanning technologies such as photocopy art, print technologies such as photo-lithography, light emulsion screen printing and collage, and projection technologies such as the epidiascope (Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can [Tomato]*, 1964–65 was made with the aid of an epidiascope, tracing from projections of letterheads, ads, and photographs). And while the list of media sounds dizzying, the show managed to order and present all of the works harmoniously. As the show title makes clear, photography gave rise to all of these creative avenues, even as time-based forms would come to, in some ways, overtake photography's cultural influence. As Burns notes, “Many of the most visually striking and politically or emotionally engaging moments of the 20th century—from the assassination of President Kennedy, to the Vietnam war, to the moon landing—occurred during a period of transition from the dominance of the still photographic image to the increasing prevalence of film and video.”⁴

To get a sense of the media velocity that began to overtake photography's influence, look no further than television. It is no exaggeration to say that by the early 1960s, TV had become the nation's new hearth to gather around. As the show's first exhibition panel, displayed on the wall, informed viewers, “in 1950, 3.9 million households owned a television, [and by] 1963, this number [had] skyrocketed to 50.3 million, catapulting television to the forefront for news and entertainment.” Photographer Diane Arbus and Conceptual artist Nam June Paik, wildly divergent in most other respects, both emphasized televisions in their work. In 1963, Arbus created two photographs centered on the television and its elevated status in American homes (*Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning in N.J.* and *Xmas tree in room in Levittown, L.I.*), whereas Paik blazed a trail by integrating TV sets into an installation (Paik's first major exhibition, titled *Exposition of Music–Electronic Television*, took place in Germany in 1963; on

4. Nancy Kathryn Burns, Press Release for *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 2019).

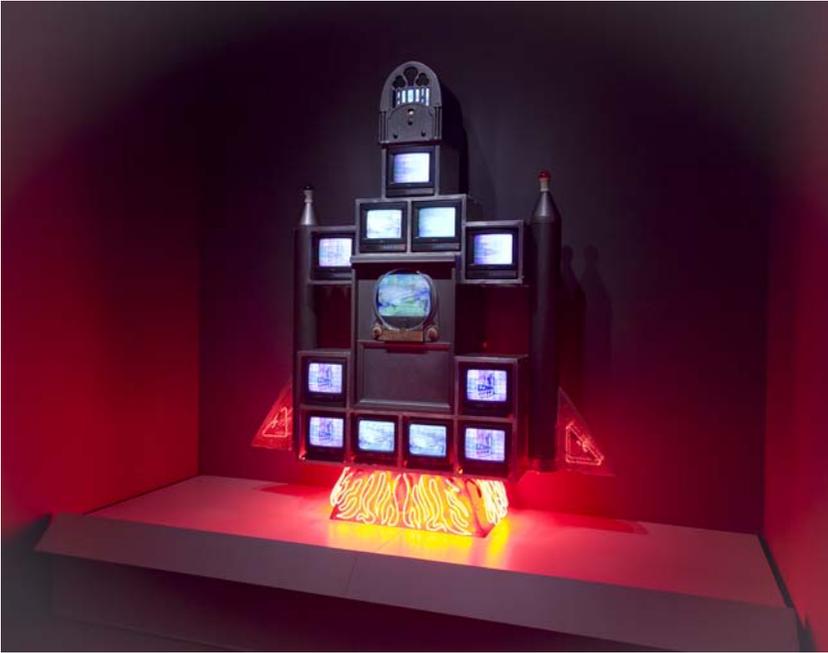


IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Robert Goddard* (1995) by Nam June Paik at Worcester Art Museum; museum purchase with funds from Mary H. and Donald R. Melville, Linda and John Nelson, and the Theodore T. and Mary G. Ellis Fund.

view in *Photo Revolution*, however, was Paik's *Robert Goddard*, created in 1995, in homage to the rocket pioneer).

As more and more living rooms became illuminated across America, and indeed the world, theorist Marshall McLuhan shrewdly observed, as paraphrased by writer Lewis H. Lapham, that “[t]he accelerated technologies of the electronic future carry us backward into the firelight flickering in the caves of a Neolithic past.”⁵ And so it is that the Vietnam War, sometimes referred to as the “living room” war, occurred just as the instantaneous transmission and proliferation of images brought the war home in both newspapers and television coverage. But even as news reports, film, and video began to dominate public consciousness in many ways, photography’s ascendance persisted, especially in terms of how racial, social, and political themes were addressed in the public eye. To this day, press photographs such as John Dominis’s *Black Power Salute, Mexico City* (1968), John Paul Filo’s *Kent State (May 4, 1970)*, and Eddie Adams’s *Saigon Execution* (1968), remain among the most iconic visual statements of the twentieth century.

Given its richly synthetic heritage, reconstructing “photography’s ascent” through a relatively compressed thirty-year window turns out to be the master stroke: in the age of pocket super computers, viewers were invited to rediscover photography less as a discrete art form

5. Lewis H. Lapham, “Introduction,” in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), XX.

of specific vintage than as a tool and tactic constantly being redefined in light of present circumstance. In this regard, the vernacular photographs dispersed throughout the show (anonymous Polaroids of everyday life experience), “reflect people’s desire to capture artfully their daily joys and challenges, as a precursor to the Instagram culture of today.”⁶ An equally inspired move on the part of the show’s creators was to narratively bracket the period under view as originating with the influence of Warhol and concluding with the influence of Sherman. According to art historian Arthur Danto, “Warhol meant his own face to be among the images that define our own cultural reality, of a piece and on a plane with the Campbell’s soup label, the Brillo carton, the *Mona Lisa*. . . Sherman, because her impulses are those of an actress and not the ambitions of a star, aspires to be known for her roles rather than her personality.”⁷

Sherman’s wish to take a backseat to the characters she inhabits is disclosed in her decision, from the outset of her career, to give her pieces generic titles. And, as distinct from Warhol’s desire to become a celebrity on par with his subjects, animate or inanimate, the essential performativity that undergirds Sherman’s oeuvre could be glimpsed in the show’s inspired grouping of three seminal works by Sherman: *Photograph, 1975* (in which Sherman performatively assumes the identity of Lucille Ball); *Untitled Film Still #7, 1977–1978* (in which Sherman, here as lead actress #7 “appears to be steadying herself after a long night . . . of drinking”⁸; and *Untitled, #112, 1982*, in which Sherman explicitly tinkers with, and exposes, the tacit arrogance of the binary logic of gender. Needless to say, doing proper justice to the literal maelstrom of artifacts and influences that comprise *Photo Revolution* is not possible here, but ruminating upon one particular grouping of works will provide welcome context.

Upon entering the gallery, on a freestanding wall in the middle of the space and facing the door, the viewer first encountered a grouping of five individual works that were made in the mid-to-late 1960s. As the first encounter inside the gallery space, the small grouping presented a kind of microcosm of the show’s effective exhibition strategy. A single print covered the entire wall, in front of which four printed dresses on dress forms, made from screen prints, stood on a low pedestal almost as wide as the wall. The two dresses to the viewer’s left, made by unknown designers, are literal examples of what came to be known as paper dresses (made from cellulose or wood pulp “fabric”), though all four pieces can be understood, historically, as artifacts of the brief paper dress fad, which exploded internationally in 1966, “from a single advertising promotion.”⁹ It’s worth noting here, recalling photography’s contested elevation of reproducibility against originality, that following their initial appearance, paper dresses would become so culturally ubiquitous that almost every candidate

6. Press Release for *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 2019).

7. Nancy Kathryn Burns, *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (New York: ARTBOOK|D.A.P., 2020), 35.

8. Nancy Kathryn Burns, *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (New York: ARTBOOK|D.A.P., 2020), 33.

9. Catherine M. Colinvaux, “An Ephemeral Fashion: A Brief History of the 1960s Paper Dress Craze,” included in *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (New York: ARTBOOK|D.A.P., 2020), 77.

running in the 1968 election for president of the United States (including Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller, and George Romney) had his own paper campaign dress.¹⁰ Even so, by 1969 the fad had already run its course, which, taken together with the material ephemerality of the dresses, made the decision to include them in the show seem especially poignant.

The print behind the dresses was a blown-up, wall-sized version of a seminal work by artist Robert Heinecken titled *Untitled (Are You Rea)* (1964–68), which originated as an offset lithograph print, encountered later in the show. The two dresses not yet referenced, on the other hand, are by graphic designer Harry Gordon. The wall-sized Heinecken piece, set just behind the four standing dresses, initially conjured a rather generic department store display, much like one might encounter today. But pausing for a spell, and allowing the pieces to seep into one's psyche, permitted rather profound relationships, within and between the objects, to surface in the viewer's mind. Without even referencing image content, or the visual conversation that took place between the separate works, one's immediate impression was that *Photo Revolution* managed to be at once a series of individual works (encountered in rough chronological sequence, in accordance with the trappings of a conventional museum experience), and a highly immersive installation. Worcester Art Museum presented the viewing public with an exhibition experience that was intellectually engaging and comforting, which is to say theoretical and beautiful, in equal measure, and in so doing created unexpected opportunities for insight. While the historical context of each work was duly furnished in didactic form, the viewer's visceral responses to the works, often grouped together in open-ended conversations (taking place in the viewer's imagination), amplified and made more accessible the cultural moment in which the work was created.

The left-most dress of the four, *Souper Dress*, is comprised of a pattern of Campbell's Soup cans displaying the word "soup," commercially designed and produced between 1967 and 1968, in a manner derivative of Warhol's series of Campbell's Soup cans (which initially appeared in 1962). If Warhol appropriated the Campbell's Soup product identity for his own purposes, in a bit of irony that he likely found amusing, the designer of *Souper Dress*, commissioned for the Campbell Soup Company, in turn appropriated and then marketed Warhol's concept. One reason this dress seized the viewer's attention, with its striking red, gold, and black palette, is that the other three dresses are made from black-and-white prints. More importantly, however, is that *Souper Dress* directed the viewer's eyes immediately across the space (to the viewer's left) where there was one of the show's most iconic images: an original print of Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can (Tomato)*. The paper dress that was positioned to the immediate right of *Souper Dress* is titled *Paper Caper Op Art Dress* (1966). This dress displayed a black-and-white op art pattern, and, as it was created for the Scott Paper Company, signaled a similar dynamic of corporate re-appropriation as did *Souper Dress*. The two dresses to their immediate right, on the other hand, were from Gordon's *Poster Dresses* series (1967–68). What must have been distinctly alluring when the Gordon dresses were first produced, as compared to the two previous examples, is that, even

10. Catherine M. Colinaux, "An Ephemeral Fashion: A Brief History of the 1960s Paper Dress Craze," included in *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* (New York: ARTBOOK|D.A.P., 2020), 67.



IMAGE 3. *Untitled (Are You Rea)* (1964–68) by Robert Heineken; National Endowment for the Arts Museum Purchase Plan.

though all four examples were made by screen-printing from photo transfers onto silk-screens, to this viewer the Gordon dresses appeared as if the single image displayed on them had been enlarged and cropped by the physical dresses themselves. Quite significantly, here we had wearable artifacts doubling as singular photographic prints.

For its part, the monumental version of Heineken's *Untitled (Are You Rea)* is part of a portfolio of twenty-four photographic prints created by placing pages from popular magazines on light-sensitive plates and exposing them to light, so that both sides of the magazine's pages become visible simultaneously. It is clear as one stood before this



IMAGE 4. Installation view of *Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* at Worcester Art Museum.

tightly engineered ensemble of signifiers that the artists standing behind the pieces (which included Heineken, Gordon, two unknown artists, and, by the logic of appropriation, Warhol) were speaking to each other. And these aesthetic frequencies, at once formal and content-driven, became audible to the precise degree that a viewer permitted their twenty-first century nervous systems to receive them. Soon enough, as one moved through the show, the voices proliferated along with the conversational strata lain down in the viewer's mind, from piece to piece, and group to group. Making indeterminate, associative connections between the works seemed key, rather than experiencing each work in isolation from the rest.

From Andy Warhol's most iconic works concerning celebrity, commodity spectacle, and time-based media structures to Cindy Sherman's brilliant deconstructions and performances of gender and cultural identity, and at every station in between, if one looked and listened closely, *Photo Revolution* generated an endless stream of interpretive possibilities that enlivened, and challenged, one's perception of the world. ■

JAMES CUNNING HOLLAND, a visual artist and writer, teaches digital and performance art at Eastern Connecticut State University.