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# DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS

Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

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Photograph of Old Faithful Geyser Erupting in Yellowstone National Park from Ansel Adams Photographs of National Parks and Monuments, compiled 1941 - 1942, documenting the period ca. 1933 – 1942 (image courtesy of Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Branch of Still and Motion Pictures)

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# INTRODUCTION

Claire Anscomb

It is my great pleasure to introduce the 2024 special issue of *Debates in Aesthetics*. This issue seeks to advance lively debates about how we should understand and appreciate photographic practices and their products. To this end, original contributions were solicited from the philosophical community in addition to responses to a target article, written by Dawn M. Wilson. Wilson's article examines Ansel Adams's music-photography analogy to tease out a more refined version of the analogy and advance the "multi-stage" view that she has been developing over the course of her theorizing about photography. Three responses (Campion, Giupponi, and Pettersson) to the target article have been published here alongside a reply by Wilson. Also featured are two original research articles that tackle topics from luck-based sceptical arguments regarding the artistic status of photography (Star) to the epistemic merits of photography (Schreier). Despite their different approaches, in common to all the articles published in this issue is a sincere interest in the testimony of practitioners and a close attention to their processes and the material circumstances in which they practice. The results are a nuanced set of discussions that I hope will help to progress debates in this, and related, areas of philosophical aesthetics.[1]

Wilson's target article takes the photographer's music-photography analogy seriously. According to Adam's analogy, "a negative produced by photographic 'visualization' is analogous to a score produced by musical composition" (Wilson 2024, 14) and prints are like performances, which may have different appreciable qualities — further variability of which may come from different individuals reinterpreting a negative.

1 I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the reviewers of these articles, whose contributions furthered the aims of this issue.

For Adams, visualization, where a photographer anticipates a finished image with certain values, textures, and arrangements, is necessary for the creative expressive work of fine art photography. While Wilson finds the analogy compelling, she proposes that it is limited by the single-stage account of photography, that is seemingly assumed by Adams, whereby it is supposed "that a photographic image has been generated once a camera exposure has occurred." (Wilson 2024, 14-15) Anticipating other discussions in this issue, Wilson highlights that "aesthetic scepticism and epistemic dogmatism can be traced to the single-stage view of photography, which supposes that a photograph is fundamentally mind-independent because it is autonomously created". (2024, 15) However, according to the multi-stage view, the exposure stage only produces a photographic 'register', which requires subsequent rendering to generate a photographic image. It is thus the register that Wilson proposes is analogous to the written score, and is used to create the negative, which is a one-time performance that can be used to generate 'expressive performances'. Resultantly, while there are distinct stages, Wilson proposes that creativity in these practices is extended and interdependent, inviting the idea "that someone appreciating fine art photography can critically appraise not just the print, but also the 'visualization' expressively realized in the print." (2024, 27)

Significantly, through the revised analogy, Wilson respects the testimonies of practitioners but balances this with consideration for the ambiguities or inconsistencies they may contain. This is an admirable approach that aims to promote new ways of thinking about the creation and appreciation of art photography (Wilson 2024, 15). Nevertheless, we might posit, as Lopes has (2014, 158), that sometimes we profit from appreciating certain arts in ways that are not true to the kind.[2] Furthermore, as Wilson herself highlights, all this plays out "within a negative-positive paradigm" (2024, 39) and it would be intriguing to consider

2 Lopes, Dominic McIver, *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

how a multi-stage view would account for the expressive potential of less common or 'alternative' photographic practices where there are no negatives, as in the direct-positive process used to produce daguerreotypes, for example. Perhaps one approach lies in the forward-looking nature of the account offered here. Images that have ostensibly existed as unique entities, like daguerreotypes, can now be easily scanned or digitally photographed and 'reinterpreted' using digital contact film in the darkroom or various computer-based means to produce new digital prints. Indeed, as Wilson has suggested, the "true spirit of the analogy emerges" (2024, 39) if we look to photo-electrical technologies like a digital RAW file, the equivalent, Wilson proposes, to an exposed but undeveloped film, or "a score that can be performed unlimited times." (2024, 39)

Taking up themes related to the digital, Campion responds to Wilson's article by examining the recent phenomenon of 'videogame photography', or static images produced from videogames. This way of producing images, Campion proposes, has affinities with the multi-stage account of the photographic process as graphical information, which is usually output directly to the screen connected to the system, is processed so the system reads it as an image file (2024, 59). Nonetheless, given that no photographic event involving light is involved in making the images, Campion concludes that videogame photography would be inadmissible as a "proper form of photography on Wilson's multi-stage account" but that this "seems to challenge the harmony the account has enjoyed with photographic practice" (2024, 60). Although Campion takes this to be a tension in the account, as Wilson writes in her reply: "When Ansel Adams tells us that his prints are musical performances, his claim should be taken seriously because it provides insight into his art practice, but it does not justify redefining the ontological category of musical performances." (Wilson 2024, 114) In this case, some harmony with practice could be maintained by taking the claims of practitioners seriously and appreciating static images from videogames *as* photographs

without thereby designating them as such. In doing so, we are arguably still in the position to grapple with the important distinctions Campion highlights (2024, 62) — between the real and virtual within photography — without having to radically revise ontologies.

Giupponi's response to Wilson's target article also looks to another art, namely Renaissance practices of intarsia, where small pieces of wood are combined to form an image. As Giupponi outlines (2024, 68), the works were often designed by painters, who made the preparatory drawing, and executed in wood by specialized carpenters, *intarsiatori*. The practice is one that has often been dismissed, as Giupponi explains, as either a sub-genre of painting or a craft (2024, 68). Underpinning these sceptical attitudes, Giupponi proposes, is that intarsia is treated as a single-stage endeavour (2024, 68). Accordingly, Giupponi looks to Wilson's multi-stage account as a model upon which to highlight the distinctive, yet interdependent creative achievements of the artist responsible for producing the preparatory drawing and the *intarsiatore*. In her reply, Wilson praises Guipponi for delivering the kind of outcome she hoped to achieve: "a better understanding of creative achievements and assignment of credit to practitioners who are otherwise overlooked." (2024, 115) In general, the visual arts, unlike music, are ill-equipped to recognize or credit the variety of figures who may have made important contributions to the manifestation of an artwork. However, the kind of approach advocated by Wilson has the potential to facilitate new attitudes that could help to change this. Although, as Wilson also indicates in her reply to Giupponi, the degree to which the arguments in service of this are successful is likely to be dependent on interrogating other implicit or stubborn conceptions, like sharp distinctions made between art and craft (2024, 115).

Pettersson directly takes up Wilson's challenge "to expand the music-photography analogy in several directions" (2024, 39) by considering the analogies of silence in music and darkness in photography,

and covers or versions in music and photography. Highlighting the distinction between a recording of an absence and an absence of a recording, Pettersson suggests that light is not necessary for producing a photograph. Should a photosensitized surface be exposed in the dark, then "the production of the envisioned absolutely dark photo is still *sensitive* to light: had light been in the scene, it would have shown up in the photo." (Pettersson 2024, 89) This helpfully prompts Wilson to clarify in her reply that photography is concerned to register "the presence and absence of light, typically as a differentiated pattern, during some specific time interval" (2024, 103) which also depends on other material circumstances of the event.

Considering covers in music, Pettersson questions: "what constraints could plausibly govern the rendering, so that it is still a rendering of the register." (2024, 91) For a response, Pettersson turns to the informational account of another advocate of a multi-stage view. According to Lopes: 'A photograph is an image rendered by making marks based on input from a recording of information about a light scene." (2016, 87)[3] From Lopes's approach, Pettersson again questions "How much, and what kind of guidance is needed for an image to be a rendering of a register?" (2024, 91) Pettersson makes the challenge concrete by looking to Diarmuid Costello's imaginary case of a work made by Gerhard Richter, where the artist drags solvent across the wet surface of a painting made by tracing a photographic image of the Kölner Dom projected on the canvas. Questioning whether the "envisioned photograph" is "*of* the Kölner Dom", Pettersson suggests that just as similarity is used to settle lawsuits in music cases where it is alleged that one song originated in another, "the 'way out' of the possible impasse is to think of photographs necessarily involving capturing the 'looks' of things" (2024, 92). However, questions, Wilson suggests, about the authenticity of a rendering are perhaps beside the point: "There can never be any

3 Lopes, Dominic McIver, *Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley, 2016).

rendering from a register that is identical with a 'photograph' created during exposure, no matter what its visible properties' (2024, 108-109). As Wilson advocates, the multi-stage account allows for enormous diversity across cases: "even when a photographic event has occurred, evidence of that aetiology would only be salient in the final product to a greater of lesser degree" (2024, 40). Returning to the case under discussion, given the way the paint is ultimately manipulated, the imaginary work, which could be considered a hybrid between photography and painting, is not an image that preserves the informational relation to a high degree.[4] However, this in combination with the fact it is not, from visual observation, obviously *of* the Kölner Dom would arguably be a source of its artistic significance.

In his article, Star draws on a work of art history, Robin Kelsey's *Photography and the Art of Chance* (2015), to suggest that the main source of doubt about the artistic pretensions of photography is not the familiar brand of Scrutonian scepticism. Rather, photographs may be the product of luck, leaving photographers deserving little or no aesthetic credit for their work. Star addresses this concern by attending to different kinds of luck — *circumstantial luck* and *resultant luck* — and argues that, to different degrees, both are compatible with photographic activities being skilful and artistically creditworthy. In building this argument, like Wilson, Star is keen to stress that photography should not be reduced to the moment of exposure and that the testimony of photographers may not always be that accurate or informative about broader practices. In relation to epistemological issues, Star proposes that "it is important to distinguish between artistic credit in relation to single photographs and artistic credit in relation to an *oeuvre*" (2024, 141) — with the latter we can determine whether photographs have

4 For more on the concept of 'hybrid arts' see: Anscomb, Claire, 'Hybridized, Influenced, or Evolved? A Typology to Aid the Categorization of New and Developing Arts', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2023) 81:3, 317-329. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpad028

been taken skilfully, something which may be corroborated by external evidence. As Star questions, "why should we not be able to infer that a particular photograph is a creditworthy work of art from facts external to the content of that particular photo?" (2024, 140) Indeed, considering that contextual information helps to anchor interpretive activity in relation to a variety of visual artworks (for further discussion on this see, for example, Maes 2010 and Bantinaki 2020), it would seem arbitrary to prohibit this activity in relation to photographic work.[5]

In the final article, Schreier questions the epistemic status of photography by looking at a variety of different photographic practices. As Schreier finds, they have different standards and so "we need additional sources of knowledge to justify using an image to warrant true beliefs" (2024, 155). In some practices, where visual information is added, the epistemic merits of the images are increased but this, Schreier points out, is "explained by the epistemic virtue of trained judgement" (2024, 155). Given that, as Schreier outlines, now many photographic processes are digital, as in those conducted through smartphones where images may be processed by, or edited with, algorithms that give "a more mind-dependent representation of the scene" (2024, 155), we arguably need to do more to encourage this epistemic virtue not only in knowledge-oriented practices, but to guide our everyday interactions with the world via the deluge of such images through which we seem to encounter it. Moreover, with the recent explosion in AI-generated images that appear photographic, perhaps now more than ever, we need to be willing to embrace external information, not only in our appreciative practices, but to verify whether images are reliable sources of visual information.

5 Maes, Hans, 'Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (2010) 50:2, 121-138. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp051; Bantinaki, Katerina, 'The literary translator as author: A philosophical assessment of the idea', *Translation Studies* (2020) 13:3, 306-317. https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2019.1668841

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