Photography and Philosophy.

For: Torino Fotografia, discussion "Photography & Co.", 17/6/85.

Photography may be a subject for philosophical analysis and criticism from various avenues af approach, and with varied intentions. I shall take one approach only, and my intention will be to try and understand photography as a post-industria object. And I shall try to show why photography, if thus approached, constitutes an eminently philosophical subject.

It is a common place to say that philosophy is in a crisis. Various reasons for that crisis are given. The most important is, of course, that science, which is a consequence of philosophical reflexion, has occupied virtually all the subjects of philosophy, and has left practically nothing for philosophy to do: "episteme" has devoured "sophia". In fact, there seem to be only two ways open for a continued philosophical discourse: to criticize science, and to pose existential questions, in the hope that science will never be competent to ask them. (These two ways may cros but anglo-saxon philosophy prefers the first one, continental philosophy has given, until recently, preference to the asking of unscientific questions).

Now I believe that the crisis of philosophy is part and parcel of a more general crisis of our culture. And I suggest that what is involved here is the painful passage from industrial society toward xx what is variously called "post-industrial" society, "information" society, or post-modernity. The passage is painful because it renders obsolete many, if not all the categories of thought and action. The categories of understanding, the political, ethical and esthetic categories, and the categories of behavior and even of perception. If we try to apply those traditional categories to what is emerging about us and within us, we cannot grasp it. Thus philosophy, just as science, politics, aesthetics, and all the disciplins connected with this, (like economics, the law, the arts, and technology), is called upon to elaborate new methods. The very word "philosophy", (just like the words "science", "art" and so forth), is acquiring a new meaning, or it will be abandoned. One way to reformulate those traditional disciplins is put all previous categories between brackets and to approach the emerging phenomena with an open mind. This "phenomenological" attitude is a very powerful one, because it tries to have the new phenomena propose the categories which are adeaqte to them. "Die Sache zu Worte kommen lassen". One of those emerging phenomena is photography, and it has the added advantage that it is relatively old, one of the eldest. This is why a phenomenological approach to photography may help to reformulate philosoph; as a whole, and thus help to overcome our crisis.

.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

Let me point out some of the characteristics which make photography a post-industrial object. (1) It is a surface. (2) It carries an information which sits on the surface. (3) It can be electro-magnetized and thus freed from the surface, (to become "immaterial", non-objective). (4) The information it carries can be transferred from surface to surface. (5) The information it carries may be stocked in artificial memories. (6) The photo is produced by an ever more automat-

ed apparatus. (7) The apparatus which produces the photographic information is programmed. (8) The photo has practically no value as an object, its value is in the information it carries. (9) The photo seems to be a reflection of rays coming from the outside world, (a mirror image), but is in fact a projection of models of behavior, of knowledge and of experience, (an imperative image). (10) In sum: the photo is a surface which is programmed to program its receivers, it has no objective value, it tends to become non-objective, and to become pure imperative information of two dimensions. Thus it is a phenomenon of the approaching future information culture.

I have chosen those characteristics of photography, in order to stress what seem to me to be the fundamental changes we are going through at present. The are: (1) Two-dimensional structures, and no longer linear texts, carry the informations which are decisive for our knowledge, experience, and evaluation of ourselves and the world. Therefore the structure of knowledgem experience and evaluation themselves is changing. (2) Information need no longer be stored within objects, but it may put on their surface. We need no longer change the form of the objective world, if we want to create information. (3) Information may be immaterial. The objective world is getting less interesting. (4) Information may be multiplied and distributed practically infinitely. Everybody can own it. (5) Information can be stored in memories with easy access. Human memories need no longer to be troubled. (6) Humans will be ever more interested in programming apparatus, and ever less in impressing information in objects. Work will become redundant. (7) The programming of apparatus will require a calculating and computing reasoning, and new strategies for information production. (8) Ownership and property of objects will become less and less interesting, as interest concentrates upon information production and consumption. (9) Knowledge, experience and evaluation will no longer refer to objects, but to models. The ontological distinction between "true" and "fictional" will become blurred, and will have to be abandoned. (10) In sum: We shall have to give up linear, causal, processual, historical thought and action in favor of an imaginary, contextual, relational, cybernetical thought and action, and we shall have to a work ethics and esthetics in favor of a ludic, combinational ethics and esthetics.

Now all those changes are too radical to be grasped in abstract. But if we contemplate the photo, as we hold in in our hands, we may understand what is involved here. And if we consider the behavior of those who program and produce cameras, of those who handle them and press upo their shutters, and of those who contemplate the photos, we may have an insight into what life willbe like in the approaching future of informatisation, robotisation, and the dominance of images over society.

.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

Philosophy, in our tradition, is a specific manipulation of words according to rules: it is a linguistic discourse, and its rules are those of logic. The consideration of photography suggests that this sort of game is no longer adequate to the emerging thought structures. If philosophy is to survive the

present transition, it will have to learn how to change its structure. It will
have to abandon the alphabetic code in favor of computer codes which permit the
programming of photos and comparable images. But this is so radical, as to pro-
voke the question whether this will still be philosophy, or some new, as yet un-
named way of thinking.

There is a paradox involved here. If I take a photo as a subject of
philosophical discourse, I am invited to abandon that discourse and to elaborate
a new strategy for thinking. To abandon the alphabet, and with it all the rules
of of linear thinking. To abandon language as a mediation of thought, and with
it all the semantic, mythical and aesthetic parameters of language. I am invit-
ted to abandon conceptual thinking in favor of a new kind of imagination. which
is, to be sure, quite unlike pre-alphabetic, pre-historical imagination, in that
it is based on clear and distinct calculation and computation. The paradox in-
volved here is this: the linearity of philosophical discourse must not be reject-
ed, but elevated into a twodimensional thought structure.

Now, of course, this is not a new challenge. In fact, photos could
not have been invented more than a century ago, if philosophical thought had not
prepared the way for their invention. Ever since Descartes and Pascal, the need
to reformulate philosophical discourse into calculation became felt, and ever since
Leibniz and Newton the methods necessary for such a reformulation have been elab-
orated. But the challenge has now become urgent. The photos are the result of
a structural change in the philosophical discourse, but now that theyare here,
they menace to do away with the discourse. There is a sort of feed-back between
pure theoretical thought and its results: probability calculus produces photos,
and the photos strike back and demand that they be taken as thought models. Thus
photos are not merely a subject of philosophical discourse, but they are even more,
a problem against which that discourse advances to suffer shipwreck.

.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

What I said is nothing but short hand for long and, I am affraied,
rather complicated discussions. It is nothing but a preparation for the dialogue
which is to follow. Please keep in mind, when taking my suggestions up, that what
I had in mind is not photography as a philosophical problem among others, but
photography as a phenomenon which challenges philosophy as we know it. It is not
photography, it is philosophy, (and with it our whole Wetsern tradition), which I
intended to put in question.