

## Thinking in Visible Color / David Macarthur

"The work of art compels us – as one might say – to see it in the *right* perspective, but without art the object is a piece of nature like any other..."

– Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>

The Socratic question "What is photography?" lies at the heart of all of Yanai Toister's memorable, chromatically seductive, and self-reflexive photographic compositions. Toister's is a philosophical art. His images provoke one to meditate on questions about the nature of photographic images, the possibility of photographic meaning, and about what implications photography has for our conception of seeing, our idea of art, our relation to technology, and what notion we have of objective reality and our cognitive and sensuous engagement with it. Since his earliest public exhibition in 2000 Toister has shown a rigorous, investigative, almost "scientific" approach to photography: 1) challenging, by complicating, the culturally and theoretically dominant documentary or "realist" conception of photography; 2) experimenting with modes of abstraction (especially the role of color) in photographic images – a study that is becoming increasingly more radical over time; and 3) sensitively and methodically exploring the strange synergy and parallelism he (and others<sup>2</sup>) find between photography and architecture.

It is important in approaching Toister's work to realize that he is a post-Photoshop photographer who exploits the full panoply of contemporary photographic techniques and digital technologies to create, modify and enhance his images. These images are produced by medium or large format cameras and, since 2005, also by digital cameras. In very recent work – his 2012 images depicting, by means of 3-D scanning, photograms produced on (light-sensitive) Fuji apple skins

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- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture & Value (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 7.
- 2 Notably, Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of industrial buildings and structures. See, e.g., Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, Typologies of Industrial Buildings (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

(pp. 118-121) – no camera was used at all. A philosopher of art has written that “Photoshop... is the end of photography as we know it,”<sup>3</sup> to which we can understand Toister as replying: “On the contrary, it reveals fundamental features of the medium of photography” – namely, that photography can be (and has from its inception been) used to present fictions, fakes and fantasies; that it is a selective and transformative – Toister says “translational”<sup>4</sup> – medium; and that it has always been subject to multiple choices affecting the image, such as the quality and amount of light, the type of film or photosensitive paper, re-touching of negatives, multiple exposures, the theatre-like staging of objects or people or settings, and so on.

In short, Photoshop is neither the end nor a radical new departure for photography, but another tool in a long history of photographic tools that allows the artist to produce images of his or her imagining. All of Toister’s work, from the early figurative pieces to the recent cameraless works, shows photographs or photograms bearing the face of his own artistic intentions, including the intention to reveal the intentions of the designers of photographic technologies.

One reason to speak of an “end” signaled by the digital manipulation of images is that there is a widely popular tradition of conceiving photography in terms of its mechanical or automatic relation to the world, the purely causal transaction between reflected light, a mechanical device for capturing light and a photosensitive medium. In the writings of many theorists this “indexical” quality is supposed to establish the *realism* of the photographic image; the claim is that we see *through* photographs to the world – but, mysteriously, a world past.<sup>5</sup> Some go further and claim that it establishes the transparency of the image as well, as if photography is in the same line of business as telescopes, microscopes and mirrors.<sup>6</sup> The modernist art critic Clement Greenberg writes: “Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for that

reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document and act as work of art as well.”<sup>7</sup>

Many of Toister’s images, however, pose serious *epistemological* problems for relating to photography as a fundamentally realist medium since we are made aware of the fact that we typically cannot tell, on the basis of just looking, where to draw the line between the real and the unreal, the indexically produced features of the image and the intentionally produced features. As Toister has said about the contents of the photographs that most interest him, “When it’s real it looks fake and when it’s fake it looks real.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Toister’s thinking and practice rediscover the American philosopher Stanley Cavell’s perception that photography is bound up with the question of skepticism in modern philosophy – where skepticism is taken to mean the inability of our senses to distinguish the presence of reality from a fabrication of reality, as exemplified by the inhabitants of the computer-generated fantasy world of the film *The Matrix*.<sup>9</sup> If, as Cavell has put it, “film is a moving image of skepticism” then Toister’s images reflect, and reflect on, the closely related (but differently motivated) thought that photography is a frozen image of skepticism – a skepticism which is at the same time a counter-modernist skepticism about there being an essence of photography.<sup>10</sup> As Toister’s images attest, photography is, despite its familiarity, unfamiliar; it is an open-ended medium, an uncharted terrain inviting precisely these sorts of explorations.

For example, in the “Visible Color” (2005, pp. 110-117) and “Palettes” (2006-7, pp. 68-75, 104-107) series we are presented with pictures of buildings that have been manipulated in Photoshop through color “correction” – saturating some colors, desaturating others – and the erasure of objects (e.g. paths, fences, electricity wires) and details (e.g. the filling-in of windows and doorways) from source images. This work bears interesting comparison with James Wellings’ “Glass House” series (2006-8)<sup>11</sup> of

color-manipulated images of Philip Johnson's Glass House (1949, fig. 1), although Toister's images are more subtly intentional, less sentimental, his color manipulations more ambiguous. The buildings in the Visible Color series look artificially, perhaps digitally colored, but they are, in fact, images of structures painted top to bottom in a uniform bold color: orange, pink, purple or blue. Toister calls our attention to the question of their "true" color by including in each image an apparently artificial color marker: the uniform building colors themselves; the recurrent appearance of a magically blue pipe or an unusually intense red piece of wire tubing; and in Visible Color #2 (p. 110) an unmistakable and slightly disorienting contrast between the saturation of orange hues in two adjacent buildings. Are these color effects natural or artificial? Are colors themselves natural or artificial?

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- 3 Gregg Horowitz, "Photoshop or Understanding Art," in Daniel Herwitz & Michael Kelly, eds., Action, Art, History: Engagements with Arthur C. Danto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
  - 4 Yanai Toister, quoted in Ellie Armon Azoulay, "Step into the Light," Haaretz, Jan. 10, 2011.
  - 5 See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); André Bazin, What Is Cinema?, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). Cavell writes that photography "proposes an artistically unheard of relation between the presence and absence of its objects." Stanley Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking" [1985], in Cavell on Film, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York, 2005), 117.
  - 6 Kendall L. Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," Critical Inquiry 11 (1984): 246-277.



- 1 James Welling, 0806, 2006, inkjet print, 83.8x126, edition of 5, courtesy David Zwirner, New York  
ג'יימס וולינג, 0806, 2006, הדפסה בהזרקה דיו, 83.8x126, מהדורה של 5,  
באדיבות דייוויד זווירנר, ניו-יורק



- 2 Thomas Demand, Hinterhaus, 2005,  
c-print/framed, 26.9x21.5  
© Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn,  
courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London  
תומס דימנד, שיכון, 2005  
תצלום צבע ממוסגר, 26.9x21.5  
© תומס דימנד, VG Bild-Kunst, בון,  
באדיבות שפרוט מאגרס ברלין לונדון

More interventionist strategies are employed in the “Palettes” images – in which colored buildings in a black-and-white environment have the look of architectural models that have been placed in an artificial landscape – although, in fact, these are treated images of real buildings photographed *in situ*. In another related body of work called “KPU” (2008, pp. 62-65), a subtle shift to a cyan sky serves to emphasize the simple cubic geometry of the bulky gray-and-white modernist buildings below, lending them a staged quality and a nostalgic longing for a modernist past. The lack of people and the general de-emphasis of human habitation in this series, and indeed in all of his architectural works, serve to create an otherworldly aura, a sense of the uncanny.

The architecture/building images stand in an interesting relation to the de-populated images of Thomas Demand (fig. 2), who photographs realistic, life-size paper-and-cardboard models of kitchens, offices, staircases and other living and work environments.<sup>12</sup> But whereas Demand’s images of interior spaces emphasize the presence of people through their absence, Toister’s images of exterior spaces de-emphasize human habitation. For Toister, it is the world itself that becomes strange or model-like in the camera’s gaze. Intriguingly, all of these building images involve a curious combination of theatrical and anti-theatrical qualities that implicitly question the influential conception of art owed to Michael Fried, who claims that modernist art must aspire to defeat theatricality in order to achieve the autonomous status of art.<sup>13</sup>

A primary aim of this work is to qualify the indexical force of the source images and so to undermine the documentary or realist character of the final image. This is best understood not as an attack upon photography, but rather as a re-conception of it, one that does not deny the physical basis of the medium, namely, that photography is a capturing or registration of light – hence, of the “real” in a minimal sense. It does, however, challenge the

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- 7 Clement Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” in **The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose**, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 60.
  - 8 Yanai Toister in conversation with the author, 24 June, 2012.
  - 9 Stanley Cavell, “What Photography Calls Thinking,” 116-117. **The Matrix**, 1999, Warner Bros., directed by A. and L. Wachowski.
  - 10 Stanley Cavell, **The World Viewed**, 188. Cavell’s idea is that, like Descartes’ skeptical scenario of a mock reality consisting of nothing but dreams/hallucinations, in a film we are satisfied with a reality that does not exist, *now* – Toister adds, ‘and maybe never!’ Cavell assumes what Toister contests, namely, that reproducing physical reality is the camera’s automatic function. (It is worth mentioning that Cavell is writing about traditional pre-digital photographic technology.)
  - 11 Noam Elcott, Sylvia Lavin and James Welling, **James Welling: Glass House** (Bologna: Damiani Art Press, 2011).
  - 12 Roxana Marcoci, ed., **Thomas Demand** (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005).
  - 13 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in **Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and **Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

claim of the *transparency* of the image, of simply seeing *through* the picture to the, or some, objective world. Toister's photographic works provide abundant proof that we simply cannot reliably tell, on visual grounds, how to distinguish the real from the non-real, the natural from the artificial. What is often thought of as the intrinsic documentary nature of pre-digital photography rests on many assumptions and presuppositions about the camera, the conditions of its use, optical science, and the treatment and development of the film. The important point is that the distinction between the intentional (= unreal) and the unintentional (mechanical, automatic, indexical = real) is not a distinction that we can draw within the realm of what we see in a photographic image. Any question of "realism" is therefore moot, unless we know a great deal of information about how a photograph was made and produced. We need to be able to answer the question "Real as opposed to what?" to have any confidence that we know which aspects or elements of a photographic image are "real" according to one of many understandings of this multivalent term. But this means that photography as a visual medium is not, as such, transparent. So Toister's images can be looked at as studies in the scope and limits of realism in the photographic image.

Toister's anti-documentary stance, his denial of the essential transparency of photography, involves a realization that our wish to say photography is inherently realistic must be immediately qualified by adding that it is inherently *abstractive* as well. Only *some* aspects of reality are ever depicted in a photographic image (which aspects may be unrecognizable, distorted, obscured, etc.), whilst many other aspects of reality are abstracted away entirely, such as the flow of time, things in motion, and whatever lies outside the visible field of the image.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Toister's images are also fruitfully thought of as studies in the scope and limits of abstraction in the photographic image. This claim is nowhere better demonstrated than in

the *9-Sheet Experiment* series (2006-9, pp. 15, 46-49, 166), which explores the limits of artistic intervention (having been produced serendipitously, by exposure to a faulty dark-room light) and temporal displacement (having been produced over various disjoint periods of time, defeating our expectations of instantaneousness).

Toister's images exploit a further dimension of abstraction, namely, the fact that the colors of a photographic image are almost never as we would see them from the camera's perspective. What fascinates Toister, apart from the inherent beauty of photographic color, is the ambiguity of the ontology of color in a photographic context. Colors, including black and white, define the boundaries of objects, inevitably contributing to whatever realism there is in an image. Yet in apparent tension with that thought is the fact that colors have the status of constructions in the making of photographic images, tempting us to read them as abstract non-depictive elements of an image. This tension is part of the motivation for "Gray Cards" (2005-6, pp. 26, 76-77), a series which contrasts a magically suspended gray rectangle hovering above a watercourse with a similar image of a neutral gray card (used by photographers as a reference for exposure); in the first case the gray zone is digitally introduced, while in the second, the gray zone is an object held aloft by an unidentified subject, presumably the artist. And in "Tri-Channeled Compositions" (2005, pp. 78, 81, 83, 85) we are shown photographs built out of three superimposed, slightly misaligned, images, each containing only one of the three basic colors of light (red, green, blue) used to produce what we like to call "life-like" colors in photography. It is a reflection on photographic seeing, which is intimately related to ordinary seeing since the human eye has red, green and blue receptors.

Treating color as an abstract quality, something to photographically "paint" with, lies behind the early figurative works' abiding interest in images in which regions of vivid color seem to float free from the world.

This is virtually a description of what we see in an Untitled work (2001, p. 50) from the series "Ahab" showing an expanse of sensuous green that floats on – and, imaginatively, away from – water, that looks like it was taken in the rice paddies of Vietnam (in fact, it wasn't.) In another Untitled work (2002, p. 109), from the series "Straits," Toister creates a stunning panoramic view of cloud-shadows skating over an agricultural valley of crops, fields and dams. It is as if we are being invited to see the geometrical pattern of green, brown and blue regions of color as an ephemeral abstract artwork, detached from its physical reality and ordinary earth-bound significance. Another example of this etherialization of color is a close-up of a fire from "Register of Facts" titled Flame (2004, p. 87), which evokes the sense that the brilliant orange at the centre of the image is attempting to leap out of the image as if the world cannot contain it. In these works we are being invited to consider a question that has obsessed modern philosophy, namely, whether colors are in the mind, or the world, or both.

In the photographs chosen for the exhibition one cannot fail to notice that almost half are images of modern vernacular architecture and buildings. That Toister was born in a modernist-inspired habitat (a kibbutz) and is an artist who lives and works in Tel Aviv, the "White City" with its world-heritage Bauhaus (mostly international style) architecture, no doubt plays its part in this. A deeper motivation lies in the problematic of whether photography at its best can count as art – a negative answer to which Greenberg links, as we have seen, to its "function as document." A similar predicament haunts architecture. Architecture or building (since the term "architecture" may appear to beg the question at issue) sits in an awkward relationship to the modern post-romantic conception of art as a useless object of disinterested contemplation since, all too obviously, it is designed for human use and habitation.<sup>15</sup> To photograph buildings, then, is to photograph something whose status as art is problematic and controversial.<sup>16</sup>

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- 14 See Joel Synder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision and Representation," Critical Inquiry 2 (1975): 143-169.
  - 15 On the modern idea of (fine) art see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment [1790], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), Ak. 304-308.
  - 16 From considerations of utility Adolf Loos famously denied that building qualified as art. Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime" [1908], in U. Conrads, ed., Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 19-24.

But this inevitably raises the question about the status of photography, too, since it also has been made historically for human use, especially for documentary and evidential purposes in newspapers, magazines, law-courts, archives and scientific laboratories.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed the connection between architecture and photography is even closer than this since there is a tendency to think about both in purely scientific (say, mechanical) terms: a matter of engineering in the one case and of optics in the other. And the way both disciplines relate to time and space intersect in intimate ways. Architecture is a (relatively) timeless art; photography is an art of the timeless, the frozen in time. And both work within, or involve, a 3-D space conforming to the eye's demand for spatial representation according to the laws of perspective as first worked out in the Renaissance.

By making his architectural images look fake ("Visible Color") or model-like ("Palettes") or simply revealing a building as a sum of parts ("Sum of Forms," 2008, pp. 56-59, 103) Toister is directing our attention to the intentional perspective which, as the opening quotation from Wittgenstein puts it, "compels us" to appreciate the thought expressed in a building's form that potentially has the power to render it a work of art. So, too, Toister builds the form of his photographic compositions (much as an architect builds the form of his designs) with the aim of transforming light-and-chemical induced images – "pieces of nature" in Wittgenstein's phrase – into artworks.<sup>18</sup> The photograph is not a mere mechanically produced thing in Toister's hands; it is an intentional action.

Regarding its status as art, Toister contests another of Greenberg's claims, namely that "the photograph has to



3 Gray Card (Riverside County), 2007,  
archival pigment print on cotton rag paper, 60x70  
כרטיס אפור (מחוז ריברסייד), 2007,  
הדפס פיגמנט ארכיבי על נייר כותנה, 60x70

tell a story if it is to work as art.”<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, these photographs, conspicuously devoid of human subjects, turn away from narrative. They are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the narratively dense tableau photography of Jeff Wall, for example.<sup>20</sup> Their claim to art is based on their capacity to express compelling thoughts – for example, about where to locate color in the scheme of things, or about the character of seeing and the distinction between ordinary and photographic seeing. Kant famously taught the conceptuality of ordinary perception; Wittgenstein that seeing is an elastic concept that does not stand for a unique relation to some absolute or fixed conception of reality.<sup>21</sup> Toister, building on the insights of both, emphasizes the artifactuality and artificiality of photographic seeing which, in turn, casts light on the extraordinary panoply of contingencies, conditions and conventions involved in ordinary seeing.

In closing, let us return to one of Toister's very few images to depict a human being, Gray Card (Riverside County) (2007), which reveals only the torso of the artist holding a gray card in front of him (fig. 3). It is obviously a figure for Toister-the-artist's relation to his images. He is always present in them, or behind them, even when we cannot literally see him there; present not as a storyteller or a person that we can relate to, since his face is hidden from view. The moral is that Toister reveals himself in the intentions – a species of practical thoughts – *expressed* in the images. The old idea of art as taking an interest in what lies in the artist's head is humorously mocked as the head is “cut off,” lying outside the image. But many of Toister's images honor another old idea of art by hiding, to a greater or lesser extent, traces of the artist in the making of the work. As Kant says, “even though the purposiveness in a product of fine art is intentional, it must still not seem intentional.”<sup>22</sup> We, the audience, are invited to discover the thinking so subtly and effectively expressed in these images, in order that we may see more clearly our own ambiguous relation to the world.

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- 17 The problem for photography is worse, in so far as it contains many unintended details.
  - 18 On the question “Is photography art or object?” see Walter Benn Michaels, “Photography and Fossils,” in Photography Theory (The Art Seminar), ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2006), 431-450.
  - 19 Clement Greenberg, “Four Photographers,” in The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 183.
  - 20 Thierry De Duve, et al., Jeff Wall: Complete Edition (London: Phaidon, 2010).
  - 21 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason [1787], trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929); Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations [1953], trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), part ii, 198.
  - 22 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, Ak. 306-307.