

Qualifying Photography as Art, or, Is Photography All It Can Be?

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With medium specificity a passé historical concern confined chiefly to the pages of art history, it may seem prosaic and anachronistic to question the position and relative validity of a single medium—photography—within the world of contemporary art. In addition, the same question may seem patently irrelevant to those who might justifiably point out that many of the most eminent, critically lauded, and well-collected artists of the twentieth century—Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Cindy Sherman, and Andreas Gursky, to name a few—all use the camera as their primary instrument. Furthermore, the status of photography as art is rarely drawn into question, and the market currency of the medium is beyond dispute. But does it necessarily follow that the fundamental ontology of photography as a practice has been fully interrogated, understood, and integrated into the discourse of contemporary art, assuming its rightful place alongside traditional media such as painting, sculpture, and drawing, as well as new media such as installation and video? In other words, does photography exist as photography in art history and criticism today? And if not, why not? Is photography—and by derivation photography criticism—all it can be?

Not surprisingly, one of the most astute theorizations of this quandary was offered—albeit obliquely—by