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Unit One Essay Assignment (E1) Revision

The Failure of Digital Tools

It is only intuitive [I'm not sure that it is so intuitive; my intuition is that a new

medium would open up whole new ways of making art, and artists, being primarily

concerned with creativity, would look to stretch as far as possible from what has been

done before] that with the introduction of a new artistic medium such as digital

photography, artistic expression in this new medium principally explores new angles on

preexisting themes. One such extension of traditional themes of gender identity and

deception is exemplified by Inez van Lamsweerde's photo manipulated image "The

Forest (Klaus)," one of four 1995 images depicting androgynous male characters altered

digitally to have predominantly feminine characteristics. The series is not entirely novel,

though; it strongly recalls the older analog photograph, "New York City," taken by

Robert Frank in 1955. Both images show men who look very convincingly like women.

The two images deal with the issues of gender and performance, but their messages are

affected differently by their media. In particular, "Klaus" suffers [why "suffers"?] from a

use of digital manipulation to achieve its ends – while Frank's image uses sparse vague

elements to ignite a wealth of interpretations, Lamsweerde's image makes distracting

attempts to modify reality, and falls short of her intended investigation of societal forces.

[Sounds like a pretty challenging thesis. How will you determine what van Lamsweerde's

intention was?]

Frank's image offers insights into how the traditional photographic medium can

choose which elements of an image to show and hide. He hides the definitive context of

the photograph, giving viewers only a circus advertisement sign and the hint of an urban surrounding. There are few definitive answers regarding the situation of the models the photograph does show; it is unclear whether they are in performing dress or casually cross-dressing, whether they are poor, and to what extent they are posed for the photographer. He shows a vague set of characters, but hides a good deal from the viewer. What is gained by keeping this information away from the viewer?

By hiding much of the definite context for the photo, Frank leaves options open and adds meaning to the image. With each question, a new viewpoint and dimension of society are introduced. With the urban background left vague, viewers are led to think about different urban environments that might have produced such a scene – from the image, cities other than New York City are plausible interpretations of the setting. It is unclear where in the city the image was taken – viewers consider the possibility of the subjects' poverty. The men could be considered homosexual – their style of dress and facial makeup recall cross-dressing males, and this interpretation calls forth questions of social acceptance of homosexuality and individual identity. On the other hand, the advertisement in the background introduces another possibility – the view of these characters as performers in the circus, with their makeup and dress only a part of the greater act of circus performance. Frank's image is thus able to deal with so many aspects of our society because it has such vague context and elements. [good analysis, with relevant and concise use of evidence]

This vagueness is an inherent aspect of the medium of traditional photography. It is true in general that context is included in the majority of traditional photographic images. It comes in the form of background elements such as the urban landscape and

advertisement in Frank's "New York City," or in the form of foreground elements with multiple interpretations, such as the men's dress and facial expressions. It is reasonable to expect some level of vagueness of interpretation in any photographic image, but Frank takes this to the extreme, with so many levels and possibilities for interpretation, it seems truly a masterpiece of this aspect of traditional photography. [I agree that there is a vagueness or ambiguity in this image, and that such ambiguity is inherent to (documentary) photography. But it is less clear to me how this image represents a particularly dramatic case of ambiguity or vagueness. Do you remember the image by Weegee that we looked at in our first class meeting, of an apparent crime scene, with a woman in the middle holding a dying or dead man in her lap? To my mind, this image raises just as many questions if not more about its context. Certainly part of the power of Frank's images comes from his ability to play with this vagueness, to choose what gets left out of the photo. But, again, this is just an inherent dimension of photography.]

Such richness of context and elements is simply not possible with a manipulated digital image such as Inez von Lamsveerde's "The Forest (Klaus)", which has had many of these elements of context and detail removed or altered. The alterations, however, leave the viewer focusing more on what has been changed than what she is showing or hiding. The white background recalls a fashion shoot, and the model's very ecstatic pose suggests advertisement or fashion photography. [Through his pose] [misplaced modifier, this refers to Klaus not to van Lamsweerde], von Lamsweerde powerfully proclaims her love for this new medium of digital photography; she uses the medium almost exclusively for her art work, as she does in [this][???].

She also attempts to make more general statements about gender identity in society, but in these points she fails: where Frank's vagueness successfully allows for multiple interpretations, Lamsweerde's changes interfere with her intended interpretations. She attempts to draw our attention to the man's vagueness of gender, using his replaced hands and mouth and prepared hair and pants to suggest very feminine qualities – indeed it is practically inevitable to notice this. However, it is more compelling an interpretation to say that she is questioning our photographic identity in a digital world than to believe that this man is actually composed of pieces of a woman, which are interacting to form the whole he views himself as. It is more compelling to think of this gimmick as an extension of her discussion of the fashion industry, with the replaced body parts being donned only for the duration of the fashion shoot – much as one would model a new suit, he is modeling these body parts. They seem not so much a part of his self as something that has been applied to him very professionally. Indeed, this is in fact what they are. [A good reading, but a strained conclusion. You infer that van Lamsweerde is attempting something at which she fails. Why not conclude that her intention was the thing you claim she succeeded at, namely, to question issues of identity in a digital world, using gender as a kind of pivot? That is, how can you decide her intention except in relation to your experience of the image?]

So Inez von Lamsweerde's image ultimately mirrors the ability of her own media as well; where Frank uses the traditional photographic frame and preparation to bring about his own senses of vagueness, Lamsweerde uses her digital manipulation to remove context and add body parts, and in so doing draws our attention to the modifications in a much more apparent way than in Frank's. With "New York City," there is a feeling that if

the scene was set up or posed, it was done so very hastily, a sentiment the photo gains from its medium. The fence left in the foreground of the frame, and the very informal stance of the subjects both suggest a candid shot, with little preparation, even if we know there must have been some. In "Klaus" the opposite is true; the image feels very prepared, as though there is an explicit but failed attempt to convince viewers that the image was ad-hoc and spontaneous, that they are witnessing some divine gender transformation, perhaps the pinnacle of a homosexual male. It is much harder to take this seriously.

The image modification is simply too obvious for such an interpretation to be convincing. [Again, my sense is that this obviousness is part of the meaning and intention of the image. No one is meant to be fooled by these hands and mouth. Instead, we are supposed to wonder about how we might have been fooled.] Audience members are left feeling as though they have been deceived; in reality they failed to suspend their disbelief. As a result they cannot grasp the interpretive meaning to the extent the author desired, and they feel as though somehow they did not meet the demands of the creator. Fault does not lie with the audience, but rather with the creator, who was overambitious and unconvincing in her use of a nascent medium. Lamsweerde's efforts do make a number of statements, though many of them end up focusing on the media she uses rather than society at large, because the manipulations themselves simply become distracting. If she is unable to convey her most subtle messages, it is because the media of digital photography still calls attention to itself in our minds, and distracts us from the meaning "Klaus" was intended to draw forth.

This result can be reconciled. If "The Forest (Klaus)" fails to convince us as viewers of all of its intended results, it is because the execution on the part of Inez von Lamsweerde falls short, and if the medium can be blamed, it is only because it is a new and underdeveloped one. It is reassuring to look back at traditional photography, and convince ourselves of the tremendous richness in works like "New York City" by Robert Frank, affecting audiences half a century past its exposure date. [nice conclusion, bringing it all together]

Greg,

Your revision argues that each image attempts to question the stability of gender, but that only Frank's image succeeds because only his image is sufficiently ambiguous to raise such questions. Van Lamsweerde's image, you argue, fails because its manipulations are ultimately distracting instead of subtle, thereby foreclosing the sorts of ambiguity that could raise genuine questions about the actual content of the image. Instead, you argue, van Lamsweerde raises questions about her medium, and in both cases, the medium reinforces the meaning of the image, with Frank's traditional photograph lending inherent ambiguity and van Lamsweerde's digital image imposing a sense of gross or unsubtle unreality.

That it would take me an entire paragraph to sum up your claims is a very good sign, as it shows that you are taking on a truly complicated and tangled set of issues. You deal with this complexity very well, keeping each paragraph clear enough to make its point and ordering your ideas in a way that is also clear. Readers are probably unable to keep the entire argument in focus at one time, (and it might help to summarize at the end or even at other points in the essay), but between the thesis claim and the clarity of each individual argument, we feel comfortable following the flow of your ideas.

My two criticisms are related to the specifics of your argument, and I have really already expressed both of them in the body of the essay. My sense is that part of the complexity of your readings of each image derives from a deliberate misreading in each case. In Frank's case, you claim that he makes special use of the ambiguity inherent to traditional photographic images. It would have been more modest but still effective to note only that his medium helps to reinforce the message of his image through its ambiguity, without claiming that his is a more ambiguous use of the medium than is typical. (Perhaps you are correct that Frank does somehow make his images extra vague, and your argument begins to show this. But it would take more evidence and some comparative work to make it stick.)

And your reading of van Lamsweerde is strangely twisted, as you discover profound and critical ideas in her image but then refuse to give her credit, claiming that she failed to do something that you assert she was trying to do. To me, this shows a bit of bad faith. Not only does she deserve credit for the significance that you discover in her image, but she is more successful at her supposed intention than you acknowledge. While the constructed character of this image is clear, and it does challenge the gender confusion that is the ostensible meaning of the image, it doesn't simply nullify that gender confusion. Rather, once we recognize that van Lamsweerde is using deliberate manipulation to fuck with Klaus's gender, the "gender fuck" becomes even more complicated and hard to grasp. She is not naively trying to construct an image with ambiguous gender but to mix together themes of digitalness, fashion, masculinity, the beauty myth, image manipulation, and more. You give her partial credit, but I think it isn't enough. Perhaps if you had worked harder to spell out what you take to be the "questions" raised by this (and Frank's) image, you would have recognized the subtlety of her approach.

These criticisms are serious but do not take away from the complexity that you do discover. Your readings of the images and your ability to combine these readings in a thesis that melds gender issues with questions of media, crossing between formal elements of the media and contentual elements of the images, are highly commendable. Keep striving for such complexity and don't let yourself get away with any conclusions that are unchallenged.