



**Shirana Shahbazi: Then Again**  
**Galerie Rudolfinum – small gallery**  
**22.3.2012 – 3.6.2012**

**Urs Stahel: Pictorial Doubts and Delight**

Eight Thoughts on Photographic Abstraction and Shirana Shahbazi's Path to (Almost) Pure Form

Excerpts from the text by Urs Stahel from the exhibition catalogue Shirana Shahbazi: Much Like Zero, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, 3. 9. – 13. 11. 2011

1

When he put pen to paper and articulated his vision—"form is henceforth divorced from matter"—there may well have been a flush of excitement on the face of Oliver Wendell Holmes, a physician and writer living in Boston, USA. The year was 1859, and he believed in the future great triumph of photography over matter, in the replication of the world in this "mirror with a memory", a new, lighter world that would cast off the weight of immutable matter for ever. "In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer... Pull it down or burn it up, if you please." In a state of euphoria, he wholeheartedly endorsed "this greatest of human triumph over earthly conditions".

"Form is henceforth divorced from matter": long before abstraction had officially become part of photography, Holmes separated form from matter and envisaged a new, lightsome world. And now, separated, abstracted from matter a new, magnificent world comes into being through photography. Just how real, and how abstract is it? Is it comparable with the material world? Is it still rooted in that world? In other words, is it a photographic representation of the world? Or does an entirely new world come into being; does photography create, generate a new realm all of its own? Oliver Wendell Holmes could not know that he was prising open one of Pandora's many boxes, that he was—no doubt inadvertently—paving the way for an ongoing, internal conflict in photography, torn between representation and creation, between construction and reconstruction, between portrayal and pure form.

2

The notion of abstraction in photography was first officially formulated by Alvin Langdon Coburn in 1916, in his essay "The Future of Pictorial Photography" and in his vortographs—photographs taken through a reflective prism in such a way that "the camera is freed from reality",<sup>2</sup> as Ezra Pound put it. "Why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried?" asked Coburn. "Why should not its subtle rapidity be utilised to study movement? Why not repeated successive exposures of an object in motion on the same plate?"<sup>3</sup> He had attached himself to the Vorticists, the British avant-garde movement, in the hope of elevating photography to the same status as painting and of promoting "the expression of suppressed or unsuspected originality".<sup>4</sup>

His endeavours were buoyed up by a wider tendency towards abstraction that had first become a noticeable undercurrent in society in the midnineteenth century—exemplified in the growing opacity of the flow of money, in the increasing abstraction of scientific research into human life and the organisation of the universe, and in the destruction of past notions of the human psyche as a single entity. All that and more—including the immense representational pressure coming from photography—impelled art towards abstraction and the abstract; two different concepts for two different phenomena. Kandinsky, Boccioni, the Futurists and the Russian Constructivists responded directly to this "drive towards abstraction",<sup>5</sup> towards a revolutionary shift in perception and in people's understanding of the world. Either they matched the growing abstraction around them with their own abstractions in art, or they set themselves apart, that is to say, determined their own vision of "abstract"

by constructing their own new, parallel, art-image-world where the spirit—not mimesis—was now paramount.

3

Despite all these revolutionary visions and verberations, faith in photographic representation triumphantly swept all else aside, obliterating any other notion of photography for decades and endowing the world with a seemingly endless mosaic of supposedly realistic photographs. Faith in the mechanical-optical-chemical reproduction of the world obscured the knowledge that every photograph is already indubitably an abstraction. To this day, although their claims to "reality" elicit unavoidable mental contortions from us, we

nevertheless believe we are looking directly into an unadulterated world: as it is, as it has been, as it was, in truth. One day social psychologists will explain to us why, for a whole century, half of humankind spent a hundred years not only accepting photography as an Ersatz for the world, but loving it, promoting it and collecting it—whilst also believing it, crediting it not just with the truth, but truthfulness itself. With the benefit of hindsight, one day we will know whether in fact photography was the first global rehabilitation scheme in Western history, following humanity's expulsion from the grand narrative, from the all-embracing structure, because ever since Romanticism we have seen ourselves as lost, sole beings, who, tossed into the world, have to discover, uncover and nurture its meaning for ourselves. Meanwhile photography deluded people into thinking they could understand the world, could hold it in their hands. A calming, ordering, and sentimental function. Reflection as reassurance, pictorially memorable re-presentation as a foothold and (supposed) clarification.

6

The cause of photographic abstraction did not go away. For some considerable time photograms took the lead (sometimes misleadingly, as in the hands of Moholy-Nagy), but there were also the black squares, circles, triangles created by photographic means in the wake of Malevich's paintings, there was Alexander Rodchenko's *Black on Black*, an oil-photogram as a black surface, and Gottfried Jäger's "generative photography" in the 1960s, 70s and 80s—self-generating photographs with their own (generative) aesthetic. But they lacked the will to make their mark, they failed to recognise the need to take seriously wellfounded doubts. As yet supply and demand were in balance; film production, picture printing and press imagery were rattling on and blinking our vision with appealing, representational pictorial worlds. But in early 2011 Volume 206 of *Kunstforum international* highlighted a new tendency towards abstraction and addressed its readers: "This current is apparent in all the various media and seems to be more than an art-immanent debate. But what is it that is specifically new about this new abstraction? Is it really about as-yet unknown thematic directions and concepts or is it merely a contemporary variant or re-interpretation of already established artistic strategies? And what does it tell us, when artists once again turn to abstraction? Are they, in so doing, considering a withdrawal from reality, an aesthetic escape, seeking some form of compensation, or are they rather mediating a counter-plan, a renewal and a Utopian quality?"<sup>7</sup> Ever since Jean Baudrillard we have seen how signs and their meanings have increasingly drawn apart over the years, that the signifier has become much more important than the signified. We live in an ocean of free-flowing, referenceless signs, which are available for anything and everything. The digitalisation of the world of signs, that is to say, the photographic world, has led to a positive eruption of blurring. We live in a world of simulation, in a "simulacrum", that makes it impossible to distinguish between original and copy, model and likeness, reality and imagination. Signs and images are increasingly bereft of references. Now, for the first time, it seems that abstraction in photography is being taken seriously and properly debated; it is regarded as important in terms of media theory and photograph-ontology. Now, at last, people recognise that in fact every photograph is abstract, that any reference to reality is "merely" a pleasant, comforting guise, that "all photographs are, to the same degree, representational, concrete and abstract; constructions that arise from translations and manipulations".<sup>8</sup> But these days there is an awareness and an ongoing enquiry into the fact that the term "abstract photography" is no more than a holding-concept, for in itself it is too simplistic, too empty, to encompass the realm of possibilities of this genre. What Ugo Mulas, Sigmar Polke, James Welling, Adam Fuss, Herwig Kempinger, Wolfgang Tillmans, Walead Beshty (to name but a few of its leading exponents) are aiming at and referencing with their photo-abstract, photoconcrete sign-worlds is as starkly different as landscape photography and portrait photography once were, as different as war and peace, as Heaven and Earth. Yet all are in no doubt as to the fact that every photograph is a construct and should be regarded and understood as such. "We're not creating a world, and that is not even what we want to do. To operate, thinking creatively, is enough for a start, perhaps something new will come of that, only it won't, for sure, if it is meant from the outset to match some new vision of the world; it will only happen of its own accord, hopefully it might run off the rails in a good way, spawning wonderful bastards."<sup>9</sup> These sentiments from the German painter Bernd Ribbeck reflect one of the underlying currents in the new interest in abstraction, in which Shirana Shahbazi features ever more prominently.

7

The focus is now on pure pictoriality. On beautiful, exciting structuring. "For beauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly, brightness or clarity, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color."<sup>10</sup> This early definition of beauty by St Thomas Aquinas is remarkably appropriate to Shirana Shahbazi's abstract, geometric constructions, even if it is still in thrall to the traditional triad of truth, goodness and beauty. And Max Bill's definition: "It (concrete art) is the expression of the human spirit, for the human spirit, and may it have that acuity and clarity, that perfection, which may be expected of works created by the human spirit",<sup>11</sup> could also have been written with the images in this book in mind, particularly since Bill, himself, notably juxtaposed and combined geometry and nature in his sculptures. But Shahbazi's latest pictures go much further than this. They are like hymns to pure form; still analogue and configured for the camera, still chafing against

other forms of representation. They sing the praises of form, colours, levity; in a coalescence of signs and meaning, signifier and signified they seek to uplift, without the chill of the sublime, the splendour of the mighty, the overpowering. Much like Zero, without the weight of referentiality, representationalism, without the weight of the world, and meaning. Instead of all that—liberated, abstracted, blithely geological and geometric-abstract forms.

8

For some decades now art has not been about visions, Utopias and grand designs; on the contrary it has been questioning realities, commenting, analysing, ironising and, from time to time, bitingly laying bare the contradictions, cynicism and abysses of certain realities. The same attention is paid to natural circumstances (and our perceptions of these) as to social and cultural realities. The reasons for the demise of all things Utopian are many: including the failure or the catastrophic outcome of all realised political Utopias and the ever-accelerating pace of the world, which make it imperative to engage with fastmoving phenomena, changing structures, vanishing materiality, media domination, and to try to understand them. Thus art in recent decades has mainly been about passing comment and has distinguished itself by its minimal distance from daily life, its proximity to "ordinary" reality. But now, in Shirana Shahbazi's still lifes and abstractions, there seems to be a new longing for a place that is closer to the ideal than it can be, in reality, a place that is purer, calmer, more concentrated and closer to the essence than usual. Yet her longing is not for some grand Utopia, trumpeted from the rooftops—no doubt we have all relinquished any beliefs of that kind for the foreseeable future—but rather for a free, celebratory pictoriality; for a delight in colour and form, in structures, in rhythms, dynamics and movement; a delight in pictures, their visual impact and their more self-effacing Utopias.

1 Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" in *Atlantic Magazine*, 1859, accessible at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/3361/>.

2 Ezra Pound, "The Vortographs", in *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Harriet Zinnes, New York: New Direction Books, 1980, p. 155.

3 Alvin Langdon Coburn, "The Future of Pictorial Photography", (1916), as cited in Beaumont Newhall (ed.), *Photography: Essays & Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992, accessible at [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/C/coburn/coburn\\_articles2.html](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/C/coburn/coburn_articles2.html).

4 Alvin Langdon Coburn, *ibid.*

5 Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, "Die Abstraktion unter der Lupe", in *Fotogesichte*, part 79, 2001, p. 3 (translated).

6 See Herbert Moldering's contribution to the discussion "What is Abstract Photography?", in Gottfried Jäger (ed.) *The Art of Abstract Photography*, Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2002, p. 269.

7 Sven Druhl, "Neue Abstraktion", in *Kunstforum international*, vol. 206, p. 32 (translated).

8 Liz Deschenes, as cited in Magdalena Kroner "Form, Fragment, Formation. Aktuelle Tendenzen der Abstrakten Fotografie", in *Kunstforum international*, vol. 206, p. 118 (translated).

9 Bernd Ribbeck, as cited in Sven Druhl, "Neue Abstraktion in der aktuellen Malerei", in *Kunstforum international*, vol. 206, p. 72 (translated).

10 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica I*, (Ia q.39 a.8), trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York, NY: Benziger Bros., 1948, p. 201.

11 Max Bill, "konkrete kunst", in *exh. cat., zurcner konkrete kunst*, Galerie Lutz und Meyer, Stuttgart, 1949.