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*See The Light: Photography, Perception and Cognition*, ed. Britt Salvesen, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2014.

Hardcover, 224 pages, 165 colour illustrations, 31 black & white illustrations  
ISBN: 978-3-7913-5308-1 US\$ 49.95 | GBP 35.00; published 18 November 2013.

*See the Light* is a very handsome book: well designed, well produced, and with very good quality plates. Originally published as the catalogue to accompany an exhibition of the same name at LACMA (from Oct 2013 to March 2014), the book showcases a small selection from the 2008 acquisition of The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection, comprising over 3600 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century photographs by some 700 photographers.

The catalogue, if not the exhibition's, point of departure is the fact that photography has from its inception had one foot in the worlds of both science and art, being both a powerful aid to vision, rendering visible much that escapes the unaided eye, and a powerful means for artistic expression, representation and estranging the world. The catalogue addresses this by relating broad shifts in photographic practice to developments in the history of vision science. Here the catalogue and the exhibition come apart in ways that the catalogue itself does not thematize, as the exhibition itself contains no examples of the many and various scientific uses of photography. What the catalogue does contain is a detailed time-line, cross-referencing developments in photography and science, an essay by the catalogue's editor and LACMA Curator of Photography Britt Salvesen, divided into four chronological and thematic sections, each of which correlates a development in photography with what is claimed to be a corresponding development in vision science, and a series of brief commentaries by leading academics from a variety of relevant fields. Much of the case for the parallels proposed between photography and science, however, rests on pointing up historical

*correlations*, supported by suggestive citations from photographers and scientific researchers. To establish a more substantial relation, and certainly to establish any kind of causal connection between developments in one field and those in another, would be a much more ambitious undertaking, requiring a good deal more historical scholarship and argument than a catalogue of this kind could hope to provide. Still, it remains a suggestive and provocative hypothesis: taken as a whole, it gives us a new interpretative frame for parsing the history of photographic practice. So how does it fare?

‘Descriptive Modernism’ (1840-1880) focuses on photography’s earliest attempts to document and describe the world without embellishment or error. These years are the origin of an understanding of photography as an essentially mechanical, non-subjectively inflected, transcription of the world that remains widespread to this day. Salvesen correlates this way of conceiving the medium with physiological studies of vision (by Johannes Müller and Hermann von Helmholtz among others) that made liberal use of photographic metaphors and analogies, just as photographic manuals of the time analogized the construction of the camera to that of the eye. Included here are not only works by Henry Fox Talbot, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Charles and Jane Clifford, Graham Vivian and Francis Frith that date from the period under discussion; but also, and quite confusingly, works by a large and diverse group of photographers, including August Sander, Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Wright Morris, Bill Brandt, Irving Penn, Andy Warhol and Thomas Struth, which do not, and which arguably have little in common with one another. This pattern of exhibits exploding the organising curatorial conceit recurs throughout.

Next up is ‘Subjective Naturalism’ (1880-1920): here the animus shifts from an essentially descriptive or documentary motivation to subjective expression. The

underlying thought seems to be that photographers had in some sense to 'subjectivise' the camera's inherently documentary nature in order to render it artistic. Where earlier photographers had been content to document and describe, explicitly thematized artistic intervention (notably the work of the hand) now comes to be valorized for its capacity to imbue the images with emotional and even allegorical significance.

Salvesen correlates this transition with that from physiology to psychology, that is, from the study of bodily processes, including vision, to mental processes (in the work of Wilhelm Wundt and William James). Introspection replaces description as the key to both art and experimental psychology during this period, putting photography's claim to artistic status centre-stage. The works in this section include, unsurprisingly, experiments with gum biochromate and bromoil, processes that involve varying degrees of manipulation of pigment by hand. Included are works by Juliet Margaret Cameron, Robert Demachy, Heinrich Kühn, Alfred Steiglitz and Edward Steichen. But, confusingly, they also include works from both before and after the period under discussion, such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Sally Mann.

At this point the historical story becomes harder to follow. Subjective Naturalism seems to be succeeded in the 1920s by both Experimental and Romantic Modernism, though it is possible that the latter is meant to be read as a reaction to the former. Neither is given even an approximate end point, and it is not clear how we are supposed to interpret this decision: both pick out recognizably *past* moments of high modernism in photography, so we are presumably not being asked to see these as ongoing, yet nor is it clear when either ends. Given the broad taxonomic ambitions of the catalogue this is frustratingly inconclusive.

'Experimental Modernism' (1920s onward), as presented here, is neither transcription nor subjective expression, the two previously available options, but an

attempt to create an autonomous formal entity by exploring various (purportedly) intrinsic features of photography. Its heroes are László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes. Construed as a response to the shattering experience of World War I, it is associated with restorative movements such as the Bauhaus and correlated with the emphasis on formal integration in the Gestalt psychology of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler. Here the correlation seems better grounded, given that Gestalt Psychology and Bauhaus were directly mediated by the work of Rudolf Arnheim, among others. But, once again, the photographers brought together under this rubric are a confusing bunch: Weston, Abbott and Bill Brandt all appear once more, now joined by Lyonel Feininger, Josef Sudek, Ruth Hallensleben, Ilse Bing, Moholy-Nagy and Kepes, Jaroslav Rössler, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Minor White, Margaret Bourke-White and Man Ray. Even Bernd and Hilla Becher make a brief cameo.

Against Experimental Modernism's (more or less explicit) Utopian concern with integration and unification, as indirectly embodied by the autonomous work of art, 'Romantic Modernism' asserts a more poetic interest in nature, often interwoven with claims to spirituality and transcendence. The argument for these claims is harder to make out, but Salvesen wants to correlate the intensity of this generation's interest in light and dark (as represented by Ansel Adams 'Zone System' for exposure, for example), to developments in the new discipline of neurobiology, such as Stephen Kuffler's work on the visual processing of light by the eye's photoreceptors. As representatives of 'Romantic Modernism' we find Steichen, Weston, Minor White and Henry Callahan (all appearing again) but now in the company of Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange and Helen Levitt, among others.

This repetition of artists across discrete—if not entirely exclusive—categories, and the inclusion of work that sometimes post- or pre-dates the category in question by upwards of half a century does make one question the usefulness of the categories themselves for appreciating individual works or oeuvres. This may be the result of an unthematized tension between the double duty the categories are asked to carry out: on the one hand, they are have to function historically in order to make the hoped for correlations with the history of developments in vision science but, on the other, they appear to function predominantly as stylistic categories when applied to individual photographs. But given that the two do not neatly align, as the confusing iteration of photographers across categories reveals, it seems that one can have one or the other but not (always) both.

The book concludes with a series of brief—and to my mind too brief—commentaries by leading academics from relevant fields, including the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the visual neural systems specialist Pietro Perona, the art historian Barbara Maria Stafford, the psychologist Alan Gilchrist, the photographer James Welling, and the art historian Todd Cronan. Some of the images aside, this struck me as the most interesting section of the catalogue as a stand-alone book distinct from the exhibition and potentially of interest in its own right, drawing as it does on experts at the very forefront of their respective fields. Because the insights on offer remain tantalizingly brief, to read the contributions by Pietro Perona, Alan Gilchrist, and the two hander between James Welling and Todd Cronan is to wish that each had been given the space to develop something more substantial.

Perona proposes that we find seeing (and by extension seeing some images) pleasurable because of the pleasure associated with learning something new. Though this may sound like a banal claim, the aperçus offered along the way are genuinely

fascinating—that light falling from the top left of a scene enhances shape recognition, that image interpretation is faster on the left of a picture than the right, that we have more trouble interpreting concave than convex shapes, etc—as are the implications for what we might then expect to find dull, frustratingly difficult or a stimulating challenge on exposure to an image. Gilchrist has similarly interesting things to say about the differences between what we find legible in a two-dimensional pattern of light and dark such as a photograph and the three dimensional scene provided by natural vision. Gilchrist’s experimental data suggest that these come apart in ways that often confound folk wisdom about the relation photography and natural vision. Not making more detailed empirical work from such neuroscientists, psychologists and visual systems specialists available to LACMA’s core constituencies, given the book’s aspirations, strikes me as something of a missed opportunity. But if nothing else these serve as genuine spurs to further reading.

The two-hander between James Welling and Todd Cronan with which the book itself concludes might, it seems to me, equally have been placed first, as there is a clear sense in which it could then have served as an introduction to all that follows. Their exchange concerns the trope of “pre-visualization” as a key to understanding photography as art and, though they do not quite say so themselves, perhaps also as a key to understanding photography as an art *rather than* a science. Unlike paintings, Welling notes, photographs appear all at once: there is no (or only minimal) building up of a surface over time. But to the extent that a photograph has been pre-visualized by the photographer—“built up,” so to speak, in the mind’s eye—it cannot be reduced to a product of mere causal mechanism, and so cannot be immediately relegated to the domain of non-art. For just the same reason, however, it presumably also cannot then

serve as a vehicle for making surprising empirical discoveries or, hence, for scientific enquiry.

It also bears noting that the period during which the notion of pre-visualization fades away from dominant discourses around photography is the very moment when the kinds of modernist photography surveyed in the second half of this exhibition gave way to various Conceptual, Post-Conceptual and eventually Appropriation-based Photographic practices in the wider art world that depend much more heavily on *post-* than *pre-*visualization, as Cronan points out—note the increasing importance of reception, context and interpretation for postmodern discourses around photography from the 1970s onwards. And this offers one elegant way to pinpoint the conceptual and aesthetic limits of the Vernons' taste as collectors, which passes unremarked in the catalogue itself, and thereby date the demise of 'Romantic' Modernism in a way that the catalogue itself declines to do. Seen in this light, the Bechers really are both the odd man and the odd woman out.

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