

Modernity and the formation of perception in the ‘Age of the World Picture’, explored through the works of Man Ray and Thomas Ruff

In his essay, “*The Age of the World Picture*”, Heidegger presents the argument that perception changes based on the way in which one organizes the world through social and cultural practices. He argues the idea of truth being defined in the modern era through the centrality of visualization, and suggests that modern period’s perception of metaphysics is affected through the application of technology. Furthermore, Heidegger explores the problem of representation through the notion of “The World Picture,” which he describes as a practice of looking based on generalization, and a need to conceive the world as a representation of itself in a system in Modernity.

It is important to note that when Heidegger uses the term technology, he is not specifically referencing machine technology on a physical scale, but more to the methods of modern science. He states, “The essence of what we today call science is research”¹, noting that the understanding of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ is based on a procedure which is exercised through a specific and fixed plan, which Heidegger refers to as “an open sphere in which it [procedure] moves.”² This notion of working within boundaries and of adhering to a specific hypothesis presents the idea of conformity, which is problematic as perception enters the realm of truth as correspondence. Modern technology thus does not only convey an advance in machinery, but in

¹ Heidegger, Martin, “The Age of the World Picture” (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 118

² Heidegger, Martin, “The Age of the World Picture” (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 118

Heidegger's mind signifies a specific system of thinking which is sociologically and culturally time specific, presenting problems in metaphysics.

The idea of research in the modern era, of having a ready-made frame and placing it over the world, presents perception as being calculative and controlled. Truth in modern times is skewed as the character of success in calculative truth investigation does not allow one to consider the world through qualitative relations, but through quantitative ones.

What does Heidegger essentially mean by "The World Picture?" He defines the term "World" as being "a name for what is, in its entirety...not limited to the cosmos, to nature (inclusive of history)"³, and the term "Picture" in relation to the phrase "we get the picture"⁴, supposing an understanding of the world as something that is set in front of us, how it is represented, and "all that belongs to it and all that stands together in it—as a system."⁵ The notion of "a world picture" presents in itself an idea of historically and innately being "acquainted with something"⁶ not only reiterating on Heidegger's claim for modern science's need for hypothesis, but also the necessity to understand the world based on preconceived frameworks. What is misleading in the concept of "The World Picture" is its need to compare the current historical context against previous ones in order to develop a representation of the modern world, as well

³ Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 129

⁴ Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 129

⁵ Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 129

⁶ Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 129

as the generalization of it. The task of comparing a period of history in context with what preceded it, is unique to the notion of “The Modern World Picture.” Heidegger states, “The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.”⁷ Greek science saw something for ‘what it is as it is’, whereas modern science focuses on issues of correspondence. “The World Picture” is a modern concept of creating a picture of the world through reflecting modernity against specific time periods. This creates the notion of categorizing metaphysics as being something which is able to change throughout specific historic time periods.



“Tears”, Man Ray, (1932)

⁷ Heidegger, Martin, “The Age of the World Picture” (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 130

“*Tears*” by Man Ray, is a photograph created in 1932 of a close-up image of the face, predominantly focusing on the eyes and the nose. He has purposefully manipulated and created ‘false tears’ on the figure, creating a somewhat surreal, yet satirical image of modern society’s obsession with glamour and fashion (materialism, commodification). The cropping of this image is deliberate, the artist is able to premeditate and control what we are allowed to see through his decision in choosing a particular frame. This idea of manipulation, premeditation and hypothesis relates to Heidegger’s problematisation of modern technology which he defines as the problem of modern science; the notion of experimental practice, in which a framework is organized beforehand. This places certain limitations on the way in which one perceives something, as this form of representation manipulates perception and understanding in a way that it must conform to coincide with what is being represented, thereby proclaiming the credibility of images and the notion of authenticity. If a work is perceived only through a limited framework, in that case, how may one identify between what is truth and what is not? This further presents the issue of the authenticity of images and how the abundance of images alters our mode of perception in the age of mechanical reproduction.

In his essay, “*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*”, Walter Benjamin presents the idea that mechanical reproduction changes the way in which we experience art. Through technology in the modern period images are easily reproduced, thereby commodifying art. The fetishization of art creates the modern experience of perception to be superficial and negative, the gaze becoming transcendental. The

emotions that embody a work of art in its authenticity are now lost and art is rarified. Benjamin States, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”⁸ This concern with reproduction and availability of images in the modern era, takes away our direct engagement with the work of art on a self-reflexive and subjective level. One does not need to physically view a work of art in person, but can view the image on a second-hand basis.

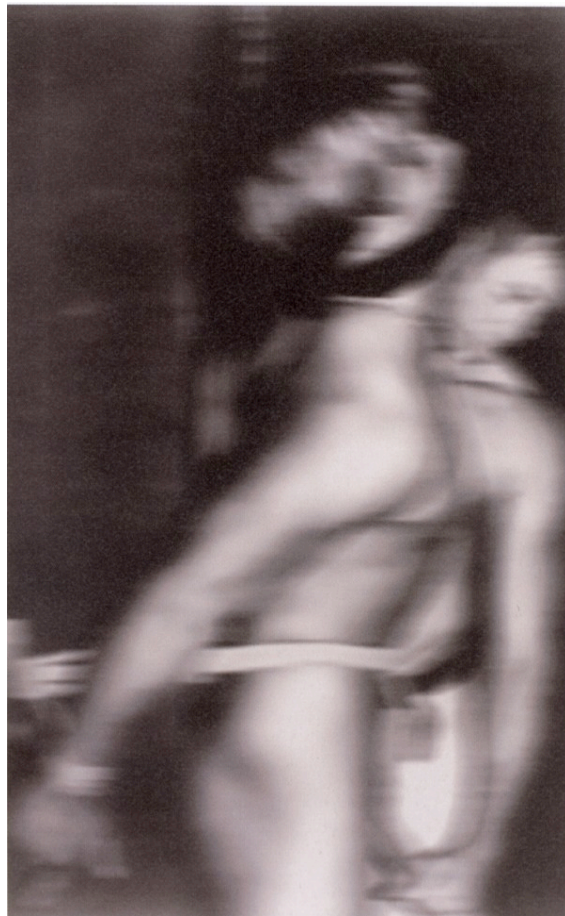
Photography concerns itself greatly with this notion of distance from the image, as the viewer is presented with something which has been channeled through a lens before reaching the eye. There is a sense of detachment that is created, which contradicts Heidegger’s notion of art expressed in his essay, “*The Origin of a Work of Art.*” Heidegger discusses in this essay the issue of art as a result of the artist, and the figure of the artist being the one who shapes the perceptual encounter of a work of art. A true work of art in Heidegger’s theory is one which informs the viewer of the artist, as he believes that “a work of art cannot exist without the artist, and the artist cannot exist without a work of art.”⁹ This idea of perception is problematic in photography because of the popularity and over-abundance of photographic images, making it harder to trace a specific image back to the artist. Those images which we are able to trace back to the artist are based on recognizable concerns with specificities in the style of their images and the subject matter that they portray, evoking the fact again of premeditated knowledge and concerns with referencing.

⁸ Benjamin, Walter, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, New York: SchokeBooks, 1969, p. 220

⁹ Heidegger, Martin, “The Origin of a Work of Art” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 1993, pp. 139-212

Other works of art that affirm the problems of perception expressed by Heidegger, are “*The Nudes*” by Thomas Ruff. He follows the problem of authenticity in modern images as he states, “Photography has been used for all kinds of interest for the past 150 years. Most of the photographs we come across today aren’t really authentic anymore. They have the authenticity of a manipulated and prearranged reality.”¹⁰ This notion of ‘prearrangement’ coincides with Heidegger’s explanation of “The World Picture” which promotes one’s perception in adherence to a preconceived hypothesis. It provides a key example of how the self-reflexive value in a work of art is lost through this idea of ‘framing’ and ‘manipulation.’ Ruff manipulates the viewers in to believing that his nudes are photographed by him, yet they are generic pornographic images collected from the internet which he has digitally manipulated. The generic nature of these images allows Ruff to exercise such a project, and pass the images off as his own.

¹⁰ Fowler, Bernard, “*Thomas Ruff—The Nudes*”, 2003. <http://www.postmedia.net/03/ruffnudes.htm>, Accessed, 12th November, 2006 [Online]



“Nudes Iox 22”, Thomas Ruff, 2000

Both the works of Man Ray and Thomas Ruff complicate and challenge the conventional notion of “the picture” and of “seeing”, especially through their choice of using photography as their medium. Photography brings an image that is distant nearer to us, allowing one to fall in to a false notion of “knowing” a place or experiencing an event without directly having been there ourselves. For example, one knows what the Eiffel Tower looks like without going to Paris, by seeing a rendition of it in a photograph. Unlike Painting in which the portrayal of a subject is stylized through individual use of techniques and the artist’s continuous engagement with the work, many photographs have the tendency to be taken quickly, thereby limiting to an

extent the artist's engagement with the subject matter. The artist's engagement with the subject at hand is mainly with the issue of framing, rather than the actual production itself. The availability and generic nature of many photographic works of art does not allow the space for the viewer to question the "world" beyond what they are presented with at hand. The danger of this is again evident in Ruff's "*Nudes*" as we as viewers have the tendency to disregard the irony that we are being presented with a preconceived and prepared reality.

Modern technology has brought the world of art diversities in the ways of image creation yet, our perception of the world through this modern notion of "The World as a Picture" is shaped and manipulated by an idea of conformity and adherence to a specific framework, thus engaging ourselves in an endless cycle of cross-referencing. Heidegger's desire on the contrary is an internal process of reflection brought in to existence through questioning, favoring the Aristotelian notion of truth; of disclosing and looking at something and uncovering the essence of it. A work of art in his theory emerges between the gap of the "earth"; of meaningless materiality and matter, and that of the "world" which signifies the meaningful idea of the social. Heidegger states, "The Flight into tradition, out of a combination of humility and presumption, can bring about nothing in itself other than self-deception and blindness in relation to the historical moment"¹¹ posing a problem in the way in which modern man perceives the world around him.

(Word Count: 1729 words)

¹¹ Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938) in *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row 1977, p. 136