A discussion around the relevance of Roland Barthes’s theory on Photography in the work of Contemporary artists Christian Boltanski and Anne Hardy

On the opening page of Roland Barthes’s book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* the author, semiotician and structuralist, begins by saying: “One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since, I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor” (Barthes, 1982, p.3). Later he goes on to say “a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an animation.” (Barthes 1982, p.20).

Barthes’s investigation into Photography led him to create a structure of terms whereby he could explain what he believed was the impact and meaning behind any given photograph. In the above example he would refer to the setting Jerome was in as the “historical cultural field of the photograph” (Barthes, 1982, p.26), he called this the *studium*. The part where Barthes is reflecting on how he is looking at the eyes that once looked upon Napoleon is that part of the photograph which Barthes defines as personal. It pierces the viewer, Barthes calls this the *punctum*: “the gaze that traps the eye” (Olin, *Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s “Mistaken” Identification*, 2002, p.110).

The *studium* and the *punctum* are a double act. Whilst one is determining the cultural context the other is touching you with personal significance. One can exist without the other in a photograph, but almost always as human beings we have a propensity to fill in the missing *studium* or *punctum* with our memories and imaginations. These elements of memory, trace and indexical link form part of what many critics and theorists have argued are the key points of criticisms of Barthes’s theory on photography, as they are all subjective. Other scholars and theorists, such as Margaret Olin, Senior Research Scholar at Yale University, and James Elkins, Art Historian and Art Critic, argue that these elements should not be relied upon to form serious components of structural analysis. The main basis of enquiry throughout this paper will
be the debate surrounding Barthes’s theory on Photography in his later years, whilst writing his final book *Camera Lucida* 1982.

Barthes argues that “the photograph belongs to that class of laminated object whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both” (Barthes, 1982, p.6), like the *studium* and *punctum*, the photograph and the subject (the referent) being photographed are mutually dependant. In the example of Napoleon’s brother, Jerome is the referent - and interestingly the DNA link - that gives the photograph its significance, at least to Barthes.

Barthes goes on to say “this stubbornness of the referent in always being there” (Barthes, 1982, p.6) is the essence of what he was interested in exploring in *Camera Lucida*. In the example already mentioned Jerome had what Barthes called, “a certificate of presence” (Barthes, 1982, p.87), in other words he existed; you have to have been there to be photographed. Interestingly, though, Barthes also states “whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (Barthes, 1982, p.6): we are merely seeing the *that* which *has been* irrefutably in existence. However, it is the photograph’s inherent ability to mark a moment which then links to the viewer in present time. Even when the *punctum* hits the viewer, with individual meaning, the arrow that pierces the surface can be an arrow that is capable of travelling through time.

Central to Barthes’s argument is that the ‘stubbornness of the referent’ is an essential component in any analysis of photography. Olin and Elkins circle their opposing arguments around this, arguing that Barthes’s theory is more about the temporal nature of time having gone by rather than any referential stubbornness. They also argue whether a photograph’s analogical coding is a good enough means of analysis. Elkins argues that “Declaring that every photograph is an analogue or a certificate of presence, as Barthes does, is not the same as insisting that it offers a one-to-one, undistorted (indexical) relationship to the world…” (Elkins, *Photography Theory*, 2007, p.22).
Phoetoaphy according to Barthes is “an umbilical cord […], rays move from the subject of the photograph, to the sensitive plate, to the finished photograph and finally to the viewer of the photograph, who is literally touched (nourished?) by the photograph” (Olin, 2002, p.100-101). Olin in her paper ‘Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s ‘Mistaken’ Identification’, picks up on Barthes’s uncomplicated approach. She argues that Barthes’s theory is taking a very naive view of a photograph’s relationship to its referent. She says that this is not taking into account a whole series of slippages that she believes should be a paramount part of the theory and semiotic interpretation. People see things differently, personal reference and identification, this is what she means by the term ‘slippage’. She argues that “whether scholars decide to avoid such slippages in their work, or to confront and exploit them, they disturb the simple relationship between representations and subjects, between images and people, between photographs and their referents” (Olin, 2002, p.99).

Olin states that identification equals meaning: a photograph is at the same time an icon and an index of meaning, “an icon with a seal of approval” (Barthes, 1982, p.87). Being there is Barthes’s way of explaining the user term index taken loosely from semiotician Charles Peirce. Index is opposed to the icon which represents its object by resemblance. In a photograph, ‘similarity’ nearly always would be referring to a physical resemblance. Index represents an object through contact, it points out its object or it is itself a trace of or mark by that object: a footprint is an index.

Olin states that “a photograph is a trace, a remnant, of the person who was there. That trace is tactile…” (Olin, 2002, p.100).

Olin suggests that Barthes’s reflections on photography in Camera Lucida start out by examining random famous photographs, such as the Napoleon’s younger brother photograph. However, as his analysis develops so do the personal stakes as he begins to site images of his mother aged five, and his analysis takes on a more melancholic approach, possibly due in part to her recent death. Whilst Barthes was writing Camera Lucida shortly after his mother’s death, and as it turned out just before his own passing,
his analysis took on what Olin describes as a more memorial element. Olin writes

“Because of this communication between the past and the present, a photograph has a memorial element, and relates directly to death, even if the person in question is still alive. Instead of the index that seemed to guarantee the myth, *Camera Lucida* dwells on the ‘that-has-been’ of the photograph” (Olin, 2002, p.101).

Christian Boltanski is one Contemporary artist whose work further explores the use of photography as an indexical trace. The human referent is present in his work but at the same time is often absent.

Anne Hardy, another Contemporary artist, on the other hand, uses photography as a final documentation of what was initially an installation of a scene that never took place. We are tricked into thinking by use of memory, illusion and imagination that something has taken place that has involved a human referent or group of referents. The final photograph (which is the finished work as she destroys any former existence of the initial installation) captures a human referent, but in Hardy’s work this referent is absent but strangely and powerfully present.

Boltanski collects photographs that have no immediate significance to him (at first glance). He is a French artist who also uses installation predominantly in his work. His installations include collections of old photographs, clothing and personal belongings that trace the existence of the human referent. He takes these collections and re-appropriates them into religious imagery. Throughout his work the artist oscillates between iconic imagery and indexical trace, making *monuments* for the lives of the people he is documenting. A dialogue exists that underpins his work and is an unspoken narrative about himself.

Often starting with a collection of photographs, he begins by re-photographing and reformatting the size of the photographs so that they become a generic format. To enhance this sameness he then frames the photographs in identical frames, though this
debatably highlights their differences as the following example demonstrates:

Portraits of the students of the Lentilliers College Secondary Education, Dijon. 1973

Boltanski then takes a further step in his work, *Monument: The children of Dijon*, 1985, as he makes a religious icon out of the photographs which he intersperses with fairy lights. We have no way of knowing whether these children are still living today, but the implication is that even if they are (as the imagery arguably implies) these individuals will certainly have lost their childhood.
Behind the above example of work is a hidden narrative that more directly alludes to the artist's own lost childhood. Boltanski had a Jewish father and a Catholic mother and whilst he was growing up in wartime France his father, a qualified doctor, had to spend much of his days hiding below the floorboards of their family home. Because of fear of persecution, Boltanski was not permitted to freely go outside on his own until he reached the age of eighteen. The implication is that in this work: *The children of Dijon*, the artist is referring to a sub text that incorporates his lost childhood, whereby Boltanski lost all childhood memories up until the age of twelve. The artist is arguably also the referent to Boltanski at least, but the wider referent he is referring to is the Holocaust.

In terms of the referent these photographs become a medium as the artist is using the original intention of the Photographer - the school photograph, which generally signifies the progression of the student and so the *studium* is the body of education - the school at Dijon. The children’s faces were once the main *punctum*, in that the human referent
would have meant something to the parents of the children photographed. Boltanski has taken that indexical meaning and changed its connotation so that the original children are a tool in order to link the viewer to a further meaning of religion, remembrance and worship. Subjective memory and meaning is so individual that it becomes difficult to identify. The human referent within these photographs is the artist himself, always a subtext, but as Barthes would argue “stubbornly, sticking to the referent”, (Barthes, 1982, p.6) even though in this example the artist is, strictly speaking, not in the frame at the time of these photographs - he is neither the initial *studium* nor the *punctum*. The viewer is transported by these photographs into another time, picking up the ‘temporal’ element present in Barthes’s theory, ironically at the end of his life.

Olin argues that the key moment in photography is not just when the shutter opens and captures the image. That is a basic perfunctory element of photography. Olin is much more interested in what she calls “the moment of identification”, she goes on to say, “the moment of identification, unlike that of illumination, does not distinguish photography from other visual images, or even from encounters in the world at large” (Olin, 2002, p.99).

Olin argues that

“at work in any personal exchange, identification plays an integral role in the formation of groups. Moreover, it is not just identification *of* a subject that is at stake but, often, identification *with* it. The personal and social position through which the beholder is looking can bring what she or he sees into focus, or distorts it beyond recognition.” (Olin, 2002, p.99).

Boltanski capitalises on this in his work: the *that-has-been* in Barthes’s theory is pushed, forced and sculpted almost into a different form, a form whereby the original referent is a disguise to be peeled away by the viewer in order to unpack the true referent within the work. The artist is never overtly confirming this intent but by alluding to this, perhaps underlying meaning, he is giving momentum to an unspoken conversation between the artist and the viewer.
According to Elkins in his book *Photography Theory*, Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* “...is a meditation on the memory work of photographs and the privacy of photographic experience within the mass of public images”, he continues, “with the exception of Walter Benjamin, no other writer on photography is more often quoted and quibbled with than Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Moving away from the structuralist concerns of his earlier works, *Camera Lucida* invests more in the subjectivity and hallucinatory mystery of photographic experience” (Elkins, 2007, p.19-20).

Found Images for ‘Jewish School of Grosse, Hamburger Strasse, Berlin. 1938

The artist has taken an image from a public educational institute from the year prior to the Holocaust. He then manipulates the children’s faces by enlarging them almost beyond recognition, so that we are left with photographs whereby the skull becomes more prominent and the eyes and the features become darker. The skull in Memento mori (a Latin phrase translated as ‘remember your mortality’ or ‘remember you are going to die’) signifies death. The artist is using the presence of the referents in the first image to transfer meaning and the possible absence and death of the referent(s) in the
second. The artist, however, describes himself as ‘The Jew that flees’, therefore it could be argued that Boltanski is ever present as a ‘sticky referent’ in this work, he was the ‘one who got away’. In some ways, this is perhaps vicarious experience, experienced through post-memory: remembering through the memory of others. Boltanski as an unorthodox Jew is bearing the guilt sometimes carried by the survivors of the Holocaust. Often in looking at photographs we are trying to make sense or understand a past event or come to terms with something we cannot comprehend.

“Barthes language is personal, full of parenthetical remarks, elliptical observations, and allusive conclusions, which infuriates some of his readers and charms others.” (Elkins, 2007, p.20). Boltanski is not using the power of linguistics, but instead is using a visual language in his installations that are equally allusive in their conclusion. Boltanski is often making a visual reference that is similar in its melancholic appraisal to that of Barthes’s final written words. Like the two are trying to let go of something that has bothered them for some time - “the referent that sticks” (Barthes, 1982, p.6). Arguably, they are trying to hang onto so something, Boltanski his lost childhood, Barthes his lost Mother.

Anne Hardy’s installations demonstrate a completely different way of working: from an eclectic display of found objects, often found at random, she sets up her installations in a way that invites the viewer to gather any number of conclusions from what may have taken place. Hardy is demonstrating that the human referent in the frame of the final photograph she takes of her installation might have been there, though never was. We as the viewer make an assumption that something has taken place. The final photograph is of the installation before the artist destroys it. This accentuates the “certificate of presence” (Barthes, 1982, p87). Barthes’s theory lends some weight to what we believe has taken place, in his ideas surrounding the authenticity of the photograph. It must have happened, it must be real.

Anne Hardy’s use of photography in her work removes the viewer from the time in which that narrative may have taken place, whilst implying that something did already take
place. The original installation which is a staged event, never was ‘real’. Inventive use of Photography as a form of documentation suggests there was an original.

In Hardy’s work: *Incidence*, 2009, a composition of three mirrors is repeated. The reflection in the mirrors reveals a different layer to the picture, suggesting a classroom environment. What could remind one person of a classroom could remind another of a youth club, and that is the subjective nature of Hardy’s work. There is a sense that this may be the scene of violence (broken pool cues on the floor). However, the three oval mirrors with their Hollywood lights imply femininity – perhaps the space is also used for dancing classes? Having been invited to speculate a false scene, the viewer interprets what - if anything - has taken place. Through our own link to memory, we decipher our
own personal meaning,

Furthermore, Hardy is layering the *that-has-been* by committing the original installation to history after photographic documentation has taken place. The truth is the human referent did not ever exist within the frame of the photograph. The propaganda-type exposé of the event and the cultural field of the photograph seem more effective in portraying meaning by the virtue of the missing but implied presence of the human referent(s).

In the next image: *Co-ordinate*, 2009, Hardy presents an environment augmented by the sharpness of her monochrome palette - the chessboard pattern on the floor and walls. The title *Co-ordinate* suggests a group activity has taken place - perhaps a campaign of some sort that required three microphones, for some kind of public speaking or performance? The maps on the wall and the dominant presence of the CCTV camera imply a manifesto; a planned party campaign. The pink cups and frilly tablecloth suggest femininity.
Hardy’s work explores the power of the ‘myth’. By presenting us with an empty shell, absent of human referent, she somehow endorses our own necessity to provide a human narrative; placing any human element into a human context. We - the viewers - become forensic scientists that hang onto minute detail as we seek to understand the meaning of what may have happened, never really knowing what has taken place and been consigned to a mythical history. Hardy’s compositions are an investigation into the connections between people and institutions. We are interacting with a prompted narrative that invites the viewer to invest in and arguably become part of the work.

Hardy’s use of the *studium* to set the cultural field of the photograph seems to emphasise what Barthes calls “a certain way an object has of being absent within its
very presence, or perhaps present within its absence” (Barthes, 1982, p6). We are conjuring up the human referent in our mind’s eye based on an often cultural visual imagery anchored in place by recollection and memory. There are no ghosts as in Boltanski’s work; Hardy is not alluding to any significant event, the events she is anchoring in our imaginations are more about what we think has already taken place.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) talked about three types of sign: index, symbol and icon. All three signs signify a different relationship to an object and its representation: the signifier and the signified. The index, Peirce argues, is about an existential relationship to an object. The symbol is code that stands separately from any physical characteristics of the object. The icon refers to analogical and mimetic kinds of representation, for example when looking at Co-ordinate, 2009, we are all the time referring back to things that we have seen before and we then make comparisons. In the light of Peirce’s semiotic analysis it would be fair to argue that Hardy’s work is dependent upon coded symbolism. However, her work reaches out and touches you in a way that draws you back into the frame, individual meaning and personal referencing result in the de-coding of all three of Peirce’s types of signage. The meaning we personally give to any interpretation is arguably what Barthes refers to as the punctum. For example, if whilst looking at Hardy’s work Incidence, 2009, if you are reminded of a classroom environment it might be the blackboard that is the punctum in this photograph, whilst to others it may be the pool cues that grab your attention.

Boltanski’s work is often about an event we may find difficult to look at. For example, the Holocaust gives his work strength, and as the sub-text could be death or a lost childhood there is a strong human referent present, whereas Hardy’s human referent is not in the frame, it is absent. We are looking into the frame and in some way it could be argued that the viewer is inside the frame as it is our own recollections and memory that we are using to understand any human referent.

“That the photograph has a particular indexical relationship to the real was recognised
by Peirce himself, who in his typology of signs he noted that photographs are characterised by a physical connection to the thing photographed” (Gibbons, 2001 p.80). Gibbons goes on,

“But at the same time Pierce recognises another important characteristic of the photograph, which is, that it is in dynamical connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses of memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other” (Gibbons 2001, p.87).

Gibbons talks about how contemporary art has become a useful tool for dealing with the memory of how people felt both individually and collectively. In Boltanski’s work he addresses the Holocaust almost as if he himself cannot look the subject directly in the face. It is as if he is helping the masses deal with a historical event that they otherwise could maybe not endure. Contemporary art can carry the burden of existentialism and of looking beyond the frame simply because it is not a science but a necessary and developmental way of coping with what we cannot face seeing, but feel.

Once all interpretation and meaning are in place, the image, the signifier, (that which you see), is hooked up with the concept, the signified and the final meaning, eventually becoming the ghost of a past meaning in our memories. That connection, the link of image to concept or at least the memory of it in our minds is what endures. The question of accuracy becomes open to the question of interpretation.

Barthes was reminded of a necklace worn by his Aunt Alice, whilst looking at a photograph taken by Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee. The photograph is titled *Family Portrait*, 1926.
Van Der Zee was a photographer employed by Marcus Garvey's 'Universal Negro Improvement Association'. The clothes worn in the photograph may have been Sunday best, but they did not belong to the family in the photograph: these clothes were on loan in order to promote 'The American Way of Life'. The *studium*, argues Olin, is the family itself. Barthes was concerned by the misrepresentation of the true identity of the
aspiring but naïve sitters and in earlier writings he talks about this in terms of a ‘myth’ that he writes further on to deconstruct.

Arguably, though, it is not the reference to true identity that moves and touches Barthes, rather it is the belt worn by one of the sitters. The punctum that punctures the field of the studium is the belt, then some Mary Janes (shoes) worn by the sitter. The third and most powerful detail of all, however, is a detail that is not there at all: a gold braided necklace worn by his maiden Aunt Alice. This sentiment became the real punctum for Barthes - the detail that was not there.

The necklace around the sitter’s neck was not braided gold but in fact a string of pearls. The braided necklace that belonged to Aunt Alice was placed inside a family jewellery box after she died. Interestingly, it was only after the image was no longer in view that Barthes’s interpretation of the image changed and the significance he placed on the necklace was a latent punctum. Barthes realised that “the punctum could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny)” (Olin, 2002, p.108).

Olin argues that the only reason Barthes can pick out the detail of a necklace that was never there is because he no longer had to remain in the frame of the image. Distance from that frame made the image all the more personal to Barthes. Similarly, this is how Hardy’s work impacts on the viewer, as the distance the viewer has from the event is how she creates a myth out of it, as myth according to Gibbons is integral to memory. Olin highlights that “it’s the mistaken detail, then, not the necklace actually pictured, that led Barthes to the centre of pain in the photograph, and to the time of the strapped pumps” She continues,

“Indeed the wearer of the necklace, Barthes’s Aunt Alice, occupies the same place as Van Der Zee’s ‘solacing Mammy’ in the family picture, and the composition of a photograph, not the pumps, or the necklace on a real person, enabled him to make identification. Presumably, Barthes recognised the family constellation, even though to do it he had to move the detail (the punctum) from one photograph to another” (Olin,
This is exactly what Boltanski is doing in his installation work - moving the detail from one photograph to another. By altering the format slightly he is removing the viewer’s focus and in so allowing a different recognition of identity to slip into the frame. All the
time using latency, distance and temporal existentiality, which allows the viewer to be lulled - as Barthes was - into a state of mind open to new interpretation and meaning.

Hardy leaves out the detail of the human referent deliberately. Perhaps she saw the virtue of the missing detail and how Barthes’s theory was enhanced by this trick of the mind? She explores in her work a displacement, transporting the viewer into what sometimes feels like an apocalyptic disaster zone. Hardy creates her interior landscapes that are a ‘no-man’s land’ with no physical human referent, but whereby everybody is welcome to be in the frame by association.

Barthes’s theory on Photography remains at the forefront of any debate surrounding photography. Christian Boltanski and Anne Hardy have utilized, albeit in contrasting ways, how the human referent in their work, present or absent, stubbornly remains, through identification, meaning and residual memory.

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Anne Hardy
*Two-dimensional Sculpture*
By Francesco Manacorda

