

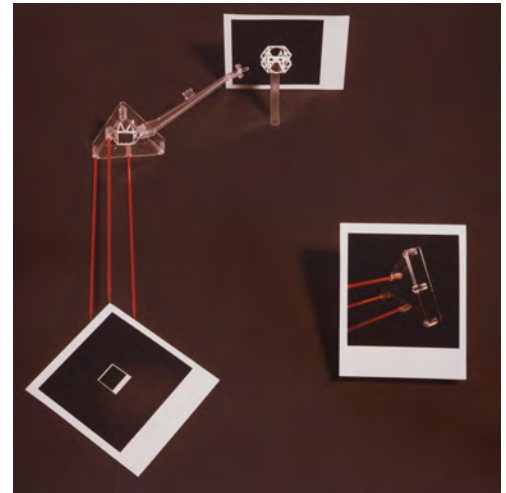
Carl Toth: Pioneering Artist, Photographer and Educator

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Carl Toth: Deconstructing Photography

In her essay "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," Rosalind Krauss states that "photography is an imprint or transfer off the real," fixing, as it were, the photographic image to its referent. (Susan Sontag makes a similar observation in her essay "The Image-World" when she writes that a photograph is "a trace, something stenciled directly off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.") The presumed nature of photography as an indexical sign, that is, as a physical trace of the object to which it refers, underpins prevailing thought about the medium and of what visual culture theorist Tom Gunning terms its "truth claim." For more than four decades, Carl Toth has endeavored to question that claim in an oeuvre that has progressively deconstructed photography's conventions.

Trained in English literature as well as photography, Toth has always understood photography to be, like language, first and foremost a sign system. His early work challenged then-accepted photographic aesthetics regarding subject matter, framing, and technique. Specifically, Toth took up the vernacular practice of the snapshot as inspiration right at the moment when photography's status as a fine art medium was being hotly debated. In a series of untitled works from the early to mid 1970s, Toth presented ensembles of gelatin-silver prints of family members and pets, shot in various locations, which were hand colored to highlight their constructed nature. Some of these works consist of grainy and blurred image sequences that are slight variations on one another, subverting the notion of photography as a device for capturing the "the perfect moment." Other works interrupt or extend the negative's conventional quadrilateral frame, piecing together images to reveal the space that might otherwise have been cut away at the edges and questioning the frame's interior truth claim to be, as Krauss would have it, "an example of nature-as-representation, nature-as-sign."





The later 1970s brought another body of work that further investigated photography's apparatus of mediation. Central to photography's truth claim is its presumed condition of immediacy, that is, of the medium itself as essentially transparent, characterized by the quality of looking through the image-signifier to the signified content, which is its presumed reality based in nature. This connection to the real is further grounded upon what Gunning terms "iconicity," that is, a visual resemblance to what is being represented. In a series of type C color prints, Toth rephotographed Polaroid SX 70 photographs that in turn re-presented other elements within the composition to create a moebius strip of remediation, drawing attention to the artifice within the frame. In one untitled work, a Polaroid print of a miniature ladder and stair laying side by side on a plywood sheet is shown standing upright on a plywood sheet with the stairway and ladder balancing on top of it; in another, two Polaroids of what appear to be plastic toy parts, one green and one blue, set on table tops are shown balancing on the toys and set side by side upon a table top. The frames of these works and others in the series are square, refusing the conventional photographic aspect ratios of horizontal (landscape) and vertical (portrait), the traditional orientations of nature-based observation and its representation in Western visual art.

The terms index and icon so often used in discussing photography are taken from the semiotics of nineteenth-century American Pragmatist polymath Charles Sanders Peirce, who brought the term semiotics into modern usage. In the Peircian system of semiotics (not to be confused with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, which influenced another well-known commentator on photography, Roland Barthes), the index is, as has been noted, the trace made by the physical object, such as the impression a car tire leaves in the mud, the relationship of the sign to its referent being one of empirical fact.

The icon is a sign whose relationship to the referent is based on semblance; simply put, it looks like what it is supposed to represent: an illuminated figure in a traffic signal communicating that it is now safe to walk. There is a third semiotic category of signs delineated by Peirce that does not find its way into the discussion as much, namely, the symbol. The relation of a symbol to its referent is abstract; it is a matter of habit or convention. Photography's symbolic status is based in large part on its truth claim as a transparent medium par excellence and thus a preferred representational conveyor of objective reality. The contingency of photography-as-symbol is a central aspect of what Toth's work ultimately reveals.

The heightened awareness of photography's mediating condition finds its definitive expression in Toth's late work, which abandons the camera entirely and instead employs xerographic collage as its primary technique. In these complex works, bits and pieces of recycled images are juxtaposed with a range of textural effects and formed into compositions that do not easily "add up" either as a coherent narrative or a coherent space, creating a situation in which looking-through is exchanged for one of looking-at, a state that can be termed hypermediation. This is especially true of larger-scale works that occupy an entire wall, which as Donald Kuspit notes have very few signs of nature in them outside of the wood-grain pattern elements of some compositions that in their obviously having been subject to manufacturing processes announce their artifice and hence distance from the natural.

Instead of transparently re-presenting the field of vision, Carl Toth's photographic practice has self-consciously evolved to create it in virtual form. And that is his signal achievement.

Vince Carducci
Dean of Undergraduate Studies
College for Creative Studies