

# Regarding THE PHOTO BOOTH

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Luc Delahaye, from Portrait 1, 1994

*"I could not understand why the artists should envy me my work, yet, in the same breath, decry it because it was machine-made – their 'art' painting because hand-made being considered necessarily superior."*  
That is how Alfred Stieglitz described the start of his lifelong struggle to have photography recognized as an art form on a par with the other visual arts.

In the early 1880s, when Stieglitz made his first atmospheric photographs of the world around him, the dominant view had long been that photography was a soberly realistic method of depiction with no human filter in between the subject and the picture. Photography's imprint of reality and its mechanical process of creation was considered incompatible with creative activity. Conversely, the medium's documentary, authenticating character from the outset assigned photography the role of truthful witness and document.

Of course, there is no such thing as objective photography; the image is always marked by the priorities of its creator. Just as moments frozen in time represent a false eternity, photography as such is not reality. It is an image of a selective section of reality – hence, a human-made construction. It goes to follow that in the right hands it also holds artistic potential.

Whether Stieglitz took the time to explore photo booths is questionable. However, artists who use the photo booth as a creative tool will recognize his early experience with the condescension accorded the machine-made image. Even today, when photography in all its forms has occupied galleries and museums across the globe, photo-booth artists at times get a less than serious reception, solely due to their choice of medium.

Since its invention in 1889, the inexpensive photo-booth image has had a very low status. Likewise, the existence of the photo booth is generally passed over in photo-historical surveys. Presumably, because of the impression that it is just a fully automated machine whose standardized product has nothing to do with artistic creation (which is correct, if the booth is used according to the instructions).

For the same reason, there is official confidence in photo-booth portraits as certificates of identification, and, of course, many photo-booth shots are used for passports, visa applications, driver's licenses and other forms of ID. They have considerable authority, as personal

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\* **Photo booth:** partitioned cubicle with a studio, camera and darkroom that in a matter of minutes produces one or more inexpensive portrait photographs, shot and processed automatically. An early model was invented by Conrad Bernitt of Germany in 1894."

**Fotoautomat:** todelt aflukke med atelier, kamera og mørkekammer, som på få minutter leverer ét eller flere billige portrætfotografier, optaget og fremkaldt automatisk. Blandt de første fotoautomater var tyskeren Conrad Bernitts udgave fra 1894.'

## ANGÅENDE FOTOAUTOMATEN

*"I could not understand why the artists should envy me my work, yet, in the same breath, decry it because it was machine-made – their 'art' painting", because hand-made being considered necessarily superior."*

Sådan beskriver Alfred Stieglitz det, der blev starten til hans livslange kamp for anerkendelsen af fotografi som en kunstart på linje med de øvrige billedkunster.

Da Stieglitz i begyndelsen af 1880'erne udførte sine første stemningsfulde fotografiske fortolkninger af omverdenen, havde opfattelsen af fotografiet som en nøgtern realistisk øjebliksskildring, hvor der intet menneskelig filter er mellem motiv og billede, længe domineret. Fotografiets virkelighedsprægning i kombination med dets mekaniske frembringelsesform blev således anset for uforenelig med skabende virksomhed, parallelt med at mediets dokumentariske autentificerende karakterer fra starten gav fotografiet status af sandhedsvidne og dokument.

Men objektivt fotografi eksisterer ikke, idet billedet altid vil være præget af ophavsmandens prioriteringer. Ligesom øjeblikke, frosset i tid, repræsenterer en falsk evighed, er fotografiet som sådan ikke virkelighed. Det er et billede af et selektivt stykke virkelighed og dermed en menneskeskabt konstruktion, hvorfor det også besidder et kunstnerisk potentiale i de rette hænder.

Hvorvidt Alfred Stieglitz tog sig tid til at udforske fotoautomaten skal være usagt. Derimod vil kunstnere, der benytter automaten som et kreativt udtryksmiddel, kunne nikke genkendende til hans tidlige erfaringer med ringagtelsen af det maskinfrembragte billede. Selv i dag, hvor fotografiet i snart alle dets afskygninger har holdt sit indtog i gallerier og på museer verden over, oplever automatkunstnere at ikke blive taget helt seriøst, alene på grund af deres valg af medie.

Siden opfindelsen i 1889 har det prisbillige automatbillede været behæftet med særdeles lav status, ligesom fotoautomatens eksistens generelt forbigås i fotohistoriske oversigtsværker. Formodentlig ud fra en opfattelse af, at der blot er tale om en fuldautomatisk maskine, hvis standardiserede produkt intet har med kunstnerisk skaben at gøre, (hvilket også er korrekt, hvis maskinen bruges efter foreskrifterne).