

Wiertz, Antoine Joseph. "Photography." Trans. Kate Tunstall. *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 654-55. Print.

Initially published as "La Photographie" in *Le National*, Brussels, in June 1855.

## 2 Antoine Joseph Wiertz (1806–1865) 'Photography'

Wiertz was a Belgian academic painter who specialized in portentous or even macabre allegories. Whereas many such academic painters considered photography a threat to art, Wiertz believed it to be a liberation. The daguerreotype could take over that function of painting and drawing which was dedicated to recording the everyday world. In essence it rendered artistic Naturalism obsolete. But by the same token it freed artists to pursue the imaginative aspects of their work. In the event it was just this freedom that modern painters exploited, most notably in the long and complex development of abstraction. What Wiertz himself had in mind however, is more likely to have been the ascendancy of his own type of nineteenth-century Symbolism. Most early discussions of photography and art held their relation to be unequal. Either photography simply was not art, or it could at best serve art by providing rapid studies. Wiertz looked further ahead to a future partnership. Subsequently, in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin referred to Wiertz's 'great article on photography' as having 'assigned to it the philosophical enlightenment of painting'. He also made the more controversial claim that Wiertz had provided a distant anticipation of montage through his speculations about art and photography working together as equals in the future. The article 'La Photographie' was published in *Le National*, Brussels, in June 1855 and was reprinted in his *Oeuvres Littéraires*, Paris, 1870, pp. 309–10. It has been translated by Kate Tunstall for the present volume.

### Good news for the future of painting!

As one knows, art is divided into two parts – the material and the intellectual. Some painters concern themselves only with the material part and admirably render a satin dress. Others are attached to the intellectual part; they invent, compose, draw and seem to be unaware of the rendering.

The painter who renders well is the mason who constructs; the other, is the architect who invents and composes. The architect and the mason in painting are in the presence of a great event. This event will be a subject of joy for the architect and a subject of despair for the mason.

A few years ago, a machine was born which is the honour of our time and which, each day, astonishes our thoughts and shocks our eyes.

A century from now this machine will be the brush, palette, colours, skill, rules, patience, eye, style, brushwork, paste, glaze, tricks of the trade, modelling, finish, and rendering.

A century from now, there will no longer be a mason in painting: there will only be architects, painters in all senses of the word.

Let it not be thought that the daguerreotype kills art. No, it only kills the work of patience and pays homage to the work of thought.

When the daguerreotype, this great child will have attained the age of maturity; when all of its force and potential have been developed, then the genius of art will suddenly put its hand on its collar and cry: 'Mine! You are mine now! We will work together.'

What I have just said, I have been saying for ten years.

I recall that to this subject someone offered this reflection: Daguerreotypes will never attain the dimensions of nature. To this I responded that they would certainly arrive at this result.

What I predicted is already coming to pass. M. Plumier, our capable photographer, one of these men of the race of exploring spirits who sometimes honour their country by some discovery, has invented the means of producing photographic drawings which represent objects as large as they are in nature. Moreover, the new method is such that he can reproduce in as many sizes as possible...

Human knowledge, go forward! March on!