

Cubist Photography

A possible caption for a *Punch* cartoon

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"The Cubist Photographer" appeared in the British humor periodical *Punch*, in the issue dated 17 June 1914 (p.480). The cartoon depicts a photographer in the act of exposing a plate on a faceted glass sphere which is fragmenting the image of a male sitter. On the wall of the studio are sketches of abstract or "cubist" photographs. They look remarkably like vortographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn.

But this is serendipitous. Coburn's vortographs were not made until nearly three years later. It would have been gratifying to suggest that the *Punch* cartoon depicts Coburn in the act of photographing Ezra Pound, for example. However, apart from the unfortunate fact that neither gentleman looked like the characters in the sketch, or that Coburn did not employ a faceted glass ball to make vortographs, the remorseless march of cause and effect would force us to the conclusion that *Punch* could not have responded to vortographs prior to their existence.

Nevertheless to assert that the cartoon's publication was merely coincidental would be to discarding the baby with the bath water.

In 1913, one year prior to the *Punch* cartoon, Coburn had referred to one of his photographs as "almost as fantastic in its perspective as a Cubist fantasy," (1) and questioned: "why should not the camera artist break away from the worn-out conventions... and claim the freedom of expression which any art must have to be alive?"

However, at this time Coburn's "freedom of expression" was limited to distorted perspective achieved by a camera viewpoint aimed down at the abstract patterns of streets and squares and by the use of an ultra-wide angle pinhole "lens".

Punch saw no reason why the photographer should not utilize an optical device for the segmentation of the image in order to produce Cubist pictures.

Interestingly, it is *after* this cartoon appeared in print that Coburn revived his earlier

theme and called for an exhibition of "abstract" photography. He asked: "Why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried?" (2) And one of the specific ways to accomplish this goal, said Coburn, was "the use of prisms for the splitting of images into segments." (My emphasis).

There is no evidence that Coburn saw, or was influenced by, the *Punch* cartoon. But what is evident is that it is far more likely that Coburn was influenced by the cartoon than that the cartoon was based on Coburn's images.

As it turned out, Coburn did not employ a "prism" but a kaleidoscope type device, made by taping together a triangular tube of mirrors. The poet Ezra Pound dubbed the device a vortoscope and the results vortographs. Most of his vortographs depicted objects, such as pieces of glass, although Coburn did make a few portraits with the vortoscope, including one of Ezra Pound. (3)

Eighteen of Coburn's Vortographs were exhibited in London at the Camera Club, during February of 1917, when they received considerable attention, not all of it favorable. Major supporters of Coburn's abstract photographs, as might be expected, were the Cubist painter Max Weber, Wyndham Lewis and, of course, Ezra Pound, who wrote a preface to the show's catalogue. At the opening of the exhibition, Coburn's close friend George Bernard Shaw was pressed into remarking on the images for the benefit of the press. But for once, Shaw was non-plussed and (almost) speechless. As a reporter remarked: "Mr. George Bernard Shaw got up and proceeded - to praise the vortographs with faint damns." Shaw struggled to extract meaning from the unrecognizable, abstract shapes, lines and tones - and gave up. "He was content to find a certain amount of pleasure in them, to admit the fact, and, for the rest, to take refuge in silence." (4) It is difficult to escape the impression that Shaw was not only bemused but also rather disinterested in vortography, and that he only attended the discussion as a favor to a friend.

Other critics and fellow photographers had no such constraints. Perhaps the cruelest comments were those intending to be facetious, such as the writers who found them entertaining only in the time it took to decide which way up each picture should be hung. (5)

Ironically, such critics had unwittingly understood one of the principles of Vorticism and had unknowingly agreed with Coburn, who evinced an explicit disregard for top or bottom.

But the photographic critics of vortographs were already years too late. *Punch* had lampooned the Cubist photographer several years before the first abstract images had been created.

Footnotes and references:

1. Coburn was referring to his photograph "The Thousand Windows" included in a series of five photographs called *New York from its Pinnacles*, in a one-man show at the Goupil Gallery, London, in 1913.
2. *Photograms*, 1916.
3. This image was called "The Centre of the Vortex."
4. *The British Journal of Photography*, 16 February 1917, p. 87.
5. Such as the critic W. R. Bland in *Photograms of the Year*, 1917-18

Unpublished, as far as I know. c.1985