Automatism: Response to Diarmuid Costello

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II
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Critical Response
II
Automatism

Charles Palermo

We believe that some of the key challenges for the philosophy of photography remain: i) giving a satisfactory account of the automatism or mechanicity that is widely taken to be the distinctive basis of photography; ii) clarifying the relation between causation and intentionality in photography; and iii) explaining the realism of photographic images—their relation to what they are of—in a way that leaves room for fictional depiction.  

As Diarmuid Costello and Dawn M. Phillips explain, the relation of photography’s “automatism or mechanicity” is routinely seen as reason for viewing photography as “mind-independent, agent-less, natural, causal, physical, unmediated” (“ACR,” p. 2). So challenge i is really also a big part of challenge ii. Further, on the accounts of photography’s realism they consider the most advanced, the independence of photography (its special modes of detection and depiction) from the mind (beliefs, knowledge, intention) of its practitioner turns out to be especially important, so challenge i turns out to be important to challenge iii, too.

In what follows, I have little or nothing to contribute to an ontology of photography—not directly, at least. What I want to discuss is automatism. The first thing I would like to point out about automatism, in fact, is that it is not specially photographic. So, while improving our understanding of automatism seems likely to contribute to all three of these challenges facing the philosophy of photography, it need not and probably should not come out of the philosophy of photography.

I say a discussion of automatism probably should not come out of the philosophy of photography because, as Costello and Phillips point out, in discussions of photography “the term ‘automatic’ stands proxy for a variety of notions used to characterize the photographic process,” including “mechanical” and those I already cited: “mind-independent, agent-less, natural, causal, physical, unmediated” (“ACR,” p. 2). Dominick McIver Lopes condenses the variety of these impulses in thinking about photography and automaticity into a “material conditional”: “if what specifies photography as an art medium is its automaticity, then taking advantage of that automaticity curbs authorial agency.”

Later, in their summation, Costello and Phillips reiterate and expand on this understanding of the “automatic”: “The intuition that the photographic process is in some sense automatic is supposed to imply that the process takes place independently of human agency. It is possible for a photograph to be produced “automatically”—if, say, a curtain blown by the wind knocks a Polaroid camera onto the floor and trips the shutter” (“ACR,” p. 15). There are plenty of reasons to be dissatisfied with this parable of the automatic. Costello and Phillips, for their part, think “treating ‘automatism’ and ‘agency’ in general as a zero-sum opposition is incoherent” so we want to say a washing-machine exemplifies an “automatic process,” while we don’t like to say the same of erosion caused by waves on a coastline. That is because “examples of processes that are entirely independent of human agency cannot properly be called ‘automatic’” (“ACR,” p. 15). To paraphrase a little: automatic processes are not only not unin-
tentional but they stand in a certain kind of relation to intentions. The Polaroid produced by the billowing drapery isn’t taken automatically at all. Nor would a vase shoved off the sill by the same action shatter “automatically.” Lopes, once again, gets this right: “automatism is not typically in tension with agency,” he explains.“Tools are fitted to the kinetic, pragmatic, cognitive, and social capacities of agents in order to extend those capacities” (“A,” p. 857). He points to Patrick Maynard arguing to similar effect: “Machines were introduced not only to save labor but also to leave less to chance.” Nevertheless, Maynard notes that mechanicity (in the form, say, of Aristotle’s autómaton) has also long been associated with chance. Thus, he speaks of “automatism’s pincer action”: “On one side, relevant aspects of the image may be there by chance, while on the other . . . by natural powers” (“AAA,” p. 731). This may lead to problems, however, for those interested in “locating the relevant intentions and thereby the mental content in the space between these contraries” (“AAA,” p. 732). Again, the automaticity of the photographic image is at odds with intention, agency, “mental content.” The problem, here as elsewhere—and this will be my general complaint—is that automaticity is carefully distinguished from mere mechanicity or chance and then collapsed back into them. As is surely clear by now, I am skeptical about this picture of automaticity, to name just one of my objections.

What does offer a good picture of automaticity? If I have a camera that focuses automatically, then, when I press the shutter release, it automatically focuses. That means, it focuses when I press the button. It does not focus accidentally; I expect it to focus, I want it to focus, I intend to take a well-focused picture by availing myself of this feature of my autofocus camera. (Of course, there are good reasons to turn the autofocus feature off: you want to focus on a face in the background, not one in the front row. Yet sometimes autofocus is just exactly what you want.) An automatic operation is not an accidental one; it is an intentional operation. But if someone were to ask me what I was doing when I depressed the shutter release, I would say “taking a picture,” not “focusing.” The gist of automaticity in this context is nicely captured by contrasting intended actions with descriptions. We call an action automatic if we acknowledge it as our act (as opposed, say, to an unintended consequence) but want to distinguish it from the description under which we perform that action.


4. Obviously, I borrow the formula “under a description” from G. E. M. Anscombe. When I speak of an intentional act in the series initiated by the agent as being disconnected from the action’s description, what I have in mind might be glimpsed in her discussion of intentional
There is a further distinction to be made: between automaticity and automatism. The term *automatism* goes at least as far back as the eighteenth century. In less current, philosophical senses, it can refer either to an account of agency on which we merely turn stimuli into actions or, contrarily, to the faculty by which organisms can originate actions without external stimulus.\(^5\) In more common current use, the term designates either a general notion of acting “mechanically, or unthinkingly, esp. through habit or convention” (*OED*, sense 3) or, as in the case of automatic writing, either because the subject cannot (*OED*, sense 4a) or will not (*OED*, sense 4b) control his or her action consciously. This last sense—of automatism as the ability to act, to write, to make pictures, even, beyond the control of the conscious mind—is the sense most pertinent to the present discussion. (It might easily go without saying that “mechanically” in the *OED*’s third sense is strictly metaphorical and requires—even permits—no machinery to play the pivotal part in rendering the action automatic.) This is why surrealism comes up in connection with photographic automatism and its relation to art. Of course, surrealist discussions of automatism have their roots in the slightly older medical and spiritualist senses of automatism (that is, *OED*, sense 4a).

First of all, before we proceed further, let’s note that the discourse of automatism locates the disjunction—the division between the action and the description that we found to be constitutive of the automatic—in the agent, not in a machine or even in a process, such as photography. Planchette writing is a form of automatism not because planchettes are machines but because the spirit medium is divided (dissociated) and cannot describe him- or herself as writing, even if he or she can acknowledge that he or she is doing the writing:

Miss S. . . ., of whom I have already spoken, sensed the movements of the planchette beneath her fingers and, by much practice, came to anticipate her automatic writing before reading it. She would say to me, without looking at the planchette: “Ah, that’s Johnson who wrote that,” and in fact the *Spirit* would have signed “Johnson.”\(^6\)

Whether you take “the *Spirit*” to be the conscious spirit of a dead person named Johnson (as the spiritualist might) or a persona or personality

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5. Here I refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first two senses of *automatism*.
created by some dissociative phenomenon, such as hypnosis (as a skeptical researcher might), the automatism lies in Miss S.’s dual relation to her own writing activity. It has nothing to do with the mechanism or even with spontaneity, as is generally believed of automatism. In fact, “the medium,” Janet goes on to point out, “anticipating thus the writing of his spirit, sometimes consciously completes it and collaborates with him in his singular compositions.” It is the medium’s and the researcher’s shared understanding of the automatic writing—according to which it both is and is not the medium’s act—that makes it automatic. Generally, I think we want to speak of an automatic act as automatic if we are tempted to note some disconnection (or disconnections) between our intentions in performing it and the description under which we act. Automatism is our way of describing the capacity (or incapacity) in the agent that produces the disconnection between the agent’s intentions and descriptions. Sometimes that (in)capacity looks like a pathology (say, somnambulism), sometimes like a special talent or sensitivity (spirit mediumship), but sometimes it looks like a technique, as in the case of photography or of surrealist psychic automatism.

When young surrealism addressed the question of a surrealist pictorial art, the key question was whether such a labored and deliberate activity as, say, painting, could sustain automatism. Max Morise offered the most careful and thorough consideration of this problem I know of within the surrealist camp. His conclusion was precisely that the psychological automatism Janet discussed was what the movement needed: “A good number of paintings by madmen or mediums show the strangest appearances and bear witness to the most imperceptible mental currents. You could put into an algebraic equation that such a painting is to x what the tale of a medium is to a surrealist text. Heavens!” For Morise, the trick of automatism lies in “forgetting what has just been done, or better, ignoring it”—just like a medium, who ignores the fact that she is writing to permit another self (even if that other self is really her own) to have its say. Is it a coincidence that, in his closing paragraph, almost immediately after disclosing his answer to surrealist art’s theoretical problem, Morise asks “Who is this Man Ray, our friend, who is making with sensitized paper things of the most incredible elegance from the most ordinary things?” I doubt it. But the fact that Morise can see a relation between Man Ray’s use of photo-

7. Ibid.
graphic processes and automatism does not exactly tell us what that relation is. All we can see here is that photography is valuable for the privileged access to automatism it gives someone like Man Ray, and that access appears to depend on its automaticity (that is, on the ability of “sensitized paper” to pry apart intentional actions and their descriptions).

This prevalent intuition that photography has some kind of inherent automaticity (and, thereby, offers privileged access to automatism) merits some thought. Patrick Maynard, in his *The Engine of Visualization*, considers a strong and classic argument that photography’s mechanicity is a fatal flaw—at least for photography as an art. The great “naturalistic” photographer Peter Henry Emerson (from “The Death of Naturalistic Photography” in 1890 on) claimed that

> the artistry around photography . . . consists in a few “limited” elements of selection—of view, lens, focus, exposure values, and printing methods—but it is “the machine that draws the photograph,” and “The result is machine-made; the trapping of a sunbeam”: “The photographer does not make his picture—a machine does it all for him.” It follows that whereas art is “personal,” photographs are “machine-made goods.” Owing to this lack of “individuality” or the “personal,” which is due to the extremely “mechanical” aspect of photographic technology, photographs lose interest, where etchings and paintings do not.

Maynard catches Emerson drawing a comparison between photography and true arts precisely in terms of mechanicity:

> In photography man puts the machine under certain physical conditions, and the machine will always (in the same conditions) bring about the same result, therefore the process is logically mechanical. On the other hand, a personal art is one in which the results would differ again and again under the same physical conditions, for the mind would work differently on each so-called ‘replica’ of the original.

This quotation helps Maynard argue that Emerson wants photography to be less regular in its results, that he rebels against its mechanical reliability. In his recantation, though, Emerson’s complaint against photography is that, on account of its mechanicity, photography denies the photographer

10. Quoted in ibid., p. 271.
11. Ibid., p. 272.
sufficient control, not that photography didn’t offer sufficiently varied results: “I thought once (Hurter and Driffield have taught me differently) that true values could be obtained and that values could be altered at will by development. They cannot; therefore, to talk of getting the values in any subject whatever as you wish and of getting them true to nature, is to talk nonsense.”12 A couple of years later, Emerson revisited his comparison between the agency of the photographer and that of the painter. He imagines a painter and a photographer setting out to picture a stretch of shore: “The photographer at once sets up his machine, focuses and exposes; but in these very processes his ideal has gone. What results may be beautiful, but it is no more the representation of his ideal, the vision he first saw. It is something else, for the machine imposes certain conditions which were never in the photographer’s mind at all.”13 Photography’s mechanicity introduces a gap, a discontinuity between the ideal the photographer intends and wants to capture and the photograph.

Not so for the painter: “each touch helps to his desired or ideal end. . . . Everything is done unto one end, and all is certain from the first” (NP, 1.185). Emerson calls a painting “a perfect index of its creator’s mind.” Yet the painter’s “ideal will vary with individuals and in the individual from day to day, nay, from hour to hour” (NP, 1.182). In other words, the painter can lose his “ideal,” as the photographer does. (Maybe if this weren’t the case, failed paintings would be rare.) But the painter’s work is vulnerable to an opacity within himself—like that of the medium. This raises an interesting problem, though: if realizing one’s “ideal,” one’s plan, means braving whatever opacity, whatever discontinuity, separates that aspiration from its realization, then painting is not sure in a way photography isn’t. Further, when it works, it will, like the automatically focused camera, both fulfill the agent’s aims and also seem to have come out, to have turned out right, of itself. Which is to say, it will be “automatic,” like photography. In the end, machinery is beside the point.14

So, if the automaticity we routinely associate with photography is not uniquely photographic or even mechanical, how about the automatism so

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13. Emerson, Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art, in “Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art” and “The Death of Naturalistic Photography,” 1.185; hereafter abbreviated NP. According to a footnote, the proposition is a revision of a paper Emerson read before the Photographic Society of Great Britain in March 1893; see NP, 1.170.
many associate with photography and specifically with its mechanical attenuation of agency? Costello takes on a set of arguments by Rosalind Krauss about the relation of automatism to photographically dependent works, such as (for our purposes) the animated short films of William Kentridge.

Kentridge describes the process by which he makes his short animated films, such as *Mine* (1991). Without attempting to capture the process in full detail, I’ll point to a couple of important features of it. First, Kentridge uses an unusual procedure: rather than animate his images with a series of drawings, he photographs a single drawing in a series of slightly transformed states, so that, when the photographic record of the successive states is screened at cinematic speed, animation results. Second, Kentridge specifically refers to the generative role of his working process (and even environment) in the development of his drawings and of his films: “While sitting around contemplating I either go round in tight circles or slip into neutral and vegetate. An activity is essential to me. It is only when physically engaged on a drawing that ideas start to emerge.” Finally, Kentridge compares this activity—generating motifs in or through the actions of his work—to ordinary extemporaneous speech: “Generally, and here the process I have described and the nature of the speech get closer, there is an impulse and knowledge of the general direction we want to go in. But then there is a reliance on habit, experience and unconscious parts of the brain for a sentence to emerge that is formally connected and gets to the destination you had anticipated.”

Their other differences notwithstanding, these three points are key for both Krauss’s view of Kentridge and Costello’s. The deeper issue between Krauss and Costello has to do with Krauss’s use of some arguments of Stanley Cavell’s on the transformations of (or, even, the invention of) artistic media under modernism. The concept of automatism is part of Cavell’s account of artistic medium and a prominent feature of Krauss’s discussion, too. Costello takes her to task for misrepresenting Cavell’s discussion of both medium and automatism and also for offering (the issue of her fidelity to Cavell aside) inadequate discussions of both automatism and medium.

I want to focus on the issue of automatism. It cannot be completely separated from the matter of medium; nevertheless, I think I can discuss the relevant points concerning automatism apart from the question of

whether a medium can be invented by an artist, which is the fundamental point of disagreement between Krauss and Costello.

Krauss glosses Kentridge’s description of his working process in *Mine*, substantially as I have, including his comparison of his method with ordinary speech, and sums it up:

The analogy he makes is to the way ordinary language, deploying itself in the course of conversation, is for the most part guided by habit, by learned patterns of speech, by rote formulations, by gambits and clichés. Thus, though we embark on our discourse knowing generally what we want to say, much of our activity of choosing the words and forming the sentences is preprogrammed, semimechanical, a form of automatism.

To this, Krauss opposes another sense of *automatism* that she locates in Kentridge’s remarks—“a sense that is the very opposite of the first”—which she compares to “free association” and calls an “upsurge from the unconscious of the unanticipated, the unexpected.” In other words, automatism (as Krauss understands it to function in Kentridge’s practice) combines the mechanical, habitual, and deliberate with the irruption of the unconscious into that deliberate process.

Costello is surprised by Krauss’s use of *automatism*. “The brute automatism of the camera itself, the fact that cameras are capable of producing an image of whatever they record without subjective mediation—which would be the most obvious sense of the automatic for Cavell in this domain—does not even figure” in her account (Costello, “Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 [Summer 2012]: 836). I’ve already said why I don’t think it makes sense to speak of automatism as inhering in or being a feature “of the camera itself.” That is not how the concept of automatism developed originally or how it was used when it arrived in art-theoretical parlance. It is a more or less unanalyzed innovation of a certain kind of theorizing about photography, and I do not see much reason to ascribe it to Cavell or, at least, to understand his remarks about automatism in such terms. (But that is another topic.)

On the other hand, Costello doubts the use to which Krauss does put the notion of automatism: “Krauss interprets Kentridge’s description of what is essentially a form of practical know-how as an artist, his intuitive sense of when to push and when to wait while working on a drawing, in such a

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way that it emerges as a form of psychic automatism. On the resulting account, it is Kentridge’s unconscious, rather than Kentridge simpliciter, that is responsible for what appears in the drawing” (p. 838). Of course, as I’ve tried already to explain, this use of the term automatism is perfectly orthodox.

Nevertheless, Costello resists it on two grounds. First, he says Krauss’s account is not an adequate description of automatism for the relevant (by which I take him to mean artistic) purposes: “it is a form of practical judgment that has its counterparts, born of hard-won experience, across almost any domain of human activity one cares to think of. Construing it as a form of psychic automatism has implausible implications for these other domains. Is knowing how tightly to tune an engine or when to refrain from disciplining a child an automatism in this sense of the term?” (p. 838). I think a reasonable response would be “Why not?”

In his account of habit, William James articulates a continuity of habitual actions that progresses from walking to fencing and even to musicianship:

If an act require for its execution a chain, A, B, C, D, F, G, etc., of successive nervous events, then in the first performances of the action the conscious will must choose each of these events from a number of wrong alternatives that tend to present themselves; but habit soon brings it about that each event calls up its own appropriate successor without any alternative offering itself, and without any reference to the conscious will, until at last the whole chain, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, rattles itself off just as soon as A occurs, just as if A and the rest of the chain were fused into a continuous stream.17

So, a “gleam in his adversary’s eye, a momentary pressure from his rapier, and the fencer finds that he has instantly made the right parry and return. A glance at the musical hieroglyphics, and the pianist’s fingers have rippled through a cataract of notes” (PP, 1:114). Habit can be bad, but it is also the condition of a certain kind of high performance: “The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work” (PP, 1:122). James strikes me as the right kind of source (historically, for instance) for reconstructing the relevant meaning of automatism. Further, though, I take the phenomena he explains to be more or less exactly what Krauss and Kentridge are describing.

17. William James, Principles of Psychology, 2 vols. (1890; New York, 1950), 1:114; hereafter abbreviated PP.
Costello’s other objection is that Krauss’s account “mischaracterises Kentridge’s artistic agency in setting out to harness, among other things . . . his own free associations as an automatism” because “remaining open to, indeed setting things up in such a way as to solicit and encourage, such promptings is anything but automatic; it is sought out. Construing this as an automatism would be like construing the activity of a psychoanalyst, as opposed to the material they work with, as automatic” (p. 839). In this, I would be inclined to agree with Costello and Phillips against Costello that “the idea that oppositions such as automatism and agency . . . stand in a zero sum relation” is more of a hindrance than a help in thinking through these problems in the philosophy of photography (“ACR,” p. 15). Another way to put it would be to say that nothing stands as a better example of “remaining open to, indeed setting things up in such a way as to solicit and encourage” an automatic outcome than the agency of the photographer. If Kentridge’s work fails to count as automatic, and fails precisely because he does too much to enable its automaticity, then nothing is less capable of being automatic than photography.

18. One might think here of the work of some photographers who precisely thematize their preparation—such as Thomas Demand. For an account of his practice and of “to-be-seenness” in contemporary photography, see Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (New Haven, Conn., 2008).