University of Dundee

Sinaida Michalskaja's philosophical *Windows*

Sandra Plummer, UCL Slade School of Fine Art

'[A] picture of the inside of a window is an exemplary photograph—the first photograph one should attempt, the origin point of one's photography, the origin of all photography. Where Niépce and Daguerre both take pictures *from* their windows, Talbot makes an image *of* his window. He tells us that photography is about framing, and then shows us nothing but that frame; he suggests that photography offers a window onto the world, but then shows nothing but that window... This, then, is no ordinary picture. It is rather what Talbot elsewhere called a "Philosophical Window" (Batchen 2000: 9-10).

In his reflections on Talbot's series of pictures of his oriel window (1835-1839), Geoffrey Batchen appraises both the literal and metaphorical qualities of these early photographs.[1] Batchen suggests that Talbot is presenting us with a picture that transcends the descriptive capacity of the *pencil of nature*. For Batchen, these are pictures that reflect on their method of picturing. Sinaida Michalskaja's photographs operate in a similar manner – as photographs that reflect on photography. *Windows* are metaphorical evocations of photography as a 'window on the world'; they are meta-photographs. Michalskaja's windows are not just literal windows, they are philosophical windows.

A photograph of a window is a reflection on the act of viewing. *Windows* are reflexive explorations of photography as a transparent means of picturing. The notion of self-referential photography suggests formalist -and specifically Greenbergian- associations. Greenberg however did not credit photography with self-referentiality: under his constraints photography was not an autonomous art medium able to reflect on, and point to its form.[2] Conversely, Michalskaja's *Windows* reflexively evoke and reject the notion of photography as a transparent medium. This occurs at a literal and metaphorical level. While some present interior views visible through the perfectly clear glass, in others this transparency is disrupted

by reflections or smears on the window. In *Nigel*, white drips of almost translucent opacity trickle down panes of glass merging with the painterly reflections of trees. This veils and obscures the view of the interior image, and has the effect of rendering the otherwise transparent window/screen opaque. The impressionistic panels in the upper half of the window operate as pictures within pictures: frames within frames, *mise en abyme*. There is an *enframing*; a revealing that is a concealing, a presencing of the window that is also a hiddenness. The Heideggerian concept of *enframing* has a central role in his text 'The Question Concerning Technology' – an essay that has been adapted by the artist into 'The Question Concerning the Window' and serves as a philosophical extension of the work.[3] What does it mean to *photo-graph* the photograph, to frame the frame, to see seeing? These windows are literally and metaphorically transparent and opaque.

Michalskaja's *Windows* are reflective of photography in general, but individual windows are also literally reflective. They depict windows that act as mirrors: reflecting the landscape or architecture opposite them. When the window acts as a mirror the external landscape is superimposed onto the glass threshold. Some examples combine transparency and reflectivity simultaneously - dappled leaves merge with an interior scene to form a montage of inside and outside. Other pictures depict only the external reflection, as if to refuse the intrusive gaze. Reflected buildings are often distorted (an effect exacerbated by the minor misalignments of the panes of glass), occasionally these distortions become kaleidoscopic; the picture breaks down, there is a fragmentation and disintegration of the pictorial. Metaphorically, Michalskaja's *Windows* recall Oliver Wendell Holmes' description of photography as a 'mirror with a memory'.[4] Photography's pre-history is also permeated with fictional imaginings of the power to fix what is reflected in the mirror. Tiphaigne de la Roche's novel *Giphantie* (1760) recounts a method of producing stable pictures (through the application of a

viscous matter to a prepared canvas) that are similar to the image reflected in a mirror.[5]

Conceived in this manner, photography is the fulfilment of a desire to possess a persistent and lasting mirror-image.[6] Daguerreotypes perhaps come closest to fulfilling this desire in the sense that they are also reflective pictures, preserving on a mirrored-surface the subject, or event, as it appeared or occurred before the lens. The polished surface enables a temporal and figural doubling - the first event is preserved as a fixed image yet the daguerreotype also reflects what occurs fleetingly in the present. Similarly, in *Windows* the glossiness of the photographic surface reflects the viewer. The addition of a translucent foil -which acts as a type of glaze over the photograph- appears to compound this effect. Installation images reveal distinct reflections on top of the same photograph. In *Manu (Mommsenstraße)*[7] the reflections almost read as a projection onto the surface of the image – suggesting a durational moving image on top of the still photograph.

Michalskaja's *Windows* depict what is beyond the window - not only the interior spaces, but also the reflected external landscape. Photographic seeing is fundamental to the creation and reception of these images. Talbot's photographs of his interior oriel window do not depict the landscape beyond it, vision is almost entirely curtailed by the window itself. Reflecting on their process, Batchen has proposed that Talbot's photographs look out from within the camera obscura to an interior window which serves as 'the metaphorical lens of the camera of his own house' (2000: 9). Michalskaja's *Windows* in contrast are photographs of the other side of the window pane. The photographer is on the opposite side of the glass, perhaps unable to enter the interior space. This looking then entails a voyeuristic gaze that is extended to the viewer of the photograph (who becomes complicit in this voyeurism). Sometimes the interior view is obscured by a drawn curtain, by reflective or opaque textured glass or even by bars on the window. What is perhaps more significant however is the way in which these

photographs reflect metaphorically on seeing. While Talbot's windows produce a picturing of their own apparatus -the camera obscura- at work, Michalskaja's *Windows* recall earlier drawing aids (that incorporated reflection) such as the Claude glass or the camera lucida. The Claude glass was a handheld dark convex mirror that produced a reflection (from behind the artist) that was particularly suitable as an aid in the composition of landscapes.[8] Reflective windows create a similar reverse view to that of the (late eighteenth century) Claude glass. The (early nineteenth century) camera lucida was the device that lay at the origin of Talbot's desire for photography. As Talbot notes in his *The Pencil of Nature*, this desire was later realised through the apparatus of the camera obscura.[9] While Talbot's windows are captured in the dark interior room of his home, Michalskaja's are generated outdoors in natural sunlight. Michalskaja's *Windows* are created in an illuminated space rather than a dark chamber; they correspond in this sense to a camera-lucida rather than a camera obscura.

Windows reflect on the nature of photography as a medium that produces what is seen by the photographer. Yet Michalskaja's *Windows* also exceed the conventional construction of photographic vision. *Windows* depict the interiors of domestic and other spaces that Michalskaja has positioned her camera to look into, but we also see what the photographer has turned her back on. The reflection in the window of the sky or architecture opposite reveals what would normally be beyond photographic seeing. This is a kind of reversal of photography and a return to pre-photographic seeing enabled by devices such as the Claude glass (which also produced a reflection of what was behind the artist). The superimposed reflection belongs to the exterior of the glass threshold: it obscures the voyeuristic seeing of the interior space and flattens the spatial depth of the representation. However, this reflection also produces an extension of the photographer's gaze and of the photographic field of vision. The window depicts a surplus vision (that belongs to a reverse view); it screens what should

be the photographer's blind spot. In this sense *Windows* demonstrate an expansion of photographic seeing.

Michalskaja creates a convergence between the transparency of the window and the transparent photographic medium. In *Andy* the window operates as a screen that transparently reveals the still-life of flowers in the interior (a picture within the picture) but also simultaneously depicts the reflections of external tree branches. The disruption of the literal transparency of the photograph is most pronounced when the window/screen is cracked. *Michel* combines the texture of the interior curtain behind the window with the shadowy -exterior- reflection of the houses opposite. However, the cracked panes disrupt the viewing of the picture within the frame, forcing us to see the screen itself. What occurs here resonates with Yve Lomax's account of 'the fracture' within the 'seemingly smooth and transparent surface of the photographic image'. This fissure in the image draws the viewer's 'attention to the photographic surface' so they can no longer *look through* 'the photograph as if it were a window, a pane of glass' (Lomax 16).

Martin is a photograph of a broad expanse of blue sky perfectly reflected in a quartered square window; the sky fills the entire window frame within the picture. The documentation of this photograph creates spatial ambiguity that is compounded by the means of display. The original (mounted) photograph is placed on top of a wooden stand on the ground of the Lethaby Gallery. The photograph appears to acquire actual depth (becoming object-like) and interacts with the adjacent window in which it is reflected. The shadow cast by light through this adjacent window interrupts the image in the original photograph. This secondary shadow obscures part of the photograph from view. It also adds spatial and temporal 'depth' to the image creating further uncertainty with regard to what we are seeing. The dark recess of the

original -representational- window merge with the newly cast shadow that proceeds from it. In the documentation of *Leonn and Johannes* a glaze of translucent film partly covers the front of the photograph adding a literal layer of depth. Other works have been positioned so that they merge with real objects. In both *Jungle* and *Lilly and Two Money Trees*, inkjet prints have been placed behind windows (Ekistics and Ikebana Observatory Vol 1, Oxford House, 2014). In these additions to actual windows, the shallow space of a (real) interior -as depicted in the photograph- is replaced with a virtual representational interior of a window. What is depicted is a photograph of a photograph, yet it acquires objecthood in its convergence with an actual window. The photograph is actualised in this convergence.

Sinaida Michalskaja's *Windows* are philosophical reflections on the nature of photography. The reflexive aspect of *Windows* is immediately apparent. They may include literal aspects of a reflected landscape or reveal glimpses of a domestic interior, but they are essentially meditations on looking. They also produce a presencing of their subject matter – literally and metaphorically. *Windows* are philosophical in their self-referential exploration of the convergent transparency of photography and windows (subverting our tendency to *look through* without seeing the metaphorical window). These works become -in Talbot's words- 'philosophical windows' that expand the conception of photographic seeing. The philosophical aspect is also foregrounded in their accompanying text 'The Question Concerning the Window' (the artist's adaptation of Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology') in which Heidegger's text has been transformed into a treatise on windows. But this adaptation could perhaps also be extended to photography. This work is not simply a question concerning a window, but a question concerning photographs.

How does Heidegger conceive of photography? The question concerning photography is addressed in Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (where it is discussed in a section titled 'Image and Schema'). Heidegger initially discusses the photograph as an example of the secondary type of image – as reproduction or 'likeness' in contrast to the first type of image (the 'this here'):

> 'That which shows itself here always has the character of the immediately seen particular ("this-here")'…Thus the image is always an intuitable this-here, and for this reason every likeness – for example, a photograph – remains only a transcription of what shows itself immediately as "image"' (1990: 65-66).

The photograph is proposed then as an example of a secondary type of image -a mere likeness or copy *of* what is at hand. Heidegger subsequently asserts that the photograph is an 'image in the first and broad sense' of the term where it corresponds to the look of 'something at hand' (65-66). It shows itself and that what it copies as likeness. Jean-Luc Nancy highlights that this type of image also *shows* the *showing itself* of the original thing; this is an inversion of 'mimetic values' - 'every copy copies the thing and the thing's showing-itself'.[10] The photograph however can also show *itself* according to Heidegger – 'the photograph shows not only how what is photographed, but also how a photograph in general, appears' (1990: 66). Nancy proposes that the photograph 'shows itself as a photograph, and it shows the showing-itself of the photographed thing' (86). The photograph then appears to be intuited both as a likeness of the image and as an 'image' (in the *first* sense). The photograph (as a reproduction) shows not only the image it depicts but also its own fact of being a photograph – it shows not only its picture (in its function as photograph), but also how a photograph appears. The 'look' of the photograph is both that of what it represents (the 'this here') and of the photograph in general. Sinaida Michalskaja's *Windows* initially appear to show only the window, and the showing itself of the window as a thing. Yet they also show

'how a photograph in general, appears' (Heidegger 1990: 66). *Windows* reveal the general

look of the photograph but also the looking entailed within photography, an appearing and a

presencing of photography that echoes Heidegger's reflections on the medium.

References:

Adams, W. L. Lincoln, 'The Evolution of the Camera', *Munsey's Magazine*, 25: 5 (Aug 1901) <http://historiccamera.com/ebooks/evo_of_camera1901.pdf> (accessed 2 October 2012).

Batchen, Geoffrey (1999), *Burning with Desire*: *The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

— (2000), *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

— (2002) 'A Philosophical Window', *History of Photography*, 26:2, 100-112.

Greenberg, Clement (1946), 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston', *The Nation*, 9 March 1946. Reprinted in David Campany (2003) ed., *Art and Photography*, London: Phaidon, pp. 222–3.

— (1964) 'Four Photographers: Review of *A Vision of Paris* by Eugene-Auguste Atget…' *The New York Review of Books*, 1:11, January 23, 1964 Reprinted in Volume 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism by Clement Greenberg*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 183-7.

Heidegger, Martin (1990) *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (originally published in German in 1929), Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

— (1993) 'The Question Concerning Technology' in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (adapted from a translation by William Lovitt (1977); original German publication 1954) New York: Harper, pp. 311-341.

Holmes, Oliver Wendell (1859), 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph', reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg (1980) ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven: Leete's Island Books, pp.72-82.

Lomax, Yve (2000) *Writing the Image*: *An Adventure with Art and Theory*, London: I. B. Tauris.

Michalskaja, Sinaida 'The Question Concerning the Window', the artist's website
<http://sinaidamichalskaja.com/windows>

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2005), *The Ground of the Image*, trans, Jeff Fort, New York: Fordham
University Press.

Charles François Tiphaigne de la Roche, *Giphantie* [1760] as cited in Adams, W. L.
Lincoln,'The Evolution of the Camera', *Munsey's Magazine*, 25: 5 (Aug 1901)
<http://historiccamera.com/ebooks/evo_of_camera1901.pdf> (accessed 2 October 2012).

Talbot, William Henry Fox (1844), 'Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art' in his
The Pencil of Nature, London: Longman and Company (The Project Gutenberg EBook of
The Pencil of Nature by William Henry Fox Talbot),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33447/33447-h/33447-h.html> (accessed 2 October 2012).

Notes

1 This idea of the metaphorical and literal meanings inherent in Talbot's oriel window pictures was extended further in Batchen's (2002) article 'A Philosophical Window', *History of Photography*, 26:2, 100-112.

2 Greenberg reduced the medium to possessing narrative and literary capacity, it was deemed merely descriptive and illustrative rather than transformative. In his 'Four Photographers' book review of 1964 Greenberg asserts that 'because of the transparency of the medium' photography works best when it 'calls the least attention to itself and lets the almost "practical" meaning of the subject come through'. Four Photographers: Review of *A Vision of Paris* by Eugene-Auguste Atget…' *The New York Review of Books*, 1:11, January 23, 1964 Reprinted in Volume 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism by Clement Greenberg*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 183-7 (p. 183). Should photography reflect on its 'form', then it would jeopardize its essential narrative function. For Greenberg, photography is closer to literature than any other art - 'the final moral is: let photography be "literary"'. Clement Greenberg (1946), 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston', *The Nation*, 9 March 1946. Reprinted in David Campany (2003) ed., *Art and Photography*, London: Phaidon, pp. 222–3, p. 223.

3 Martin Heidegger (1993) 'The Question Concerning Technology' in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (adapted from a translation by William Lovitt (1977); original German publication 1954) New York: Harper, pp. 311-341. Heidegger's concept of *enframing* isn't meant to be understood as a literal framing or framework. *Enframing* or *Ge-stell* refers to a 'gathering together', a 'way of revealing' (p.325) and is related to *stellen* which 'in the sense of *poiesis*, lets what presences come forth into unconcealment' (p.326). 'As the essencing of technology, enframing is what endures' p. 336. See Sinaida Michalskaja's website for her essay 'The Question Concerning the Window' <http://sinaidamichalskaja.com/windows>
4

 Oliver Wendell Holmes made this observation in his 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph' (1859) reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg's (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*, 72-82, p.74.

5 In Charles François Tiphaigne de la Roche's novel *Giphantie* (1760) the hero describes how the native genii produce pictures that recall the operation of reflections on polished surfaces. Following the application of a viscous matter to a prepared canvas, the rays of reflected light paint a picture that 'is similar to that of a mirror; but by means of its viscous nature the prepared canvas, unlike the mirror, retains a facsimile of the image', translation is as noted in 'The Evolution of the Camera' by W. L. Lincoln Adams, in *Munsey's Magazine*, 25: 5 (Aug 1901). <http://historiccamera.com/ebooks/evo_of_camera1901.pdf> [accessed Nov 08].
 W. L. Lincoln Adams reflects that 'De la Roche must have conceived the idea after viewing the pictures shown with Porta's "dark chamber" [camera obscura], a contrivance which, as we know, was already in vogue'.

6 See Batchen's (1999) *Burning with Desire*: *The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

7 *Manu (Mommsenstraße)* c-print, diasec, 250 x 150 cm 99/13 Vormwald und Schüler, Künstlerforum Bonn, 2014. All of the installation images are available on the artist's website - <http://sinaidamichalskaja.com/installation-views>

8 Batchen (1999) notes that 'travelers would hold the glass in their hand so as to see a reversed image of the landscape positioned behind their back' p.73. Batchen further adds that this made the drawing aid particularly suitable for composing picturesque landscapes.

9 Talbot recounts his frustrating attempts at drawing with a camera lucida in his (1844) 'Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art' - a preface to his *The Pencil of Nature* (p.3). Talbot had first produced camera-less photogenic drawings.

10 Jean-Luc Nancy's (2005) *The Ground of the Image* provides an interesting analysis of this section of Heidegger's (1990) *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics,* p.86.