

Expanding the Mandate

Since its inception, *Leonardo's* mandate has been to explore the intersection between the arts, sciences and technology. Now there is a 500-pound question on the table: Can the mandate of *Leonardo* be expanded to explore the intersection between art, science, technology and *society*?

In the 19th century, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre of France and William Henry Fox Talbot of Great Britain, credited individually with the invention of photography, both happened to take photographs of their respective collections during their initial investigations of photographic processes. Daguerre photographed his fossil collection and Talbot his collection of china. Subsequent commentary has positioned these choices in the context of the intellectual and historical environment of the 19th century, a time of cataloging the physical and biological world as the concepts of the electromagnetic spectrum, the periodic table and phrenology were being developed. Thus, what appeared at the time to be the incidental and objective documentation of collections can be understood, in the context of history, as reflecting the values of the time period.

In Weimar Germany, during the post-World War I 1920s, artists began investigating the physical world from a new frame of reference, which they termed *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or the new objectivity. These artists, including Albert Renger-Patzsch, Karl Blossfeldt and T. Lux Feininger, photographed the world from unconventional vantage points in an attempt create a new aesthetic, one that they viewed as apolitical and objective. Their subject matter included the technology of the era's growing industrialization, and many of their images of nature also reflect this industrial vision. When juxtaposed against the history of the time—the growth of fascism and decline of labor movements—these images are understood in a more complex way as reflecting the values of the corporate industrial state.

In the United States, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Charles Sheeler and other photographers were the counterparts to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists. From the vantage point of history we can read their images in several ways. For instance, as Sally Stein pointed out in a public lecture when analyzing Paul Strand's image of a white fence, we either can see it as an example of Strand's ability to abstract the physical world, or, if we look at it in the context of the time period, we can consider the point that the growth of industrial capitalism was resulting in the promotion of single-family homeownership, and fences suggested private ownership of property. So, while the image can be read as neutral, as an abstraction, it also can be read as reflecting the history and values of the time in which it was produced.

Today, can we look at the intersections of art, science and technology and, with the understanding that we have gained from our dialogue with history, begin to comment on and assess these intersections in terms of their sociopolitical, economic and historic implications? Or must we wait for future generations to do this? Given the conditions in the world today, in which most of the world's population lacks adequate food, potable water, health care or educational opportunities, the AIDS epidemic is spreading in Africa and parts of Asia, and the war in Iraq rages on, some contextualization of these explorations is critical in order to render them historically and socially intelligible. The 500-pound question on the table remains: Can the mandate of *Leonardo* be expanded to explore the intersection between art, science, technology and society?

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