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DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHS MATTER: THEORISING THE ARTISTIC LEGITIMISATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the collective efforts at legitimising photography as art by focusing on field-members' discourses. The analysis draws on in-depth face-to-face interviews with photography professionals and ethnographic data collected in Italy. Field actors adopt a strategy of discursive theorisation, namely differentiation, to promote the artistic legitimisation of photography. Differentiation is the discursive opposition between worthy and un-worthy individuals, groups and cultural products, sustained by referencing an artistic ideology. The analysis stresses how differentiation pertains to several analytical dimensions at the intersection of the social worlds of photography and art, and points out its limitations in legitimising photography when actors adopt differing legitimising principles.

Keywords: Artistic legitimisation ▪ categorisation ▪ theorisation ▪ photography ▪ differentiation ▪ cultural fields

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, the field of art photography developed by cutting its ties from commercial photography and by seeking recognition from the art world (Becker, 1982). Early photographers in the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Germany developed an artistic practice and questioned traditional view that deemed photography inadequate for artistic expression (Rosenblum, 1978; Christopherson, 1974; Bourdieu, 1965/1990). Over time, the recognition by art critics, the inclusion of photography in cultural institutions and the development of a market for fine art prints contributed to photography's status as a part of the "high" arts.

Although today a strict boundary between photography and art seems questionable (Fried, 2008), photography's artistic status is not ubiquitous across visual cultures (Seamon, 1997). As the Italian case demonstrates (Valtorta, 2009), photography occupies a peripheral position in the art world, and Italian photographers struggle

for recognition as artistic creators (La fotografia in Italia, 2011). Sociologists have not thoroughly studied the position of photography in the Italian context. This study seeks to elaborate the strategies field actors use in a situation where their products suffer from being only partially legitimised as art, despite their persistent efforts. I will show that the partial legitimisation of photography is linked to various historical and cultural reasons. For example, an elitist approach to art and the dominance of idealist art theories devalued photography as a “mechanical” art in Italy (Valtorta, 2009; Zannier, 2019). Over time, documentary or instrumental uses of photography were emphasized to the detriment of artistic considerations.

In Italy, it was only in the 1970s when socio-cultural changes and a desire for renewal in the art world began explicitly to consider photography as part of the major arts (Valtorta, 2009). Many artists began to use photography, and photographs entered Italian museums as works of art. Designated archives and the first commercial galleries for art photography also started to open. Italian art historians and critics began to discuss photography as an autonomous art, encouraged by a broader academic interest in photography that legitimised their efforts. However, despite collective efforts, between the 1970s and 1990s, the lack of a photography museum (until 2004), and the delay of legislative interventions which classified photography as part of the national cultural heritage (until 1999), hindered these initial efforts. Lacking institutional legitimacy, Italian private collecting and the market for art photography lost the opportunity to grow, unlike in other European countries.

This paper begins by discussing the relationship between discourse, categorisation and artistic legitimisation. By combining the sociology of arts (Baumann, 2007) and organisational studies (Durand & Khaire, 2017), I will address two understudied issues: 1) the relationship between categorisation (by field actors) and the legitimisation on photography as an art form, and 2) the role of different kinds of field actors (besides the traditional intermediaries) in producing a theorising discourse to support the legitimisation process. The empirical section draws on 23 face-to-face interviews with photography professionals and ethnographic observation during 20 field-configuring events in Italy.

By applying the idea of “mechanisms of status recategorization” (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016), I have distinguished three strategies of legitimisation: differentiation, emulation and sublimation. In the case of Italian photography, differentiation consist of the symbolic distancing of photography-as-art from lower-status types of photography. Emulation implies the discursive and material presentation of photography so that it corresponds to the qualities of high-status contemporary art. Sublimation, in turn, consists of framing photography as an authentic member of the art world by linking photography to broader legitimating narratives of the contemporary art world. In empirical reality, these mechanisms are interrelated and intertwined. However, the theoretical objective of this article is to focus on the process of differentiation and discuss the analytical limitations of the concept. Thus,

I will analytically isolate the process of differentiation to argue why it *alone* is not a sufficient strategy to guarantee the full artistic legitimisation of photography.

2. THE ARTISTIC LEGITIMISATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

2.1. Photography as a case of partial artistic legitimisation

Artistic legitimisation is a theoretical concept that explains how cultural products achieve the status of art through actions and discourses of social groups (Baumann, 2007; Heinich & Shapiro, 2012; Harrington et al., 2015). Such a theory adopts a constructivist perspective within the sociology of art (Alexander, 2003) where the label of “art” – and the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” genres – are seen as products of (culturally embedded) social processes. Since legitimisation does not affect the material features of already existing cultural products, I will not discuss what art photography “really” is or what kind of an object it becomes when it is legitimised as part of the field of arts. Instead, I will focus on nuances, discourses and practices of social construction that leave photography as only a *partially legitimate* art form.

Earlier sociological research on the production of photography as art offers evidence of its partial artistic legitimisation. Focusing on the opposition between groups of photographers (i.e. amateurs and professionals) and on what is considered “art” among photographers' practices (Christopherson 1974; Bourdieu, 1965/1990; Schwartz, 1986; Solaroli, 2016). previous studies demonstrate that photography occupies a position of incomplete legitimisation (Bourdieu, 1965/1990; Brunet, 2012; Heinich & Shapiro, 2012). However, despite these empirical analyses, theoretical reflections on these issues are underdeveloped. In particular, recent changes in art worlds, such as the progressive adoption of photography as an artistic language by contemporary artists (Valtorta, 2009) have not been taken into account.

There are three commonly cited reasons that explain the difficulties photography experienced to be recognised as a legitimate art form. First, the mechanical and reproducible nature of photography hinders an aesthetic appreciation based on traditional artistic criteria, such as subjectivity and uniqueness. For example, the art market distributes and evaluates photographic prints as material objects by adopting criteria of rarity and uniqueness that derive from the traditional arts (Sagot-Duvauroux, 2012).

Secondly, the democratisation of photography weakens its artistic ambition, as it is virtually impossible to isolate artistic production from mass uses of photography (Brunet, 2012). Thus, since the invention of photography (Battani, 1999), professionals legitimised photography by establishing conventions (Becker, 1982) that isolate artistic photography into a “sacralised” sphere (Douglas, 1966).

Third, scholars agree that the context of production, distribution and consumption determines photography's meanings, including aesthetic appreciation and

discussion (Becker, 1982; Alexander, 2003; Tagg 1988). Institutional discourse (Tagg, 1988), for example in museums (Edwards & Morton, 2015), is based on ideological notions that support particular meanings and interpretations of photography. The lack of institutions in charge of the transmission and diffusion of photography, as in the Italian case, prevents an understanding of photography as an appropriate component of legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1965/1990).

Previous research has argued that the collaboration between photographers, critics, intermediaries, artistic institution, the market and the academia sustains the legitimisation of art photography. However, more emphasis should be devoted to understanding legitimisation mechanisms, and specifically how actors pursue legitimisation in fields where meaningful categories – such as photography and art – are strategically mobilised and often opposed in discourse. Theorising this processual explanation is my main task.

2.2. Theorising discourse and categories

Unlike previous studies that broadly assume the legitimising effects of critics and academics' public discourse, Baumann's (2007) artistic legitimisation framework accounts for the functioning of legitimising discourse by identifying which actors, discursive elements and mechanism play a role. Baumann (2007 p. 59) argues that successful artistic legitimisation is based on the widespread acceptance of an artistic ideology, as aestheticians "create ideologies of art, and critics frame particular works of art by appealing to the theories and values of specific ideologies". Finally, discourses provide a vocabulary and set of concepts that art world members exchange in oral and written communications (Baumann, 2007).

However, in focusing on how gatekeepers provide ideological support to legitimacy claims, Baumann devotes less attention to two crucial aspects. The first is the role of categorisation processes in discourse and their effects on legitimisation. The effects of discursive oppositions between categories (i.e. genres) on legitimacy are not explicitly addressed in Baumann's model. This is possibly because, as Scardaville (2009) suggests, Baumann's framework is more suitable for explaining success stories than cases of partial legitimisation. However, sociologists of culture have often underlined that categorisation processes and classification systems (Lena & Peterson, 2008; DiMaggio, 1987) affect the legitimacy of cultural products. For example, consecration (Bourdieu, 1993) is a process that confers legitimacy through the separation of deserving and undeserving categories of products or individuals as it "assert[s] the existence in a field of a reliable hierarchy of worthiness" (Accomnotti, 2018, p. 7). Similarly, in organizational research, actors can legitimise or de-legitimise cultural products by mobilising, challenging, and contesting meaningful categories through persuasive theorisation (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016; Grodal & Kahl, 2017). For example, Delmestri & Greenwood (2016, p. 25) point to "theorization by allusion" to describe discursive strategies – such as symbolic distancing,

or evoking culturally resonant social-level frames – that proponents of institutional change adopt to legitimise certain products. Besides, texts and discourses provide a narrative for the institutionalization of new categories (Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010) that challenge existing social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 2012). Specific categories, such as “painting”, are perceived as more legitimate, and membership in them is considered desirable (Negro et al., 2010).

Second, Baumann’s focus on artistic ideology overlooks the role of other field actors in producing a legitimising discourse. His emphasis on aestheticians and critics follows earlier theories and their identification as the traditional legitimisers of cultural products (Becker, 1982). However, several other field members also adopt framing, discourse and artistic ideologies to label, evaluate and categorize cultural products as art. Both studies on organisations (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016) and cultural fields (Griswold, 2013; Lizé, 2016) agree that a host of field members – producers, intermediaries and consumers – take part in negotiating meanings in different institutional contexts.

3. METHODS

I draw from in-depth face-to-face interviews with Italian critics, historians, curators, art collectors, artists and professional photographers ($n = 23$, see Table 1), and ethnographic data collected through participant observation of field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) ($n = 20$), such as gallery openings, presentations, auctions, art fairs and festivals. Sampling, data collection and analysis were guided by Charmaz’s (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), for two reasons. First, as the field of Italian art photography is understudied, the analysis should start from empirical realities. Second, a nuanced analysis of the Italian context provides evidence that can support theory building by providing new insights. CGT theorises action by paying analytic attention to discourse and categories emerging from the data. Through constant comparisons between the data and co-construction of meaning with research participants, CGT help understand how different perspectives inform individual and collective meanings. Following Charmaz’ epistemology, I used earlier theoretical concepts as sensitising concepts. They were adopted in the analysis only if empirical evidence clearly confirmed their significance. For example, Delmestri and Greenwood’ (2016) concept of category detachment (section 4.5) was adopted in data analysis only as the categories emerging from data analysis demonstrated a correspondence with this concept.

Consistently with the CGT methodology, sampling was performed in two stages and according to two complementary criteria (Charmaz, 2014). Purposeful sampling enabled selecting respondents based on their ability to explain the mechanisms underlying the partial legitimisation of photography due to their professional involvement with photography. Specifically, it aimed at identifying subjects who occupy different positions within the fields of photography and art. Hence, the

sample included professionals involved in the production, intermediation and consumption of photography in Italy with the purpose to engage in discussions informed by various structural positions (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). Based on the first rounds of interview and observational notes analysis, I adopted theoretical sampling to select further respondents who occupied professional roles which were ignored in the initial sample.

Data were collected in unstructured face-to-face interviews, which encouraged in-depth exploration of ideas, experiences, identities and relationships between meaningful categories (Charmaz, 2014). The opening question, “Could you tell me about your relationship with photography?”, allowed to inquire meanings associated with photography and art by referring to interviewees’ position in the field. Subsequently, I encouraged detailed discussions on sub-topics that emerged in the initial phase, asked for clarifications and exclusively focused on the categories expressed by respondents. The interviews lasted from 1 to 4 hours. In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation in 20 events from November 2018 until November 2019. These events included 11 exhibitions, two conferences, three art fairs, two festivals, two auctions and one winter school for photography professionals. Observing these “field-configuring events” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) revealed how they shape the emergence of collective meanings. Finally, a range of art history books, art magazines and newspapers, often suggested by interviewees, provided additional data to understand better the context in which the discursive categorizations are embedded.

The coding of interview transcripts and observational notes was conducted in two phases informed by the CGT methodology: preliminary mapping and the analysis of interviewee’s discourses. In the initial coding phase, I used the “line-by-line” technique (Charmaz, 2014) to identify key actors and processes involved in the production, distribution and consumption of photography. The codes were grouped into thematic categories (such as “photographers”, “critics”, “gallerists”) to map the relation between individuals and identify central aspects related to legitimisation. Subsequently, the emphasis centred on the social construction of labels and categories (Durand & Khaire, 2017). In this stage, I focused on how field actors mobilise, define and contest meaningful categories (such as photography and art) in their discourse. I established connections between specific actors (i.e. critics), conceptual categories (i.e. differentiating photographers’ identity) and specific processes corresponding to the production, distribution and consumption of photography (i.e. evaluating photographers). To protect interviewee’s privacy and professional interests, data were anonymised.

Table 1: List of interviewed professionals

Number of participants (T=23)	Profession	Age (min-max)
7	Gallerists (Art and Photo galleries)	30–60
4	Artists, Photographers, Art Photographers	25–80
4	Critics, curators, professors	30–60
2	Museums and Foundations Managers	50–60
2	Art Fair Directors	60–70
2	Collectors (Photography – Art photography)	50–80
1	Auction House Photography Consultant	50
1	Event Planner (Milan's Photo Week)	55

4. DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHERS (AND PHOTOGRAPHS) MATTER

4.1. Differences and categories

The relationship between photographs and discourse is a crucial element in understanding how photography, as a cultural product, competes for public attention and artistic recognition (Griswold, 2013). Cultural products require what Bielby and Bielby (1994) define as an “interpretative package”, a discursive anchorage of cultural objects in the institutional contexts of production and diffusion. Photography’s relationship with art in Italy is constructed by field participants through several discursive strategies which stress the artistic potential of the medium. Field participants recognise qualitative differences in photography by mobilising artistic ideologies which justify what counts as art. Discourse can produce a collective representation of the artistic value of photography through comparisons and oppositions which establish a hierarchy of the creative use of photography. The interviewees argue that images taken with a camera, albeit fabricated by the same instrument, are not all the same. Distinctions between photographs, and photographers, matter.

Hence, to understand which ideas and artistic notions come to be associated with photography, we have to look at how differentiation pertains to the production, distribution and consumption of photography. Below, I sketch a conceptual map to highlight how differentiation – between art and non-art photography – is performed along several analytical dimensions and actors (cf. Alexander, 2003; Griswold, 2013). First, I show how social worlds differentiation determines the distancing between the fields of photography and contemporary art, where actors adopt two competing ideologies to frame the artistic value of photography (section 4.2). Then my analysis highlights the discursive differentiation of producers, their identity and their

practices (section 4.3) and the differentiation of photographs as material objects that circulate into distribution channels (section 4.4). The final dimensions discuss how differentiation determines a separation between market distribution channels (section 4.5) and photography collectors (4.6).

4.2. Differentiating social worlds

Social world differentiation consists of a discursive separation between groups and actors. This creates social distance and segmentation both *within* the world on photography and *between* the worlds of photography and art. Because of the historical development of the field, social worlds differentiation establishes specific ways of producing, understanding and evaluating photography that refer to competing legitimising ideologies. For example, in 2011, a group of professional photographers, editors, gallerists, educators and historians organised a conference to discuss the condition of photography in Italy, *La fotografia in Italia. A che punto siamo?* (Photography in Italy. Where are we now?, 2011). The proceedings show how differentiation within the field of photography was based on discursive opposition between insiders and outsiders supported by a common discipline:

I'm not saying that there are no people who deal with photography [in Italy]. The mere fact that we've filled a room like this proves it. I am saying that a shared space doesn't exist, and the product of this absence is that outsiders are those primarily dealing with photography in Italy, who discuss, talk and communicate photography. Even brilliant outsiders: art critics, journalists, philosophers, advertisers, and writers sometimes foray into the field of the photographic. I have nothing against interdisciplinarity. Indeed, I welcome it: one of the conquests of modern culture is the connection between islands of knowledge. However, in order to have an interdisciplinary approach, there must be a discipline, perhaps to be shaken, to be destabilized with interventions that prevent it from sitting on itself. Because there are outsiders, there must be an inside. And because there is transversality, there must also be a territory to cross. (Smargiassi, 2011, p. 15)

The author here asserts his position within an in-group comprising several professionals who lack cohesion as they do not share a common legitimising ideology (Baumann, 2007), despite being all part of a specific collaborative network. The conference was sponsored by an established publishing company and photographic agency, which also runs a gallery of photographic prints. Significantly, such network does not include art critics, curators, or gallerists that do not exclusively identify with the meanings and values of the photography world. In this case, the separation between insiders and outsiders echoes the importance of segmentation in the legitimisation of social worlds (Strauss, 1982). Distancing is a strategy to sustain

“a growing conviction that ‘what we are doing’ is not just as legitimate but even more legitimate than those of another earlier, established, or more powerful SSW [sub-social world]” (Strauss, 1982, p. 175), that is the contemporary art world.

The excerpt above shows that discursive differentiation alone cannot produce legitimisation. Instead, it requires a discipline – what Baumann (2007) would call a legitimising ideology – to sustain the demarcation between insiders and outsiders, “us” and “them”. Photography can be legitimised as an autonomous discipline only as long as its boundaries are sanctioned by a common ideological understanding, which prevents outsiders from venturing too far into the field. A young art critic, who identifies as being part of the world of contemporary art while specialising in photography, spontaneously shares a similar oppositional view of the field:

In Italy, there are a thousand facets [in photography], it's a bit like politics. (...) There are factions: you believe in a certain thing, and if you really believe it then you support that thing, but at the same time you cannot even enclose yourself in it, because otherwise the risk is that you only speak with yourself. Thus, you have to soften yourself and open up also to accept other people's thoughts, yet without compromising yourself. The world of photography is a world of people in their sixties and upwards, who don't want to give way to novelty and want to protect that handful of names, that handful of styles and approaches to photography. Because, obviously, these are elements of the world in which they grew up. They have to protect them because if they don't, then they would also lack the... the demand for their contribution. This is a cyclical thing. (Art and photography critic, 45, M, Milan)

This critic belongs to a new generation at the crossroad of the worlds of photography and art, and thus has to negotiate his ideas in a social space characterised by a *double differentiation*, relying on two competing legitimising ideologies. The first distinction is the opposition between historically renowned authors versus amateur and commercial photography. This has institutionalised an aesthetic appreciation of photography-as-art *within* the social space of photography (“that handful of names, ... of styles and approaches to photography”). This separation underlines that all photography is not the same: there are “masters” or “authors” – and then the rest. Great photographers possess specific abilities, a genuine vision, and these characteristics legitimise them as artists among other photographers and photography enthusiasts.

The second opposition is the one between the contemporary art world's understanding of photography and the traditional aesthetic appreciation of photography-as-art. Influenced by post-modern theories of art, the contemporary art world encourages the inclusion of photography among the several languages artists can adopt. In doing so, artists-photographers are compared to artists who work with different media. Accordingly, there are artists who *use* photography, just as there

are photographers who work as artists, and both can belong to the canon of art. Yet, this artistic contemporary ideology favours multi-media artists, as they are considered free to adopt photography at their needs. Photographers, again, are considered restricted by the exclusive use of the photographic language.

The consequences of the double differentiation between photography and art photography, and photography and art are evident in the art critic's further elaboration on the topic.

There's no point in talking about photography from inside [the world of] photography. In fact, the most interesting things are outside. Then, it is clear that it is also due to the nature of the medium, because its beauty is that everyone is interested in it (...) Most contemporary philosophers may well mind their own business, but fortunately they don't. That is, fortunately they also mind our own business, they speak better about photography than – I even say this against my own profession – better than art critics or critics of the sector. You understand that it's something that interests everyone in a transversal way. Because photography is communication, photography is memory, and photography is history. Then it can become art if done well in one of these fields, [with one of these] motivations. Then the art world can absorb it in and give it a value, a different value. (Art and photography critic, 45, M, Milan)

The opposition between an “inside” and an “outside” structures different understandings (i.e. “our” and “their” business) of photography's legitimacy. Consequently, the legitimisation of photography through differentiation is challenged by photography's simultaneous presence in different social contexts. According to the art critic, what differentiates photography as art from other uses is its integration into a social environment – the art world – which labels photography as both *distinctive* and *included*. Drawing on Baumann (2007), one could argue that the constant competition between these different legitimising ideologies penalizes photography as an art practice.

In light of photography's presence in multiple social spheres, how do producers differentiate between artistic uses of photography and between different types of photography? Cultural objects require a theory, while photographers require a discipline.

4.3. Forms of photographic production and the identity of producers

According to the interviewees, there are multiple ways to produce art with photography. Field participants adopt discursive justifications that differentiate photographers through the opposition between photography-as-art and non-artistic

practices. At the same time, historical distinctions between photographic genres play an essential role in differentiating the artistic status of contemporary producers.

Producers adopt differentiation as a strategy of identity formation. Photographers who undertake both professional activity (e.g. work on commission) and personal projects try to disentangle the specific meanings associated with each practice. Differentiation allows them to distinguish personal work as a form of artistic experimentation, referring to photography as an autonomous expression:

There is a difference, in my opinion, between being a good photographer, [that is] a good professional who reproduces what he has to do, through studio or product photography, and a more artistic approach, that is to use photography for a personal story. Then, things are not so clear but overlap very often. Regardless, it is useful to know not the purpose, but the reason why you do things. (Artistic and professional photographer, 35, F, Milan)

Notions of freedom, purpose and disinterestedness in commercial practices are familiar tropes for photographers who engage in artistic production (Christopherson, 1974; Schwartz, 1986). They are used in the (self-)definition of art photographers in several ways, for example, by problematizing the shared conceptions of photography as a constraining artistic tool. Others separate photography-as-art from other photographic practices to preserve the autonomy of artistic production as opposed to commissioned work, referring to the purpose and subjectivity associated with “personal” work.

In the case of photographers, the development of an artistic discipline demonstrates how differentiation can be a source of artistic theorisation for producers. Differentiation can be a tool for defining the boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” (as discussed above) and, at the same time, a structuring device among “insiders”. Discipline acts as one of the “legitimizing conceptualizations” (Strauss, 1982, p. 177), which “are needed not merely for defending the SSW [sub-social world] from outsiders, but to give justification and guidance to insiders, and also to shape a legitimized order of the SSW.”

Moreover, other actors in the field of photography, such as collectors and critics, can differentiate producers by referring to the same ideological conception of photography-as-art:

Even on the author's part, knowing how to use photography correctly in all its potential is not easy. You must have read Susan Sontag, all the classics about photography. Then you have fun. It's like when one plays the piano and the violin, you have fun when you know the technique and you know the expression of all the great artists, Bach and Chopin, and why do they make that kind of project with their piece. Why? It's extraordinary. Even reading music is the same thing. You can understand it, you can write it, and you

can play and interpret it when you know the author's story in depth. So, it's the same thing in photography, only that while it's obvious that music is not easy if you want to perceive it in all its potential, photography seems much simpler. (Collector and former photography gallery manager, 70, M, Milan)

How can you differentiate yourself, distance yourself? If you want to make yourself different as well, don't you? Your difference is in developing projects. Images overlap. Very often, they can't make a difference. The difference is made by the project. (Photography critic, 50, M, Milan)

Above, the collector differentiates producers based on theoretical and historical knowledge about the artistic discipline. The critic, in turn, identifies project management as a distinctive part of artistic practice. Both evoke differentiations (*within* the world of photography) between producers who strive for the same type of recognition and compete for the symbolic capital reflecting an ideology of photography-as-art (cf. Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

At the same time, the differentiation between producers may refer to the distance between the world of photography and the world of art, which are structured according to different legitimising principles. For example, the separation between photography and art is reflected by the categorisations of a photography critic who divides art-photographers from photo-artists:

The artist-photographer is the artist who employs the photographic medium as an expressive language, but in some way does not exclude other languages. In the sense that he finds in photography, let's say, the ideal medium to express one's project, one's work. He, however, does not preclude himself the use of other media, other languages. (...) The photographer-artist is the one who does not move beyond the photographic medium but acts in an artistic way. That is, he does not have a commissioned work, he lives by his own solicitation (Photography critic, 50, M, Milan)

In this quote, differentiation concerns both the intentionality of the producer and the context of production. The social definition of the photographer-artist is produced in opposition to amateur or professional uses of photography. Photography-as-art, therefore, differs from the common meanings associated with technique and commerce. Besides, photographer-artists are compared to multimedia *artists* who are "free" to express themselves using photography. Hence, the differentiation between artist-photographers and photo-artists refers to the legitimising principle of "art for art's sake" (Bourdieu, 1996). Confronted with such ideology, photo-artists are delegitimised, since photography represents the limit of their practice, and therefore of their legitimacy as artists.

4.4. Types and qualities of photography

Differentiation affects the material dimension of photography by establishing a separation between the qualities of photographic prints. Once photographs are distributed in commercial venues as material objects beyond the control of producers, they are differentiated according to two legitimising principles that reflect the historical separation between the categories of photography and art (discussed in section 4.2), and the classification placed on photographers (section 4.3). For example, a gallerist recounts that the historical distinction between “professional photographers” and “artists who use photography” establishes a legitimate principle for evaluating photographic prints:

There are photographs by authors who are considered more as artists and less as photographers that are offered, for example, in contemporary art auctions. Then there are auctions exclusively for photography. So, this is a gap that I hope will be filled sooner or later, in the sense that I think photography, even the most traditional, analogical, printed in darkrooms... is an expressive medium belonging to art, as painting and tempera and acrylics, sculpture and so on. The market still makes this distinction, so that Cindy Sherman goes to contemporary art auctions as well as Ruff, Struth, Candida Hofer, and so on. And all the others go to photography auctions. So, of course, it has to be said that many of these authors, or these artist photographers, as we want to call them, which are more historicized, were born as photographers and therefore never thought that sooner or later their photos would be hung in a living room or a museum. Being born as a photographer of another kind, maybe there is a bit of this distinction, while those who belong to the generations closer to us began to photograph because they really wanted to give artistic expression to their thought. Maybe they are more directed towards, let's say, the contemporary art market rather than the photography market. (Photography gallery manager, 45, F, Milan)

The differentiation between photography and art determines a division of distribution channels independent of producers' will and expectations. Discussions about the professional background of photographers institutionalise distinctions between those “born as photographers” and those “born as artists”, that determine which markets will include their work. As such, the example confirms that “category meanings and value constructs are embedded in broader interpretations of the accepted cultural history of a field” (Khaire e Wadhvani, 2010, p. 1297).

The gallerist, however, tries to question the ideological principle behind this distinction, since photographers in the category of art receive higher economic and artistic valuations. Her ideological conception of photography as an “expressive medium belonging to art” opposes the differentiation criteria between photography

and art that auction houses adopt. This opposition has significant consequences on the artistic legitimacy of the medium, as demonstrated by the processes of differentiation that affect the distribution channels of photography.

4.5. Distribution channels and forms of intermediation

In general, distribution channels adopt the categorization of historians, critics and curators to frame the discourses associated with cultural products (Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010). In the Italian case, these categorisations are also performatively reinforced by discursive differentiation and have consequences on photography's legitimacy as art.

The analysis shows a separation between the distribution channels of photography and art that reflects the social distance between the respective social worlds. On the one hand, there are galleries specialised in photography and on the other hand contemporary art galleries that include photography. There are specialized photography auctions which are distinct from contemporary art auctions that include photographic prints. There are two specialized photography fairs that stand apart from modern and contemporary art fairs that often include photography in their specific sections.

Photography galleries are well aware of the status differential between the labels of photography and contemporary art. Thus, depending on their position in the field of photography, gallery owners either discursively highlight the distinction between the two genres or try to avoid it. The closer they are to a clientele of collectors who only buy photographic prints and ignore other artistic media, the more they consider their condition as a strategy of specialisation:

When you start a business of this kind, you also have to go through a specific path to become an expert or someone specialized in a particular field. So, we started with a broader path of contemporary art, and in these initial markets we brought artists from other media and not only photographers. Over a couple of years, there was a growth of internal specialisation in photography, guided by the presence of some photography masters that we had the good fortune to know beforehand, and whom we gradually inserted in our group of artists. And then we opened the gallery in Milan with a whole new identity and with a whole other kind of programming that was very focused on photography, but with an international background not exclusively specialized in photography. (Photography gallery manager, 50, M, Milan)

By contrast, galleries that avoid explicit specialisation, but sell photographic prints, challenge the differentiation between art forms as something useless and unjustified. For example, the owner of a self-defined "contemporary art gallery" argues that:

It's like photography needs an enclave of its own or it has been relegated to an enclave. And this bothers me. Because it's a waste of time, that's not the problem, let's move on. Then photography fairs are fine, but where's the painting fair, or the sculpture fair? (Contemporary art gallery manager, 50, F, Milan)

We started with a group exhibition that analysed how photography has influenced the arts but not in an exhaustive way. From the Chinese painter who has a cut of the pictorial image that obviously has to do with photography, to the other one that talks about images, reproducibility etc. In short, this was our thought. And after that, in a natural way, we started working with artists who indeed used photography, but not only. This year we realized the first two projects of the year with two solo exhibitions that were not photographic, not even one of the two. We then did a project in Palermo. More than half of them were indeed photographers in some way, as they use photography, but the project was not purely photographic. (Contemporary art gallery manager, 50, F, Milan)

Inside material distribution channels, discursive differentiation has enormous practical consequences. It divides photography into two separate worlds that operate according to conflicting legitimising principles. For example, photography fairs bring together dispersed professionals to frame and legitimise photography as a collectable art form. The discursive separation between photography and other genres of art aims to facilitate the legitimacy of photography as an autonomous art through the accumulation of resources (such as visibility and circulation) specifically dedicated to photography:

It seems that you have to treat photography as something else, and I understand the reasons. Especially when the market intervenes, so that we no longer deal with researches and studies on photography, but we speak of economics. Then, since photography is difficult to sell, it's ok to have fairs dedicated to photography as they bring together collectors who are hesitantly interested in this language and invite them to look at photographs, to tackle them. But fairs are, more than anything else, to be understood as a communication tool. That is, I create a container for photography as I want to shift attention to this language from a communicative point of view (Art and photography critic, 45, M, Milan)

Differentiation represents a “communicative strategy” because discourses in public events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) frame photography as something separate from competing art forms, underlying its artistic autonomy. The photography fair determines the institutionalisation of collective meanings by orienting the public's attention to

photography's legitimacy as a collectable art form. Photographs demonstrate their distinctive qualities as they are isolated from impure meanings commonly associated with low-level (and non-collectable) photography. The phenomenon resonates with Delmestri and Greenwood's (2016, p. 25), concept of "category detachment", that is, "the presentation and signaling of an object in such a way that audiences have serious difficulty associating it with the meanings and practices of the undesired category" – i.e. those of the world of commercial photography.

However, differentiation could also be a double-edged sword and it could de-legitimize photography when art photography is compared to other established arts. During a modern and contemporary art fair, Arte Fiera 2019, some gallery owners expressed their discontent for having been "segregated" in the photography section. The "photography section" communicates an internal separation between art and photography, where the latter is "othered" through labelling. In particular, the separation communicates a condition that Accominotti et al. (2018, p. 1746) defines as "segregated inclusion", i.e. "a form of inclusion in which new types of boundaries emerge between previously separate groups". Consequently, the separation of photography from other institutionalized media (i.e. painting and sculpture) that do not require specific sections, calls into question photography's place into the arts and reduces its sense of integration and "purity".

4.6. Modes of photography consumption

Audiences are equally essential agents for the discursive legitimisation of photography through differentiation. For example, collectors bestow legitimacy on photography through the very act of collecting, which represents an institutionalised form of artistic consumption. By separating individuals "worthy" of being purchased from others, collecting works as an instrument of consecration (Accominotti, 2018) of specific authors.

At the same time, other actors in the field differentiate between photography collectors according to the collectors' different understanding of photography as art. For example, a gallery classifies clients according to the type of photography they collect, their orientation towards photography-as-art, and their cultural background:

I have a friend who is a crazy collector of 20th-century art. I've been trying to sell him a picture for twenty years, but he says "I'll never buy a picture" (...) So, beyond the possibility of spending, there are some cultural barriers, if you like, which are in some cases totally insurmountable. (Photography gallery manager, 45, F, Milan)

The excerpt shows how collectors may have different conceptions of photography that can be detrimental to its artistic legitimisation. In this case, the collector of 20th century art reinforces the historical opposition between photography and art by

refusing to consider the former as a collectible piece. The following quote, instead, explains how the differentiation of collectors is also articulated according to two different principles of legitimacy:

I always say that in the photography sector, collecting has two legs: the leg of the photography collector who loves black and white photography, vintage prints, etc., and the art enthusiast who expands his art collection, and consequently his interests, to the photographic sphere. In 2018 we participated in an art fair that was not specialized in photography (...), and we were confronted with a different kind of collecting by (...) art collectors, who perhaps for the first time, as it happened there, were also making acquisitions in the field of photography. Obviously, their needs are more sophisticated, so you also need to have an offering a bit more in tune, that is pieces of certain authors, maybe vintage, etc. (...) It's also true that (...) they often approach photography by buying a work that has a price that may not be too high, because they are not used to buying photography, and do not attribute to photography the value that a large international collector of photography is used to give. (Photography gallery manager, 50, M, Milan)

The gallerist compares two types of collectors that operate according to different artistic ideologies. Photography collectors attach more value to photography than multi-media collectors because of their specialization. The latter, instead, are more “sophisticated” and prefer pieces that conform to contemporary art standards. The excerpt hence shows that same types of photography can be evaluated according to two ideological principles depending on the position of the collectors within the social space. Consequently, the artistic legitimacy of photography is challenged by the lack of a consensual evaluation.

5. CONCLUSIONS: DIFFERENTIATION AND LEGITIMISATION

In this paper, I have discussed discursive distinctions operating in the partial artistic legitimisation of photography in Italy. From a theoretical perspective, concepts from the sociology of art (Baumann, 2007) and organisational research (Durand & Khaire, 2017) can be combined to underline the relationship between categorisation and legitimisation. Interviews and participant observation conducted in the field of photography demonstrate that photography producers, intermediaries and consumers adopt *differentiation* – and a complex set of overlapping distinctions – as a discursive legitimising strategy.

Differentiation is the discursive practice of making and sustaining categorical distinctions between social worlds, individuals, objects and practices. It relies on an artistic ideology that provides comprehensibility. The key oppositions entail an increase in the artistic legitimacy of the desired category and a decrease for

the undesired one. Specifically, differentiation strategies can legitimise photography-as-art to the extent that they can separate it from categorical meanings and values that could undermine its status as an art form, such as commercial and amateur photography. However, differentiation as a strategy has limitations when competing and conflicting ideologies are adopted to evaluate photography in comparison to other forms of art. I have highlighted the uses of differentiation on five analytical levels.

First, differentiation determines a separation between and within the social worlds of photography and art. The Italian world of photography is structured according to an internal distinction between professionalism and artistic autonomy. By contrast, the world of art imposes a distinction between artistic languages, whereby photography is delegitimised with respect to the traditional visual arts. Second, differentiation has consequences on the identity of photographer as artistic producers. In the world of photography, art-photographers are considered as autonomous creators who cut instrumental and commercial ties with photography. In the world of contemporary art, photographers are differentiated from multi-media artist due to their specific reliance on photography, which is understood as a limitation.

Third, photographs are cultural products that acquire different economic value in commercial setting depending on processes of differentiation and the adoption of a specific ideology. Photographs which are valued according to the ideology of contemporary art are sold at higher prices and are fully legitimated as art. Fourth, differentiation determines a separation between the distribution channels for photography. While specialised photography fairs legitimise photography by separating it from other media, contemporary art fairs can de-legitimise photography by segregating it in specific sections. Last, collectors help reinforce the differentiation between collectable art-photography and non-collectable photography through their collecting choices. Collectors are also differentiated by other field actors into categories, depending on their cultural understanding of photography.

A full artistic legitimisation of photography can be reached only if members in the field of photography and art adopt a consensual legitimising ideology. However, as the data demonstrate, the opposition between competing ideologies is often mobilised across the field in the different actors' (artists, critics, gallerist, audiences) discourses. While artist-photographers are successful in demonstrating that they operate differently from other low-status forms of photography, their claims are often contested or refused by members of the contemporary art world. Disputes between competing ideologies prevent photography from gaining widespread acceptance as an art form.

Although the paper only focuses on cases of *differentiation*, actors in the field can combine it with other legitimising strategies to reduce contestations. Emulation and sublimation increase the comprehensibility of the artistic legitimacy of *specific* forms of photography by embedding their artistic value in the artistic ideology of the contemporary art world. By increasing the compatibility between the legitimising

ideologies of photography and art, the limitations of adopting differentiation alone can be reduced.

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