

The Tarot of Photography: Is Necromancy Dead?

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For much of the twentieth century a tranche of cultural pundits were posing the rhetorical question: 'Does painting have a future?'¹ The existence and popularity of photography is, of course, one of the factors that led critics to query the ontological status of painting. In our new millennium, photography is largely a digital art and has been massively transformed from what it was for much of the previous century. For me, this throws up the question of the current status of the medium, and by borrowing phrasology from debates about painting we can formulate the issues to be addressed thus: 'Is photography dead?'

Given the proliferation of digital images online and elsewhere, the idea of questioning the future of photography might seem ridiculous, even if from the nineteenth century onwards the medium has been associated with death because of the ways in which it freezes moments in time. In dealing with the future of photography, I decided to look for help from the tarot.

Over the course of the twentieth century, both photography and the tarot went from being specialist pursuits to mass phenomena. And, like painting, the tarot has become more popular rather than being rendered obsolete by ongoing technological developments that had the potential to threaten them both. This relates in part to the retromania that has saved a number of unlikely mediums from oblivion, as shown by the growing sales of vinyl records, as well as the recent revival of interest in Polaroid photography.² Drawing

succour in part from the ongoing popularity of painting, many devotees of the tarot are stubbornly resistant to the use of straight photographic imagery on their cards, preferring on the whole to see drawn or woodcut renditions of the symbolism they deploy for divination. Likewise, for some time now the tarot has captured the attention of the art world and artists.³

So let's look at the tarot. From the fifteenth century onwards in Italy and then in France, tarot decks were used for playing games of chance. The cards in the deck underwent various evolutions in design and became standardised as the *Tarot de Marseille*, a pack of 78 cards, 22 of which are illustrated trumps but with the remainder of the pack resembling the modern playing cards used for games such as bridge and poker. In the eighteenth century French occultists became interested in using tarot cards as a means of divination. Mostly they deployed traditional decks for their magical purposes – and often only the trumps were used in fortune telling.

Early in the twentieth century the British-American artist Pamela Colman Smith drew what became the standard modern divination tarot deck to instructions from occultist Arthur Edward Waite. This deck was issued in 1909 by the English publisher Rider and for the sake of simplicity can be referred to as the *RWS* (Rider-Waite-Smith) deck. It differed from earlier decks in that all the cards were illustrated, not just the trumps and the royal cards from the four suits.

The design and production of tarot packs has grown exponentially in the hundred-plus years since the *RWS* deck first appeared, and there are now thousands of them catering to a wide variety of interests and tastes. To take just one example, there are a number of decks aimed at those who wish to query socially dominant heterosexuality, including the *Gay Tarot* by Lee Bursten and Antonella Platano, *Tarocchi Gay Orsi (Gay Bear Tarot)* by Emilio Ortu Lieto and the *Brotherhood Tarot* by Patric Stillman (not to mention the *Cosmic Tribe Tarot* by Steve Postman which offers a choice of three Lovers cards to cater to all sexual tastes). Today tarot packs aren't designed for those who might wish to play competitive card games, but there is nonetheless a division between decks

geared towards fortune telling and those more suited to being simply appreciated for the imagery they boast.

Before consulting the tarot I had to decide which deck I would use to ask about the future of photography. I was already familiar with some packs that I knew just wouldn't work for me. Let us take, for example, the 2011 *Outrageous Fortune* tarot deck created for a Hayward Gallery, London, touring show, *Outrageous Fortune: Artists Remake the Tarot*, which was curated by Andrew Hunt. This tarot pack – published to accompany the exhibition of the original art featured in it – is really a conceit to allow 78 artists to produce pieces to be shown together but using a mixture of media including photography, drawing and painting. When I first held a borrowed copy of the *Outrageous Fortune* tarot deck in my hands, I immediately knew it wasn't sufficiently coherent for me to use it as a tool of divination. Many of the cards were unrecognisable and to identify them I had to turn to the booklet that came with the deck. Artist Ruth Ewan had even transformed the Five of Swords (one of the uglier cards in terms of interpretation in the *RWS* deck) into an anti-war artwork, as scrawled over what seems to be a digitally manipulated photograph of Reims Cathedral are the words 'PENS NOT SWORDS'. I find myself reading this as, 'PENIS NOT SWORDS' (especially as 'pork sword' is a phrase I sometimes use as a humorous synonym for male genitals).

Suzanne Treister, who contributes trump card The Hermit to the *Outrageous Fortune* tarot deck, issued her own complete pack *Hexen 2.0* which she'd worked on for three years before first exhibiting it at the Science Museum, London, in 2012. Treister's tarot proved popular with collectors and now sells for outrageous prices, but I didn't think it would work for a reading concerned with the status of photography. *Hexen 2.0* features voluminous information about twentieth-century politics and paranoia, which is what interests its creator and its many fans; the deck is coherent but the data on the cards is too specific to allow them to be of much use for divination. Treister's cards are the divinatory equivalent of digital photography: completely functional for the twenty-first century but probably less attractive than dead traditions for anyone drawn towards

retromania and necromancy. Thus The Hermit, which Treister contributed to the *Outrageous Fortune* deck and uses in *Hexen 2.0*, has as its subject Ted Kaczynski aka the Unabomber. Kaczynski is a misanthropic right-wing terrorist and murderer rather than the healer the card traditionally invokes (although if the card is reversed – dealt upside down and therefore conveying an inverted meaning – the Unabomber works well enough in relation to tarot convention). Not only Treister’s choice of imagery but also its meanings make it plain that *Hexen 2.0* is not a traditional tarot deck.

Another recent art world tarot project is the *SPILL* deck. This is a tarot pack produced as part of the *SPILL Festival of Performance*. Initiated in 2009 and launched with an exhibition at the Barbican, London, in April 2011, the deck is a collaboration between photographer Manuel Vason, designer Justin Weyers and 22 contemporary live artists who each re-stage a tarot card from the major arcana. The 56 minor arcana cards were simply created by Vason and Weyers without further collaborators. What I like about this deck is that it is obviously photographic, a style of artwork that is unpopular among those who prize tarot decks as tools of divination. Unsurprisingly it hasn’t created as much of a sensation among tarot users as Suzanne Treister’s skillfully drawn cards. The *SPILL* tarot would be hard to use for fortune telling because less can be read into its photographs than say Pamela Colman Smith’s deeply symbolic drawings. Likewise, anyone familiar with the featured artists will bring too much extraneous information to it.

In the end I decided I wanted to use the original *RWS* tarot for my reading.⁴ As I shuffled the cards I repeatedly asked the question: ‘Does photography have a future?’ I then divided the deck into three piles, chose the cards on the left and laid out the first ten of them in a Celtic Cross spread. I’d chosen this method of inquiry because as A E Waite states in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1911): ‘This mode of divination is the most suitable for obtaining an answer to a definite question.’ Waite suggests the first card should be chosen by the subject of the spread and must be a royal card. Since I couldn’t get photography to pick for me and it isn’t a human subject, I randomly dealt the Ten of Cups and was happy enough with that.

Ten of Cups

This card signifies success in relation to family, marriage and love, and was clearly a good card for my subject because with the move to digitisation, photography has increasingly become merged with other arts and practices.

Eight of Wands

Traditionally wands were batons or staves or rods but in the deck he created with Smith, Waite renamed this suit to make it sound more magical. This was the cross card in my spread and might signify forces opposing the querent (usually the person asking a question of the cards but in this case the subject of my question). The Eight of Wands as the cross card was a good omen representing love and enthusiasm, and revealed photography as moving in a positive direction because the first card in the spread connected to similar currents. I was therefore already able to conclude at this juncture that photography had a glowing future, but probably not in a form that was familiar to twentieth-century devotees of the medium.

Temperance

A card signifying patience and adaptation. This part of the spread demonstrates photography's energy and why the question of its future was raised in the first place. The card also reminded me that Pamela Colman Smith became the first painter to show at American photographer Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in New York, which had previously concerned itself solely with avant-garde photography. Smith had exhibitions of paintings with Stieglitz in 1907, 1908 and 1909; and Stieglitz issued a platinum print portfolio of her paintings. Clearly the alchemical marriage of painting and photography goes back to both the birth of the later medium and the emergence of the avant garde around the same time.

Seven of Swords

A card representing sneakiness and cunning. This aspect of the reading shows what is fading away and is now past experience as far as the issues raised by the spread go. Clearly the insistence

of certain artists - Gilbert & George spring to mind - that their photographic works aren't photography is no longer necessary. Photography has already been accepted in its own right as an art form.

The Hierophant

Hierophant is the Greek word for high priest. Waite renamed this card and traditionally it was known as The Pope. In fact, if you look at the figure Smith painted it actually is The Pope, only the name and not the image has been altered, which is appropriate since The Hierophant signifies the lure of conformity. The dangers photography currently needs to be wary of can be found in the hackneyed and conventional work selected for competitions such as the *Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize* at the National Portrait Gallery in London. This is the negative energy around photography right now, and it is obvious that those who shout the loudest that they are championing the medium as an art form are actually psychic vampires attempting to suck everything interesting from it. That said, the entire reading tells us that history will forget the reactionaries celebrated by the likes of Taylor Wessing since they are already outflanked by the endless transmutations of photography online and elsewhere.

Seven of Pentangles

This is another suit Waite had renamed - it is known as coins in traditional tarot decks and is sometimes found rendered as discs rather than coins. This part of the spread tells us that the future of photography lies in investment and profit. That those who devote themselves to the liberation of photography will make gold in their souls, for the alchemist is not concerned with transmuting lead into precious metal but with sending the sexual energies up into the higher centres and using them to expand their consciousness so that they too might become a fully enlightened communist.

The Knight of Wands

This card shows that photography need have no fears because those

who are continually deconstructing and reinventing the medium bring it growth and enterprise.

Three of Wands

Tells us that photography will advance through partnership with other arts. This element in the reading unveils how others feel about photography and informs us that hacktivists, activists and finger poppin' daddies, are looking to the ongoing march of digitisation to bring about a systematic rearrangement of the categories by which we understand the visual arts.

Nine of Cups

Shows that wishes will be fulfilled. Since any final obstacles to the eclipse and re-emergence of photography as an aspect of all the arts would be indicated here, we can conclude that there are no blockages and the process I have been describing is more or less complete.

Ace of Wands

Represents new beginnings. This is the final outcome of the question I asked the tarot. The *RWS* deck therefore told me what I already knew, viz. that digitisation has transformed photography and it is no longer the medium we once knew. Traditional photography has already passed to the other side of history, but the medium has been reborn through processes such as morphing and digital editing. Photography had to die so that it could be reborn as something funkier and groovier! Likewise, the tarot doesn't divine the future; it simply allows us to access knowledge we already possess and to bring this information to the attention of our conscious minds!

- 1 See for example the youthful essay, *The Future of Painting* by arch cultural old fogey Kenneth Clark in the British weekly *The Listener*, 2 October 1935, which kicks off with: 'The art of painting has become not so much difficult as impossible...' But this wasn't just an establishment position at that time, the surrealist artist Joan Miró interviewed by Francisco Melgar in the Madrid publication *Ahorn* in 1931 expressed his views on the death of painting even more passionately: 'I personally don't know where we are heading. The only thing that's clear to me is that I intend to destroy, destroy everything that exists in painting. I have an utter contempt for painting.'
- 2 On the latter see: 'Why stars love Polaroid's retro chic: no risk of embarrassing uploads on the net' in *The Observer*, 9 November 2014. Online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/nov/08/why-stars-love-polaroid-no-embarrassing-uploads>. Accessed 4 December 2014.
- 3 I discuss art world interest in the tarot from a London-centric perspective in the main body of this text, but the US touring show *Contemporary Magic: A Tarot Deck Art Project*, first shown at the National Arts Club in New York in 2010, curated by Stacy Engman should also be noted as another example of an ongoing and growing high-cultural fascination with cartomancy. Among those featured in Engman's show and accompanying catalogue in the form of a tarot deck were Tracey Emin, Kehinde Wiley, Catherine Opie, Karl Lagerfeld, Nick Knight, Marc Jacobs, Yayoi Kusama, Vivienne Westwood, Ryan McGinness and Diana Thater.
 At the Andy Warhol Museum this work was shown alongside Warhol's collection of tarot decks and on 5 August 2011 there was a single-screen premiere of Andy Warhol's film *The Velvet Underground Tarot Cards* (1966). Promotional material for this event at <http://www.warhol.org/responsive/event.aspx?id=3002> (accessed 1 December 2014) describes the film as: 'Originally shot as background footage for The Velvet Underground and Nico during their *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* performances, this Warhol premiere kinetically documents each member of the band having their cards read at a big apartment party. The tarot reader is continually interrupted in her readings by the chaos created by the characters around her... 16mm film, b/w, sound, 65 minutes...'
- 4 Among other places, Engman's exhibition was also on view at The Dalí Museum in Florida in 2013, and of course Salvador Dalí created his own set of tarot cards very late in his career as a painter.
- 4 Until a few months ago I didn't have any tarot decks of my own. But I recently inherited seven tarot packs from Marga Tormo Moll who died unexpectedly at the age of 45 in July 2014. Marga was a cinematographer and film editor who'd moved from Valencia to London in the mid-1990s, and among many other things had worked with me on a few projects. She had around 30 sets of tarot cards and when these were distributed amongst her close friends I had first pick of them. Marga's favourite deck was the *Giger Tarot*, which is a major arcana- (or trump) only set that uses works by HR Giger to illustrate a pack of 22 cards. It is a shadow deck designed

to allow users to explore their dark side, and is totally at odds with the new-age vibe of the majority of tarot packs issued to serve the divination market in recent years. Since the *Giger Tarot* (aka *Baphomet Tarot*) followed the magical left-hand path and had a deliberate bias towards what many would see as negative results, I didn't want to use it for a reading on the future of photography. And I felt the same way about Marga's old oversized and well-used 78-card *Thoth Tarot* - painted by Lady Frieda Harris under the direction of Aleister Crowley in the middle of the last century (but first published in 1969 during an upsurge of interest in both Crowley and the tarot that emerged from the counterculture). The *Crowley Tarot* is another deck much favoured by those interested in so-called 'black magic' and the dark side of human nature.

I inherited two other trump-only tarot decks. One is a miniature but traditional *Tarot de Marseille*, and the other an oversized modern version of a similar deck that is based on woodcuts from a Renaissance Provençal tarot game, and it is assumed these are copied from a now vanished Gothic Catalan prototype. I love this modern take on a traditional deck because of its crude drawing and wild colours. However I wanted to explore the future of photography with a full 78-card pack, so neither of these beautiful trump-only decks proved suitable for what I wanted to do.

I also inherited a *Bosch Tarot* created by Atanas Alexandrov Atanassov. The *Bosch* deck incorporates elements from Hieronymus Bosch paintings and the cards are styled to look like his work. Lo Scarabeo published it in 2000. The last pack I inherited was the *Golden Tarot* by Kat Black. The *Golden Tarot* collages elements from Renaissance paintings into full card images. Like the *Bosch Tarot*, this is a contemporary confection that utilises photographic reproductions, collage and modern technology to create imagery that might be mistaken as the work of an old-master painter if you don't look too closely at it. Kat Black originally developed her cards as an electronic deck that was posted online; it wasn't officially published until US Games Systems issued it in 2004.

Stewart Home - Quick, Clean & Efficient Since 1962



Stewart Home and Chris Dorley Brown
Becoming (Mother) 2004

Giclée print
69.1 x 58.4 cm