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The Past and the Pending: Photography, Phenomenology and Intent as Perceptual Experience

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Abstract

As a practising artist/photographer I utilise photography as a reflexive practice that explores aspects of attribution theory, perception, memory, and intent. This paper criticises and debates current arguments based on the role and practice of the photographer in relation to the medium and its technical limitations through experimentation. Although 'photography' and 'seeing' are not self-explanatory, they are ultimately a designed entity based completely on the self, explained through the personal act of reflecting one's self. The paper further addresses photography within various contexts and concepts of both philosophy and psychology. The specific areas addressed 1) Attribution theory (and its various interpretations) as it relates to behaviour, and 2) Perception and the conception of the phenomenological aspects of photography, with emphasis being the contextual awareness created by perceptual and behavioural experience from a photographer's point of view i.e.: the 'photo-conscious'. In Flusser's *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, he states that photographers are distinguishable from people taking 'snaps'. People taking snaps are consumed by their camera, their 'plaything'. Unlike photographers they do not look for information, for the improbable (Flusser, 58), though it is improbable matter that creates a consciousness that is directly related to one's behaviour within the making of photographs.

Introduction

If I consider my position as photographer, then I am in effect considering my endpoints, my complexities, and the method by which I implement my intent to intervene with time, and with my subject matter. I believe self-expression begins with inquiry, followed by intent, yet understanding begins with reflective self-expression. What do you intend to try to understand? And, what do you intend the 'Other' to understand? An invocation of

sorts, the 'Self' looking towards the Other, existing as a semi discoverable expression, acts as a proem to oneself within and without a photograph. This initial and uncommon understanding between the two points to an inner dialogue seeks a response while simply stating, 'tell me what questions I am to ask you.' (Baudrillard, 186). The answers to these questions are representative of a common subconscious resolved in a photograph, frame, and space that reflect 'an aesthetic rearrangement of conflicting forces into, or toward, a state of order and understanding.' (Bunnell, 92). The relationship becomes an evaluative photographic response suspended within the unknown *now* while maintaining a trace of both the past and the pending.

Understanding photography is a minor struggle compared to understanding why one decides to pick up a camera in order to make a photograph of that 'something'. The idea that photography is the expression of something is commonplace, as is the idea that photography is self-expression, however the validity of these ideas can only be frame – worked after the photograph is already made. Perhaps more importantly, and more so, once the photograph has been recorded. Interventions are inevitable. Ignore it, disregard it, or attempt to perfect, the core domain of interest of any given image is purely based on interventional intent. If one's self-expression defines one's experience then, as self-expression, the way that I *intervene* with my given societal environment allows me to contemplate how the content of *my* photography is very much akin to being the content of one's cognitive and behavioural relationship between perception and reception. It is one's self-expression that defines one's experience, and in my own case it is an experience that allows me to arrive at a photograph.

As a photographer I recognise sight as the most dominant of senses, a sense that can ideally be based on the idea of perception. Although all senses are interrelated, sight is the most prominent and therefore first and foremost, it initiates thought processes that reflect descriptive and experiential reasoning. Over time, as a photographer, I have also come to realise that through documenting my surroundings, photographic realities and experiences differ substantially from observations and perceptions. Put simply, there is more to life than what is *seen* and what we see is based more on underpinning a constructive and meaningful interpretation of ourselves as represented in a photographic response. The primary concern is one of self-reflection and how self-reflexive practice lends itself to a historical consciousness that affirms contemplation through observation.

The birth of photography was largely due to the process of making a light-sensitive image permanent. On the surface, the photographic practice is an archiving tool. Image making naturally lends itself to the preservation of history, however we are now at a stage in the existence of the medium where the images being produced are becoming part of a history that, due to the ease with which users may now delete their images, becomes one that may not necessarily exist. It can be assumed that millions of people are currently creating numerous unconsidered images via digital means, which can cease to exist because of the 'delete' button on one's keyboard or camera. The distinction between digital-based photography and film-based photography – arguably, yet convincingly, are two quite diverse mediums – and this carries with it a problematic based on approach and process.

Although both mediums use a camera, the reasoning, approach to, and the arrival of an image represent themselves within very different methodological process structures. It would be easy to view these events as simply the end of an era, however it is not that simple. As Huizinga states:

... when eras are on the decline, all tendencies are subjective; but on the other hand, when matters are ripening for a new epoch, all tendencies are objective.' (Huizinga, 50).

Today, the whole concept of approach, and the process systems that are experienced become an undefined system. We are not simply experiencing the deconstructing of one method and the reconstructing of another; we are, ironically, blindly changing our previously understood notions of seeing. As a result, this change of medium means that society is no longer being 'represented' with photography; instead society is now becoming the *consequence* of photography.

Photography, through representation and experimentation, allows probability. Photography allows significance. Photography allows for biographies. As Adams argues, photography allows for the 'awareness of finalities and of our place in nature' (Adams, 18). It allows us to see. It allows us to consider the make-up of our existence and it carries the responsibility of investigating the social and psychological impacts that are encompassed. Paradoxically, 'photography' and 'seeing' contest our notions of meaning within almost all aspects of our waking lives. They are two acquaintances that, with the help of each other, predict definitions that by nature appear to be somewhat self-explanatory yet offer every opportunity to avoid explication. Although 'photography' and 'seeing' are not self-explanatory, they are ultimately a designed entity based completely on the self, explained through the personal act of reflecting one's self.

A sense of being

The act of making and archiving photographs is a combined process that creates an insight into understanding behaviour. We create a dialogue when we make a photograph. We code, decode and encode information. This process results in communication. We communicate to ourselves as well as to an audience. The understanding that begins to emerge from this interaction is a resolution of sorts, and that which we are attempting to resolve is a meaning that is attributable to an image. Photography as an information tool has always been a considered idea, however to perceive photography as a language that represents the 'true and false' of our existence is a shallow form of idealisation. In psychology, idealisation is commonly referred to as 'an unconscious process that attempts to reduce the anxiety associated with instinctive desires'. Be it 'instinctive desire', it is still an unconscious process that forces us to believe various ideas that we in effect have coded or decoded as photographs.

As humans we display the constant hope of the need to exist within an ideal situation or environment however and the notion of an image displaying such ideas that may be simply branded as 'good' or 'bad' is not possible. As a social response method, photography has been used to play witness to happenings in everyday life. People are responding more often than ever with a camera (or image capture device) to their everyday life and are quickly sharing the resulting images with less consideration than ever before. Technically, people are creating their own sense of being. Whether or not these happenings are personal or of a detached nature, as photographer, through my making/taking of the photograph, I can only communicate a sense of *being* directly related to a translation of the perceived idea of the image as opposed to the interpretation of the image or photograph itself.

Every person in the developed world has a way to use photography but to what extent is the medium being used and how has it shaped us? The medium was born from an experiment that had evolved over a considerable amount of time. Invented in the early

1800's by the likes of Niepce, Daguerre, and Talbot, photography had reached a point of technical perfection by the turn of the second millennium. Controlled by both mechanical and electronic means, the medium of film photography was regarded primarily as a physical and scientific process. Nowadays, the completely digital medium of photography houses an electronically-controlled mathematical approach to image capture. Although the medium experienced a turning point (much of what could be described as the death of the medium), it is now experiencing a rebirth within the analogue realm of the medium, which is my primary practice in photography.

Photography created an imprint through time that I feel only now is beginning to be understood. The advent of digital image production made available to the masses signalled the end of photography for many. The 'end' meaning that the turning point in photography's history was almost a point where photography turned on itself. The analogue medium was a unique set of processes, a set of processes that were somewhat perfected only to be ruined by the most basic of digital means. The 'tipping point' in regards to the medium's evolution is being defined (as history rolls on) through the liberation of the medium itself. Digital image capture has inadvertently freed analogue processes, processes that we hadn't yet finished with. Why is photography important now as a visual practice? What is it that drives image-makers to explore the use of the medium? I am interested in what the medium does, and can do, for the individual as user. It is not about the image first and foremost. The image is secondary at best. The primary tenet to investigate is the user who picks up the camera and uses the medium.

Photography as self-revelation: The work of Diane Arbus

I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging *it*, I arrange myself. (Arbus, 12).

This quote, taken from the dialogues of Diane Arbus (c.1972) directly reflects one's relationship to his/her subject. Diane Arbus was 48 years old at the time of her suicide. Suicide is a private act that cannot be repealed, and to an extent this act can be likened to the willingness to make photographs since this willingness is absolute and the process is a form of self-revelation. In Arbus' world this certainly made sense, since she was just as much a part of the photographs she made, as were her subjects.

Arbus was known for her interest in photographing what she dubbed 'the quiet minorities'. These minorities were people living on the fringe of society and Arbus herself occasionally referred to them as freaks so as to reveal how society at that time may have viewed such persons. The subject matter included social outsiders such as mixed gender body 'types', the physically challenged, nudists, children and the disabled. Her subject matter was presented in non-judgmental portraits that revealed an equality between her and her subjects.

Arbus was well aware that her subject matter appeared different to the normal visual construct of the time, and although different she sought to represent them as equally accepted fellow beings. I think Diane Arbus knew her work was profound, however the thing that allowed her to capture this was her behaviour within the given environments that were essentially her own. Carrying with her a social consciousness that allowed her an accepting association with her subjects, Arbus, through her actions as a photographer, empathised with her subjects through her photographs, and the resulting perceived idea of these people are eminently attributable to herself.

Photography and behaviour: attribution and perception

The act of *doing* photography is one based within a psychological context and realm, as are the resulting photographs. This exists in parallel to philosophical elements that photography has given rise to creating a complex intellectual discourse that pivots itself upon the user/creator and participant observer of the medium. The specific areas that need to be discussed and addressed are 1) attribution theory (and its various interpretations) as it relates to behaviour, and 2) perception and the conception of the phenomenological aspects of photography.

It can be assumed that the brain is the organ that conceives thought, however thought is probably more closely related to the non-physical mind as opposed to the physicality of the brain itself. If our brain tells us how to act and behave then the informant of that process, the very thing that begins that algorithm is perception. In this instance, technically, the mind and thought are two existential factors that are, ironically, non-existent, and the enactment of perception is one that is based on experience. Through my practice I enact a mode of perceiving what the possibilities of photography can be.

I believe behaviour plays a key role in how a photograph is made, and behaviour is defined as an attribution that can be described as either dispositional or situational. Attribution is a concept of social psychology. Fritz Heider (1896-1988), an Austrian psychologist whose work was closely related to the Gestalt school (which supports theories that the brain is holistic and self-organising), maintained that a person's frame of mind is a make-up of observations and analysis that are a direct reflection of one's behaviour. The reasoning behind the causes of behaviour are 'attributions'. Explanatory attribution is situational, it explains that which is happening around us and makes an attempt to make sense of a situation as we exist within it. Interpersonal attribution is dispositional. It specifically explains the role that we play within the situation itself and makes sense of our existence. It is these two types of attribution that can lead to very different perceptions experienced by an individual (me) as they engage in behaviour.

So, what happens when I pick up a camera, look into the viewfinder with the intention of creating a visual response to what I see? Whether I am alone or within a crowd of people, isolated or consumed by company, my existence is that of a social nature. What behaviour am I engaging in exactly? And how do I fathom what I understand? Is my response dispositional or situational? My reasoning leans towards a perceptual experience based on both attributions. I can't say, as a photographer what the resulting photograph is. I'm not interested. I'm interested in what the photograph becomes. The image was probably mentally 'chosen' prior to looking through the viewfinder, yet what it actually becomes is a direct reflection of my perceptual experience.

Fritz Heider claimed that attribution, as a concept of social psychology, is a process that is carried out within the brain. However philosopher Alva Noe claims that 'perception is not something that happens to us or in us, it is something we do.' (Noe. 1). He believes that perception is not a process of the brain, but is an activity of the body as a whole (the brain being a part of that whole) and that we enact our perceptual experience.

As a photographer what I create is a translation of the perceived idea of the image itself (prior to making it). This can be seen as mediation between behaviour and perceptual response. It is not binary. It is not a controlled state of affairs. It is not even perception in the first instance – it is a second-hand response method where the image then becomes the third encounter. This process can be interpreted as a form of reasoning or

dispute that connects our mind (or brain function) with our eyes/what we see. It is mediation between the senses that are the construct of ourselves. I translocate within a void, placing myself within that image. I'm not creating a photograph; I perceive my existence within it. Once an idea is formed it seems to be directly based on an immediate response, therefore the time between the occurrence of seeing, the happening of 'seen', and the exposing of the medium is mediation. It is reasoning. It is a conjured result that remains unseen. Exposing the image on film is not even the actual result since that image initially remains latent. So, in effect, the translation of the perceived idea of the image itself is *the* photograph. Only when we expose the medium are we reconciling this dispute. Then, sometime after this the object is made (i.e. the photograph); or, sometime after this we (may or may not decide to) make the physical printed object.

The question now extends to: 'What happens when we enact our perceptual experience through a camera?' Heider's theories, from a psychological point of view, support the brain as being at the top of the hierarchy of thought process and that perception is controlled from this initial point, whereas Noe's philosophical theories of perception are based on the way we move as a complete body. Both theories are based on behavioural aspects of human activity and are contextually situated.

Contextually, at this point, it becomes clear that during the act of making a photograph the two theories become intertwined. I believe that when making a photograph we are enacting explanatory attribution theory but we are producing an image that contains, or is made up of interpersonal attribution. We are simply enacting our perceptual experience through a camera, yet the resulting photograph is a dispositional response. This relationship between psychological and philosophical aspects of behaviour creates a phenomenological discourse that has the ability to decode and encode the significance of engagement with the given practice of photography.

I am not concentrating on hypothesising a concept based on the taking of a so-called 'snapshot', I am emphasising the contextual awareness created by perceptual and behavioural experience from a photographer's point of view, i.e.: the 'photo-conscious'. In Flusser's *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, he states that photographers are distinguishable from people taking 'snaps'. People taking snaps are consumed by their camera, their 'plaything'. Unlike photographers they do not look for information, for the improbable (Flusser. 58), though it is improbable matter that creates a consciousness that is directly related to one's behaviour within the making of photographs.

These concepts extend to other broader concepts that manifest as a phenomenon existing within the notion that photography as philosophy has an immeasurable insight. However, as *matter* the photograph has to become something that is existential, so that as *meaning* we are not alienated from the image, we become a complete measurable part of it. This is where behavioural response as perceptual experience becomes a revolution in seeing without the robotized consequence of automated activity. It is *seeing* that points directly to the primary objective of making a photograph. It is the behavioural decisions that perceptively allow us to see and communicate as a photographer. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson insists that the photographed exists as a photograph prior to any camera work and it exists as brain matter that carries perception as an image (Bergson, 38). To understand why someone does photograph, we need to understand the relationship between one's existence and one's medium.

Possibilities in seeing: doing photography

The relationship between a photographer and their medium needs to be clarified and

explored by gaining an understanding of the possibilities of the medium through knowledge and experience. In 1896, H. P. Robinson stated that:

Those who have only a superficial knowledge of the possibilities of our (*medium*) contend that the photographer is a mere mechanical realist without power to add anything of himself to his production (Robinson, 92).

The element of supposed truth in this statement is an obvious one – the individual photographer, so often thought, is a machine that has a simple relationship to his/her medium, and that is, to be completely disconnected from the medium and its possibilities. This is clearly not the case however. All mediums have their limitations, however the idea of possibility embarks upon the idea that one must live within the medium's boundaries. In doing so, the boundaries become part of the user's capabilities and in-depth knowledge base. If we are to question and explore the photographic medium and the associated renderings of facts or notions then we must also learn how to experiment with the mediums probabilities. The photographic medium is constituted by a common, though fairly shallow, 'referential' body of knowledge, based on a commentary that is an approximate and intrinsic problematic in itself. Probabilities are a distinct characteristic of the photographer and their perceived notions of what a photograph should be. With this in mind, the probability that we are able to expand our possibilities within the medium also means that we can define its boundaries, but not be limited by them.

Photographers witness the world through a strange conformity known as the *camera*. We keep ourselves informed with the world through this confined way of seeing and as John Durham Peters states, 'we have to keep up with the world because we are, in some complicated way, responsible to act in it' (Peters 722). The way we act in it and the way we respond to the surrounding world creates an ambivalence and ambiguity that potentially shifts our ideas of responsibility and reasoning. Contextually, Peters hints that our responsibility to act is infinite though unique to the 'now'. The problematic that presents itself is one based on the notions of contemplation, perception, knowledge and response.

Sontag in *On Photography* (1977) insisted 'Cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete'. Here, Sontag specifically mentions that the *camera* is the disease and that a nonsensical reality is the product seen within the photograph. If her book were titled *On Photographers*, her blame would clearly shift target and criticise the individual, the photographer. It is far too easy to critique the photograph since it exists within a confined space, however photographers are characters that come with an instinctual intent to respond. It is the photographer who has the power to deplete or confirm the possibilities that exist within the medium's proximities and therefore we must factor our concentration on photographers.

Numerous photographers employ very simple means to create photographs, means that are often viewed as antiquated and dated. Abelardo Morell, a Cuban migrant to the USA creates a large portion of his work with the assistance of a simple pinhole camera. He situates himself within the camera to record what the camera projects. Michael Wesley, who is based in Germany, creates images with pinhole cameras that are designed to make a constant exposure for the duration of three or more years of the one subject. These two approaches allow for the camera itself to 'write' the photograph, adding information over time and space, which are two primary principals of the medium.

The possibility that there are still new ways of seeing the world with photography is also evident with another American-based photographer Chris McCaw. McCaw's approach is unusual in the sense that he allows his huge aerial lenses (obtained from ex spy aircraft) to project 'images' of the sun as a direct sunburnt imprint on the silver halide based paper. Using concocted cameras atop trolleys and wheelchairs, McCaw has to 'vent' his camera's bellows to allow any smoke created to escape so as to not interfere with the image production.

All of these approaches are a means of revealing what has not yet been discovered within the medium. It is the approach, the mindset, not the technology, that comes first. This is an act of contemplation that is a direct result of the medium's intrinsic capabilities that are only made possible by the photographer's approach. It is wonderment filled with anticipation, the primary objective being insight into what can be possible. Just as much suspending a moment in time, 'the decisive moment' fails to exist in the image. Photographer Chris McCaw learned how to depict light (literally) by undertaking an arduous process through innovation, just as for example, approximately 150 years earlier, photographer Carleton Watkins would create large (18x22inch) plate cameras to document vast vistas within mountainous valleys and terrain. Maria Morris Hambourg writes, 'Watkins made most of his great pictures when he enjoyed the challenge of devising a shape for the previously undepicted.' (1999). Allie Haeusslein compares that both McCaw and Watkins 'relish the opportunity to engage so intimately with their surroundings, ever challenged by the unique physical realities defined by their practices.' (15).

The doing of photography, in a sense, can be interpreted as mastering light (as cliché as it sounds), however realistically it is a case of spending time with light, quite literally. As photographers we are forced to concoct a relationship with light, our materials, surroundings, and apparatus. The autoethnographic nature of this unfolding cyclical practice becomes an invaluable means that shifts our behaviour from (as Flusser put it), 'information' seeking, to an unpredictable tendency that allows us to become acquainted with the unknown. It is an unknown that we seek to explore in the first place. It is an unknown that allows us to understand our tendencies (whatever they may be) to *know* the unknown. This behaviour is generative and although it seems as though we stop time, we are actually piecing it together in discursive images and photographs that, however 'straight' or abstract, depict our everyday. It is an oxymoron, this exact notion of the familiarity of our everyday unknown, that forces us to tap into 'ourselves' through the image, and more importantly through the creation of it.

Conclusion: the photograph as both past and pending reality

Both the photograph and the act of photographing will destruct the *now* as we know it (that which we see before our 'everyday' eyes') and project us towards the two notions of the past and the pending. Without a definition of what that photograph(s) may be, the *now* becomes a metaphor for what *is* in the *now* and what we want it to be, perhaps later on, in the photograph. The notion of fixing images in our current time becomes void simply because that piece of time in the *now* is fixed in the past, yet only to become part of a future 'us' every time we trip the shutter. The resulting twofold scenario is a method of knowing based on passive tendencies reflecting time that has been freed from time itself. If time is a photograph that shows us who we are, and reflects our tendencies to search 'time' within the expanse of the past and the pending, our perceptual experience becomes embedded within the unknown that we were forced to move within. It is not about 'looking for an image'; it is about moving within images

that represent a self-reflexive practice based on behaviour that eventuates as a photograph. The photograph is not taken; it simply becomes our other self.

We need to argue that in order to *know* we have to do, and in order to *do* we have to enact perception. In practice, you don't experience photography – you experience numerous accounts, gestures, apparatus, ideas, contemplation, and matter, which are essentially the make-up of photography. Photography takes on an interest in the way we freely think, and this free spirited approach is a parallel to perception through practice. If according to Alva Noe perceptual experience has more to do with 'touch' than sight, then perhaps as photographers we should all stop looking for images and begin searching for the making of photographs that allows us to keep in touch with our tendencies, tendencies that allow us to stay free from us.

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