Photographic Representation

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1982

Submitted to the Department of Architecture
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN VISUAL STUDIES

September, 1986

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PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

Still photography has become one of the most significant mechanical tools in aiding our perception of the world. We can see its development as a logical stage within the evolution of the lens. The advent of photography helped to expand our vision and understanding of a complex world by offering a means for personal expression through accurate photographic representation of what we actually see and experience.

The form of this thesis will take shape by examining photography as a development within the evolution of the lens, by drawing from discussions of practitioners and critics of the medium, and by a presentation and investigation of my own work. I will discuss my thoughts behind the process and those elements I regard as significant that make an image meaningful to me and, potentially, the viewer, an image that can evoke meaning through transcending thought, time, space, and ultimately, experience.

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Leacock, Professor of Cinema
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title page / Abstract</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lens</td>
<td>4-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography - A Fourth Dimension</td>
<td>7-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach/Function</td>
<td>14-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>18-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>24-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Camera</td>
<td>25-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Lens</td>
<td>26-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Negative</td>
<td>29-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Print</td>
<td>30-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>35-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstraction</td>
<td>37-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>42-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>48-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footnotes / Bibliography</td>
<td>51/53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: All photographs included are by the author).
THE LENS

The emergence of photography in mankind's ongoing dialogue with visual communication can be understood as a logical stage built from developments dating as far back as the seventeenth century, when the newly invented microscope led to the discovery of bacteria in 1676. We need to recognize that the development of photography was an important and logical step in relationship to the lens.

The eye, like the lens, was the first tool human beings used for information management and gathering. Acting as an extension of the hand, it enabled us to perceive the world around and within us on a different level.

Like many other logical steps in the evolution of a science, photography served to facilitate the opening of a door - a tool to help us see on an intimate level that which surrounds us. Through our expanded vision and insight, we were further able to see that which we
take for granted or are ignorant of.

In perhaps accepting the theory of man's development of speech in order to achieve the written word¹, one can also formulate that we evolved eyes in order to bring us to the development of photography.² Within this postulate it may be conceivable to adopt what critic A.D. Coleman explains as more logical reasoning: 'Having evolved an eye, it was natural for a toolmaking creature to develop an instrument with which to enhance its scope. That tool is the lens, in all its diverse manifestations'.³

The lens and its many applications are commonplace and responsible for our ability to recognize images, places, and people beyond that which our 'real' experiences have afforded us. The 'perceptual revolution engendered by the lens and consolidated by photography'⁴ surrounds and embodies our cultures. Now that we recognize the history responsible for setting its stage, we have properly positioned photography within the technology it comes from.
PHOTOGRAPHY - A FOURTH DIMENSION

Distinctive about the role of photography in the evolution of the lens and pictorial representation is its ability to communicate realistically an event, a moment, or an experience. Photography is able to communicate a truth - a reality of experience - with convincing persuasion.

Discussions here focus on the still photograph because it embodies my work. It affords us the opportunity to study the still moment and to engage us in a dialogue where an experience can come from a mere moment in time, a click of the shutter.

The photograph serves, as it did in the last century, an important role in society because of its privileged connection with reality. A photograph is not just a depiction of an event, place, or thing, but is actually an objective document taken subjectively of a world that exists outside of that which we know as 'ourselves': a world which we continually perceive in different dimensions.
Before the photograph as a mass object, most people regarded the world through that which they saw or experienced first hand. In addition, literature and art played a significant role in feeding the imagination which depended on memory. The emergence of photographic representation brought us as subjective viewers into a world transformed.

As viewers of photographs depicting moments and events in time, we now could be objective. This objectivity is the essence of photography. The relationship between man and his reality changed and a new dimension to life was realized.

Our first notion is to regard the photograph as a two-dimensional representation of a world we perceive as three-dimensional. Although its material form ascribes to the two-dimensional concept, like all mediums of art expression, there exists a desired goal in photography, as well, for a connection with a fourth dimension, a dimension that interprets an object in more terms than just its external surface dimensions.
Our five senses react on a physical level to the moment of 'now'. They react to outside stimulus at the moment of interaction. Their reaction is based on a three-dimensional world. This dimension becomes their function. There exists a quality within all living things that expresses itself in terms of a broader reality: one that encompasses its past, present, and future.

"This level of reality is a static experience which only the mind can make dynamic by blending past, present, and future into a greater measure of reality. The 'present' is only an intersection in time of every event in the universe. It is like the single frame of a motion-picture film. When the single frame is seen, the motion stops. It is a function of the creative mind to overcome the inertia of the (now) perceived reality."

This function of the mind is activated through the process of creating images and attempting - through the photograph to overcome this inertia of perceived reality - an expression that communicates this fourth dimension.
A central credo of my work is simplicity. This approach serves me and my viewers best in defining a realistic document of the world through which expression can live.

Through recording my subjects accurately, the subject depicted will retain its inherent qualities. A viewer, then, can react based on the subject's own reality and not one superficially created by me through mechanically altering its true form. Simplicity in terms of precision is of supreme importance to a concept of 'seeing' that renders subjects in their most fundamental and meaningful way.

Through a simple approach an element emerges that seems to me like a living thing. The photographer brings this living quality to the making of an image. In a letter to a young artist, Frances Bauguier (1880-1945) discusses this 'living thing':
"What lives in pictures is very difficult to define...it finally becomes a thing beyond the thing portrayed...some sort of section of the soul of the artist that gets detached and comes out to one from the picture...I do think that the idea of 'that living thing' must be in the heart before it can be brought to life by an artist."  

The existence of this 'living thing' is expressed through the previously discussed 'fourth dimension'. Though seemingly abstract, its existence (influence) can be 'seen', in one way, through our emotions with which we react to imagery.

In the case of my work and those that have largely influenced my way of seeing and picturing (Ansel Adams, Carleton Watkins, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau, for example), the reaction is emotional to beauty that comes from an accurate representation of nature and spontaneity. I believe beauty creates a universal appeal and promotes something we draw a certain standard from by experiencing it through the still image.
In the case of traditional landscape photographers as Adams and Watkins, the influence has been to record with a conservative eye: representing landscapes to the degree that what is presented is that which we normally regard as 'beautiful'. Where Weston and Strand are concerned, however, the 'beautiful' can equally be extracted from the abstract. From Cartier-Bresson and Doisneau I have learned that the 'beautiful' can also be seen within the context of spontaneous movement and events, as well from subjects we might normally regard as ugly.

From her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes: "It is common for those who have glimpsed something beautiful to express regret at not having been able to photograph it. So successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard beautiful." 7
PERCEPTION

I have become increasingly aware of a risk that people may perceive my landscapes as just a symbol for something 'pretty' or 'beautiful' in a way that implies it being outside of man - in a way, monumental to man. This notion, I believe comes from nature of the way we look at things with a cursory browse. The difference between 'looking' and 'seeing' is the difference between defining an image as being outside of oneself and being a part of it.

Like and artifact our visual perception is the product of our own making. I have no control of how people perceive or symbolize my images. I can only help to guide them through words that express my intentions and beliefs:

Symbolism is merely an ornament to an existing concept of what something represents. If my landscapes are symbolic, they are intended to symbolize the very essence of which they are a part. This is the
same essence of which man is a part. To appreciate nature is to appreciate man. Both are a living and breathing thing and this equates an existence which both share.

My approach to photography is based on a belief in the fundamental qualities of nature and of man - in the aspects of beauty and in a simplicity of existence. My work is about the relationship of nature to man and man to nature. Through the accurate recording of this, my goal - to make images that increase our awareness of the essence of our existence - can be realized.

'I believe that we find a strength in the recognition of beauty and gain a confidence in affirming ourselves as a part of this grandeur. I believe that through photography one is able to express his belief in nature and in the significance of his own existence as something that exists in harmony with the natural world.
PROCESS

The internal process of making a photograph for me involves visualization - a concept that includes all steps from selecting the subject to making the final print. This practice involves observation of the world around me and encompasses an awareness of relationships in terms of shape and potential form, value interpretation, and emotional and human significances.

Visualization is an emotional as well as a mental process of creating a photograph. It includes an ability to anticipate a finished image even before making the exposure so that the procedures employed will achieve a desired result.

The process first involves identification of the subject matter to be used as material for expression. In deciding how best to render a personal (subjective) interpretation of that subject, composition, choice of camera, lens, exposure, and development all play an important, integrated part.
COMPOSITION

In composing an image, there are those elements within a composition one may choose to accentuate because of their significance to the overall composition. Various tools, such as focus, filters, angle of view, and camera format can help to achieve a desired result. Lenses, focus, and filters function to direct the eye to that which is in focus and of particular tonal value. Angle of view and camera format help to define the relationship of subjects to themselves.

Technique of composition in photography does not specifically relate to that of other media. "Photographic composition is the relation of subject-forms to surface-forms of the print. Composition is therefore effected chiefly by adjusting the linear extensions of the boundaries of the surface-forms as related sectors on the edges of the print." As it relates to more controlled media, like painting, for example, composition in photography is an approximation.
The photographer composes from the outside in - that is, from where the relationship between subject elements is defined by the format as a starting point - whereas the painter composes from the inside out, having more control of subject element relationships in a direct way so as to define the perimeters of the given format.

CHOICE OF CAMERA

Visualization, as it relates to a process from beginning to end is better applied to those of my images made with a view camera. Although there are qualities I see inherent in all of my work, the images I make with the smaller 35mm format are those that rely more on spontaneity. In this case, I need be less concerned with a slower calculation and more involved with a fluent and rapid assessment of the moving elements of a scene in order to integrate, compose, and communicate a meaningful and evocative moment.
The view camera, because it records on large sheet film (4X5 in my case) and has maximum adjustments for vertical and horizontal distortion corrections, affords flexibility in terms of angle of view, and at the same time, renders an image of very fine detail and clarity.

CHOICE OF LENS

My main lens apparatus on the view camera is 190mm. This length, in accordance with my camera, best replicates that angle of view seen by the human eye. I rarely use the 90mm wide-angle lens, but it does render an expansive angle of view which is useful when looking to achieve a panoramic view of a subject. Personally, I dislike a strong horizon line cutting the image in half. This tends to flatten the relationship between different elements in the picture plane. The 'normal' lens enables my composition to acquire certain repetitive patterns that become common tools in my work.
For example, my use of the receding diagonal (in the composition of an image) heightens the visual sense of depth, as if one were led from the foreground into the background of the image. This is especially useful with my landscapes.

Within the 35mm format, I use both the 'normal', length (50mm) for the obvious reasons, and the short telephoto (100mm) lens because I am able to get closer, while at the same time, maintaining some sense of intimacy. The nature of this lens forces me to compose more selectively and choose those elements that are most important to the image, feeling, and emotion I want to depict. In addition, this format lends itself to a recreational approach where aesthetic considerations do not play as large a role.

THE NEGATIVE

The Zone System, developed by Ansel Adams beginning in 1940, became a departing point for me and my studies in landscape
photography. This system of applied principles of sensitometry serves the photographer as a system for controlling and achieving the 'perfect' negative and, ultimately, the 'perfect' print. I have not, however, utilized this system to its fullest, but feel that its principles are important since they can be applied in different ways to achieve both an exceptional negative and print.

Very simply, the Zone System is that part of visualization that controls the final values in a negative by exposing for the shadows and developing for the highlights of an image. The more effective the photographer's judgement is in pre-visualizing a color subject in terms of how it relates to the monochrome tonal scale, the better the results.

THE PRINT

It is my aim to acquire the 'perfect negative', most appropriately for the landscapes I shoot. Although an ellusive ideal, an absolutely satisfactory print can come from this negative without dodging (shading
out by blocking light), burning (adding light selectively), or any other form of manipulation. If used as an integrated part of one's usual process, manipulation of the negative can defeat the intensity of the actual expression of the subject or scene depicted.

"Then the tones of the print are in perfect relationship, the detail of the lightest parts being in absolute balance with the detail of the deepest shadows, and the subordinate tones holding their relationship to the highest lights and deepest darks."9

I find the 'fine' print (or 'expressive print' as Adams likes to call it) with ease and great pleasure in extracting from a good, healthy negative. One can achieve a distinctive presence an image takes on by representing it through a print that has distinctive and crisp tonal values. With a clean range of tones (print values), good compositional structure, and a finely executed print, a dramatic image - one that evokes meaning - can be realized.
INTERPRETATION

For the most part, I believe we tend to regard a certain 'honesty' as a universal quality in photographic images, honesty in a way that has a relationship to natural forces. We define these natural forces by the familiar information within a photograph that we have seen and trust because we know it or something like it exists, whether it be of people, places, or things.

The concept of interacting with the landscape is an abstract one. My successful interaction, as photographer, transforms itself ultimately, through the ability of the photograph to communicate to the viewer an experience of the event. The successful print relies on subject matter, proficient use of available tools, and an adeptness of the photographer to respond to his surroundings. Ultimately, this brings to the viewer, if not the actual experience as seen and felt by the photographer, an experience that is meaningful.
The 'basic reality' of the subjects to which I point my camera is that which I attempt to extract in order to make an image that objectifies beauty and the very essence of which things are made. In 1939, Edward Weston wrote:

"The photographer's power lies in his ability to recreate his subject in terms of its basic reality, and present this recreating in such a form that the spectator feels that he is seeing not just a symbol for the object, but the thing itself revealed for the first time. Guided by the photographer's selective understanding, the penetrating power of the camera-eye can be used to produce a heightened sense of reality - a kind of super realism that reveals the vital essences of things.\(^\text{10}\)

Weston's thesis - that the power of photography to represent things so realistically reveals the very nature of what things are made of, a deeper kind of reality - applies not only to his expressive studies of vegetables (as is clearly illustrated with his pepper series), but also
to 'abstract' landscape studies as is seen in much of Aaron Siskind's work. These kind of photographs are just a smaller part of the larger image of nature we are familiar with. Instead of photographing the more familiar, expansive scene, the lens can be brought in closer to the small world of things that can equally serve to evoke expression.

**ABSTRACTION**

Through photography we are able to communicate and express - extend our sense of sight and record and hold meaning through visual sensibility. In discussing photography, Richard Leacock says: "Photographs are about emotion. A successful picture is one that evokes meaning."\(^1\)

Abstract images offer the viewer an opportunity to personalize meaning. "As the language or vocabulary of photography has been extended, the emphasis of meaning has shifted - shifted from what the world looks like to what we feel about the world and what we want the world to mean."\(^2\)
Those images I term as 'abstractions' are not intended as a compromise with reality. Rather, it is the intention of their meaning that seems to be of the abstract - no particular intention at all. These images rendered sharp, fully textured, and undistorted are still an objective document. But, because they lack relationship with familiar objects, they become vulnerable to a viewer's interpretation. This is precisely my intention.

Here, a viewer can bring to an image memory and previous experience to respond in a way that personalizes meaning. For each viewer there is a different meaning. This is the power of abstraction as it relates to the viewer.

As a personal credo, the abstractions I create are a departure from a known reality into a self contained reality. At the same time, while photographed directly, it is often unrecognizable. It has been removed from its usual context and disassociated from its customary neighbors and forced into new relationships. These relationships provoke thought and contemplation, ultimately evoking meaning.
SPONTANEITY

When talking about spontaneity in a photograph, Henri Cartier-Bresson first comes to mind. His sensitivity to life and remarkable ability to capture what he terms as the 'decisive moment' is a standard term the photographic world has adopted. To capture and represent the spontaneous element is one of the most difficult things to do. The advent of the small camera enabled photographic practitioners to realize, photographically, spontaneous revelation. Bresson writes (1952) about his discovery after arriving in Marseille in 1931:

"I had just discovered the Leica. It became the extension of my eye, and I have never been separated from it since I found it. I pounded the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, determined to 'trap' life - to preserve life in the act of living. Above all, I craved to serve the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eye."
The ability of photography to fix forever the precise and transitory instant is unique to only this of all the means of expression. Unlike the writer who has time to reflect, to accept or reject, accept again the elements that make his story, photographers deal without this luxury. They work in and as a part of a world whose elements continually vanish and never return.

The intensity with which scenaories strike photographers and our instantaneous response is what makes a difference. "Our task is to perceive reality, almost simultaneously recording it in the sketchbook which is our camera. We must neither try to manipulate reality which we are shooting, nor must we manipulate the results in a darkroom. These tricks are patently discernible to those who have eyes."14

Within the scenes depicted where movement is an integrated part, there is one moment when the elements in motion are at equilibrium with one another. The rate of speed with which one points the camera and composes this moment is very nearly the same time it takes to click the shutter. It is the speed of a reflex
action. So here, technique in terms of visualization plays a lesser role. What is important is to capture the interaction of all the subjects and their balance to one another, and not so much predetermined choices that serve to create emotional expression, as with landscapes.
SUMMARY

We are a society that gains most of its information through photographic representation. We see, for the most part, by way of our picturing. The photographic 'experience', as well as recreating an event or encounter, or acting as a personal record, offers the viewer an opportunity to participate on another level - the fourth dimension.

We continue to rely more and more on the picture, not only for expression, but for experience as well. Through simplicity and unaltered photographic representation, the power of photography to render a 'basic reality' and communicate an experience can be seen. Photographic representation, then, serves as an instrument by which our ways of visual perception can transform themselves into coherent interpretations of what we see, encounter, and experience. By capturing a fleeting moment, the still image serves to isolate experience and functions as a pivot point for viewers to realize their own mortality.
As humans, we have the ability to file and retain information and images. An image 'seen' or 'pictured' at a particular moment may not, in fact, serve to extend or objectify meaning at the moment we encounter the image. However, there are those images that subsist in our mind until some actual incident, which we witness or live, refers to the image once seen, resulting in a reality further solidified. This quality of the mind acts as if it were a data-base, supplying us information and reinforcing the existence and meaningfulness of events and experience.

Because we are inundated with images every day of our lives, and because we tend to rely on them, the role of photography changes; in so doing, photography also changes our sense of reality. Photographs, instead of just recording reality, have become our connection with it and the substance from which it is made.
FOOTNOTES


2 Coleman, A.D., Ibid.

3 Coleman, A.D., Ibid

4 Coleman, A.D., Ibid


11 Leacock, Richard. (From a personal discussion with him, July, 1986)

12 Callahan, Harry. (From an unpublished lecture delivered at The Art Institute of Chicago, Nov. 7, 1958.)
Footnotes, contd.


14 Cartier-Bresson, Henri, Ibid.