The Difference Between Art and Fact

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Formalism teaches us to consider every visible aspect of art as significant. Social history teaches us that a consideration into context and an analysis of the historical environment of a work of art can provide insights into the underlying factors contributing to meaning. We have all become as capable as fine surgeons in terms of our ability to diagnose art from inside and out. And like the fine surgeon, all that we see and think becomes readily available data filed in some conceptually limitless file cabinet.

Even those moments in the artistic process that seem so highly personal can often be a formulation mediated by market constructions of artistic genius. This is often what is meant by the “decisive moment” of photography. It is defined and categorized as a moment of intense critical cognition so crucial to the artistic defence of photographic practice. Such moments, seemingly so filled with the artist’s subjectivity, his exercise and creativity are often calculated and highly mediated moments. They are mediated by language and the familiar examples of the “great” decisive moments of the great photographers. The decisive moment of Garry Winogrand can be seen to be of a different order from the decisive moment of, say, Dorothea Lange or Elliott Erwitt. This difference is discernible and measurable. We can speak of different kinds of “decisive moments.” They can be isolated and compared, from one type to another. Despite the decisiveness of such creative moments, much of this has become familiar language and can be stored and retrieved according to the order of archival knowledge.

By this I mean that the way in which a society is configured, through its institutions, ideals, and laws, is paralleled in the way its own archives are structured. The camera’s importance is in providing the technical means for a society to image itself according to how it sees itself. Deriving from the Platonic tradition, an archive imparts a sense of impartiality and objectivity. Archival photographs persuade us of their “truthfulness” and, more important, their completeness in representing the truth. Material really is seen as measurable, definable, and operating within rules, some which may not have even been yet discovered. The photographic document functions to affirm human experiences as just so many elements in a grand universal machine. Even given these considerations, the more important concern for me is not whether one sees the rational ordering structure of the archive as a problem but whether or not one can position one’s work so that it accesses into the viewer’s own feelings and opinions, providing the viewer with his or her own opportunities to respond. Knowing facts is one thing but to feel and to think seriously is another. A work that moves or stirs contains a content that cannot be archived into some category.
This function of photography, as purveyor of truth, continues to this day, most dramatically, in my view, in the form of tabloid television which has converted real experiences into a kind of television version of cinéma vérité. Photographic representation has, as Louis Marin put it, appropriated “the space of the real according to the order of knowledge.” Photography continues to play a central role in embodying the laws and ideals of the modern state. It continues to define through imagery the spatial and psychological limits of the public sphere.

I use photography in my work but I want to do so with a reverse purpose from what I have outlined. I recognize photography’s agency in revealing so-called facts about the world but I also believe that it is almost impossible to think about any real fact about the world that is true. I take the view that not everything can be analyzed using facts and rules. Human actions can never be fully modelled on any theory, such as a theory of social behaviour or what have you. They can never be completely modelled on any “strategies,” on what Michel de Certeau calls “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an environment” and upon which “political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed.” We can systematically study people and their environments but it is an illusion to think in terms of theories and laws.

To this end, my photographs are complemented by text because all the facts about the world contain words. Facts cannot exist without words. But words can often belie facts in that they can have different meanings and interpretations. Words are also used in my work to augment the experience of the photographs. In doing so, the text, which can take the form of both monologue and dialogue, underlines the insufficiency of the photograph to capture real experience. I also hope that the text creates a picture of its own, related to but distinctly different from the given picture. Conversely, I want the picture to generate a text related to but distinctly different from the given text. In this sense, each work represents a kind of double image, one generated by photography and the other by text.

What I am trying to do with my work is to express moments in everyday life that break the continuity of ritualized life and the conversion of experience into fact. I want to depict those moments in life when feelings cannot be isomorphically expressed in clear-sounding language. Such moments are often fleeting, and we more often than not pay them no mind, but they can be intensely emotional and provide for feelings of autonomy from circumstances.
Moreover, the natural world is capricious and we are frequently the victims of its whims. Even so, I believe there exists free will even in the most oppressive conditions, even if it is merely to think about alternative conditions or a way to turn a disadvantage into an advantage, however temporary. I believe humans have capacities and abilities that in themselves can never be based on theory, can never be turned into rules or converted into facts. For example, what is the theory of a weary body? What is the theory of a person who sheds tears when in anger? What is the theory of consolation or regret? What is the theory of a human face?

My pictures are modern pictures in that they depict persons who are inheritors of the contradictory and too often pernicious effects of modernity. The contemporaneity they find themselves in is often oppressive and the characters have to struggle against it, often feebly. The incertitude of modern life penetrates through to the deepest recesses of the individual, challenging historical and cultural typologies that shape identity and the relationship between identities.

In Don’t Be Silly, You’re Not Ugly, a work from 1993, two women are engaged in the everyday practice of conversation. A Caucasian woman tries to assure her Asian friend that she is not unattractive. Her assurances are as much for her own self-assurance as they are for her insecure friend. She knows that her assurance must endure the opposition of societal definitions and valuations. For example, there is a hierarchy of feminine beauty types with white beauty at the top. She senses an upsurging of the underlying order of the world. She senses even the essential forms of decorum and social behaviour which wills her to remain calm, logical, and patient. At the same time, she is exasperated and knows not what to say. She is at a loss for words, so she begins to repeat herself and her speech turns into a kind of mantra that becomes increasingly disentangled from the laws of language. The Asian woman looks downcast and frozen, her entire body leaning hard against the fencing.

The camera documents this moment of profound incertitude but cannot reveal its rules and facts. Both the women occupy a radically indeterminate moment and place. In a sense, they become so absorbed into this moment that they become temporarily exiled from the world. All accepted notions of the world are temporarily thrown into disorder and they have become persons without fixed identity, free even from representation. In this regard, as a possible scenario in the world, they escape even my own attempts to depict such a scenario.

The words her friend conveys to her pass through her like a Gregorian chant. She exists in an indeterminate moment, paradoxically full of feelings but bereft of things to say. The dialogue aspects of the
text draw the viewer into a structure of unfixed visual connotations, sharing in the profound complexity of human emotions, thoughts, actions, and gestures. The lines in the text of this picture repeat to the point of losing their intended meaning. They become so many sounds and in their inadequacy to represent the fullness of the experiences they are meant to signify, they leave many gaps, which the viewer’s own experiences can fill in for or simply share. It is here that the viewer’s free will can enter into the work. As opposed to the decisive moment of street photographers, my work attempts to construct the idea of a decisive moment. My pictures acknowledge their own insufficiency in that they cannot fully represent the feelings of the depicted characters.

The idea for these pictures crystallized for me one evening in a hotel room in Cologne, Germany. I was watching a German version of a well-known American tabloid television show. I saw an image of a murder scene which was followed by an interview with an excited young boy holding his bicycle. The boy was American and his voice was badly dubbed into German. He kept one arm pointed in the direction of the murder scene, which he obviously was a witness to. I don’t know how to speak German but he kept saying the same thing over and over again. The dubbed German words kept repeating but not always exactly
the same. Some time later, I realized that the boy barely moved except for the same motioning of his head and hand. It was as though I was looking at a still image, a photograph. The repeating sounds put me into a kind of temporary trance as I fixed my eyes on the image of the boy. Momentarily I lost my sense of where I was, replaced by a strange experience of duration. I am trying to reproduce this quality in my own pictures, give them a sense of hold that causes the viewer to experience my works durationally.

The “archival” canon insists on configuring the world according to coherent classifications, defining historical unfolding as prose and parable rather than by epiphany and instability. What I am trying to do is to create something the opposite, to express through practice something inexpressible in theory and to say something about the difference between art and fact.