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Research Analysis

Photography and the Psyche

Paper 2

...art critic Pranab Ranjan Roy reminded young practitioners of art of their duty to themselves and society. When there is chaos besieging us in the real world, the artist should try to tease out meaning from it even as he attempts to represent the collapse of meanings. It is the artist's responsibility to compose his work in such a way that its individual components come together to speak in a coherent language, which will bestow significance on the mess of actual life. (Mukherjee)

I particularly believe that it is neither the artist's full responsibility to bestow meaning in her or his artwork, nor is it possible. Art can wear many masks, serve many functions or purposes, and ideas can be presented in many variable forms. Art is a very complex animal and it takes more than the artist to become realized; it's a shared responsibility! Perspectives, interpretations, projections, transference, suggestions, psyche, subjectivity, and misreadings are all components in the psychological formula of photographic art.

Psychology can enter artwork on many levels. One is documenting subjectively: "The photographer, however, succeeds in pointing to the probability that psychic psychology will persist as long as people feel the need to reject the materialistic banality of naïve realism in favor of more wafty ideals enshrouding ESP" (Greenstein 47). Another is as informed research: "McCandless utilizes formal analysis, tools from both art history and psychology, to endow Trlica's work with more artistic knowledge and power than may be warranted, while Snyder and

Moore's approach owes much to the theory and practice of popular culture" (Wajda abstract). Also, it is partially credited for the popularization of photography: "I also want to follow up on Andrea Henderson's insight that depth psychology is only one of romanticism's versions of subjectivity, its dominance due to Victorian developments, including not only the sage writing of authors like Arnold and Mill but also the development and popularization of photography" (Mandell 221).

Photography is perhaps the number one usual suspect for being the victim of artists criticized for the images portrayed in their work. Photography has a reputation by some to be a medium that employs faithful representation of physical reality. This is not always the case. "Yes, photography tells a merciless fib in his gorgeously manipulated plays of moody light, and we are the ones implicated in forming perceptions of the unknown" (Greenstein 47). This perception of the unknown is part of the psychological phenomenology of photography that needs to be understood. Between the artist, hers or his creation, and the spectator, communication mutates and is reinvented. Here enters subjectivity.

Meaning is not intrinsic. Meaning is established through a fluid cogitative and emotional relationship among the maker, the photograph, and the viewer.

Meaning is not always found in things, but sometimes between them. As one meditates on what is possible, multiples meanings may begin to present themselves. (Hirsch 13)

Artist's are not completely responsible for what the spectator reads in their work. The artist's psyche may play a part of what goes into the content, but the spectator plays a part what their psyche takes out of the content. Spectators always bring a certain psychological amount of projection and transference to the table when meditating upon, reading, or viewing an artwork. Obviously, I disagree with Baudrillard's late stance on projection: "If one thinks about it, people no longer project themselves into their objects, with their affects and their representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy: the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished, and even if it can always be marked out in detail, one feels that it is not really there that things are being played out" (Foster 146). It is very difficult to have completely neutral artwork. On the other hand, it is also difficult to

have artwork with a universal absolute. “They offer us the possibility to objectify and see a separate part of oneself which can then be integrated back into the overall subjectivity, or core self, as and when we are ready for it, as in psychosynthesis” (Wells 408).

Through everyday experiences, a person acquires a certain set of beliefs and attitudes about other people, places, objects, and issues. A belief is the information that people have about another person or a place, object, or issues that forms or changes their attitudes. Attitudes are general and long-lasting positive or negative feelings about people, places, objects, or issues. If information is limited or its source isn’t trusted, a belief can become an enduring attitude that can lead to stereotypical generalizations. (Lester 63)

No matter what the media maybe: a photograph, a painting, a sculpture, an installation, a movie, or television, people always bring their personal baggage with them, including their own biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and preferences to formulate their own interpretations of situations and visual stimuli being received. “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger 8).

We could look at an image, photography per say, under a lens of semiotics and assume that all humans’ understandings are based on signs, symbols, the referent, the signifier, and the signified. We could also take an anti-pop approach and make the signs and symbols more ambiguous leaving the experience and interpretation more weighed towards the spectator and less on the object or creator. By doing so, the weight of responsibility may actually shift. “We have here a loss of the equivalence characteristic of true sign systems and a statement of quasi-identity. In other words, the sign of this message is not drawn from an institutional stock, is not coded, and we are brought up against the paradox of a *message without a code*. This peculiarity can be seen again at the level of the knowledge bound up with our perception – Roland Barthes” (Trachtenberg 269).

Yes, the artist can manipulate the content to make it more or less suggestive, but overall the spectator must enter and do hers or his half of the communicative process. “Photographs in their ambiguity can provoke, motivating the reader to interrogate their meanings. The photograph may create enough confusion and

curiosity to stimulate the reader to solicit alternate voices” (Ritchin 97). In a recent art movement known as relational art or relational aesthetics, as attributed by Nicolas Bourriaud, who described it as “...a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Perreault). If we follow this approach or theory, then art is neither the artist nor the audience, but instead the product of both.

Psychology can become a major aspect of any artistic process, from the idea or concept, to the creation, to the environment it’s produced in and received in, to the thought that goes into the intentions and the thoughts perceived by the audience, and all of the psychological phenomenology between. “Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (Berger 10). We all see differently. We all have different educations, experiences, thoughts, likes & dislikes, IQs, and a variety of information to bring to the table of humanity to develop an eclectic existence. The various psychological interpretations of art by each individual person is neither particularly right or wrong, just different and very interesting.

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Further Notes

"The gap between what they fail to know now, but will know, opens up pain, sorrow, change – and therefor interior space or 'depth.' Those we view are unconscious, but we are hyperconscious, masterful, since we have the knowledge that they lack and so know of their lack. Thus the photograph shows us the flaw in their consciousness – their future loss and absence, their death, which they don't know – and this flaw simultaneously constitutes for us their psychological depth and our superiority" (Mandell 224).

"In this critique two principal logics interfered with each other: a phantasmatic logic that referred principally to psychoanalysis – its identifications, projections, and the entire imaginary realm of transcendence, power and sexuality operating at the level of objects and the environment, with a privilege accorded to the house/automobile axis (immanence/transcendence); and a differential social logic that made distinctions by referring to a sociology, itself derived from anthropology – Jean Baudrillard" (Foster 145).

"The more you know, the more you sense. The more you sense, the more you select. The more you select, the more you perceive. The more you perceive, the more you remember. The more you remember, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you know. The process of sensing, selecting, and perceiving takes a curious, questioning, and knowledgeable mind. The goal of a visual communicator is to produce powerful pictures so that the viewer will remember their content. Analyzing an image makes you take a long, careful look at the pictures you see – a highly satisfying intellectual act. Those images become a part of your general knowledge of the world. You discover how images are linked in ways that you never thought of before" (Lester 5).