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On the Affectivity of Globalization and Contemporary Photography

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On the affectivity of Globalization and Contemporary Photography

My paper is a contribution to a beginning tendency within photography theory within the wider field of visual culture to move beyond a focus on photographs as participating in the discursive construction or deconstruction of meaning towards a perspective which takes into account the emotive, affective, carnal, situated and embodied aspects of taking and perceiving photographs. I will argue that within the field of contemporary photography practices there has been an on-going trend in the last years, which shares a similar interest in the affective and situated, and which is less interested in the discursive question of whether or not the photograph is able to represent a particular situation or event, but in relation to which the theoretical tools with which to take into account the varieties of ways in which these works function is still limited. I will place this argument within the slightly narrower field of contemporary photographers working with issues of the movements, interactions and conflicts of globalized space, arguing that what much contemporary photography brings out in relation to these spaces is not the wider patterns of globalized movements and homogenized spaces, which are so often the focus in discussions on globalization, but the situated, incarnated and affectively charged differences of globalized spaces.

Just to make clear, neither globalization nor the ways that photographic practices and theory change perceptions are new phenomena. Discussions around how the camera changes perceptions have been connected to uses of the Camera Obscura in 5th C bc China, and others have used the term globalization to talk about the cultural relation, travel and exchange between the Sumer and the Indus Valley Civilization in the 3rd millenium b.c. But in both cases, the recent changes in photographic practices and the on-going transformations of globalization, these can be seen to have taken not just a quantitative but perhaps qualitative leap in the last 10-15 years, and in both cases one of the main factors underpinning this change is new advances in technology, which have allowed people to take, share and perceive images as well as travel, exchange information and communicate in previously unforeseen ways. But another thing that globalization and photography have in common is that they tend to be theorized through a discursive perspective that borrows most of its theory from post-structuralist thinking. In the case of globalization there is a tendency to try to find different wider patterns of political relations, travel and information exchange and how identity constructions are broken down and re-constructed in these processes and for photography it tends to be theorized in terms of representations and the construction or deconstruction of

different kinds of representation. So when it comes to theorising both the changes of globalization and photographic practices, I argue that there is a gap in the theoretical tools available, and that a lot of what's missing is precisely that which a lot of what contemporary photography helps to bring forth, namely the extent to which these changes don't exist in an abstract discursive realm of signs and patterns but in an embodied, incarnated realm of situated space.

In her book *The Cruel Radiance*, Susie Linfield talks about a common pattern within photography criticism to take on a tone of suspicion towards photographs and their ability to tell the 'truth', or indeed anything useful at all. Unlike critics of other cultural expressions, like the written word in its various forms, movies, paintings, dance, music, etc., who more often embrace their emotional responses and bring these into their critical reflections, Linfield describes critics of photography as regarding emotional responses as something to cautiously guard oneself against. Linfield brings up the enormous influence of Weimar-era writers such as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Bertolt Brecht on the photography criticism and theory developed since their time, and how these theorists maintained the importance of not letting oneself be carried away by one's emotional responses but to distance oneself and maintain a critical stance vis-à-vis the image. Even more influential was perhaps Susan Sontag's lesson few decades later that "one never understands anything from a photograph" as well as how "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses". Sontag's writing set a tone for photography criticism that cannot be overstated in terms of its influence on the theory to come, and repeatedly used metaphors of photography as "treacherous", "reductive" "predatory," or "a sublimated murder – a soft murder." The influential writings of John Berger and Allan Sekula also criticised the medium in similar, if not harsher tones, and continued to lead the way to a postmodern perspective which was vehemently opposed to photography's ability to do anything else than, potentially, in the best of cases, undermine modernism's myth of originality and 'truth'.

Now I would argue that in today's media savvy societies, the awareness of photography's limitations is no longer the exclusive domain of a few particularly perceptive critics. On the contrary, today theorists, critics, practitioners as well as many publics are experts at distancing themselves from photographs as well as deconstructing their truth value. Although photography can still be used as a powerful tool to convince and manipulate, lessons to spread the awareness of how photographs 'lie' today often end up preaching to the choir. Laura

Marks makes a comparison between the aniconic suspicion of images in certain religious trains of thought and the way in which, in the contemporary situation, “images, though ubiquitous, are increasingly viewed askance”, and as Linfield goes on to describe, today, averting one’s eyes from images is considered a virtue.

Now, photographs don’t offer explanations of the underlying complexities of a situation, or what the solution to a particular problem might be. They do, however, have the potential to offer an emotional and visceral connection to a particular place or event. And for a select few contemporary theorists, this ability of photography to conjure deep emotions is not something to be shunned, but is indeed one of its great strengths. For Linfield, this is valid not only for art photographs but for all kinds of photographs found in the media, photojournalistic, documentary photographs and her argument is perhaps at its strongest when it comes to images of violence, once that mainstream photographic theory would reject as voyeuristic. Rather than criticising away the emotive experience of such images because its too seductive and blinds us to the manipulative powers of photography, the emotive and the affective can be seen as a way in to a critical reflection of a particular situation, without which some of the things that might be opened up by this approach would become invisible by using a purely representative terminology. By conjuring sometimes unexpected emotions and sensations, photographs have the ability to carry our thoughts one step further than would the simple illustration of a fact. In this sense, the vagueness of the photograph as well as its ability to make the perceiver sense and feel, those qualities which have been most harshly attacked by critics, can also be seen as photography’s most important qualities

As mentioned, a result of the changes in photographic practices in the last 10-15 years, many photographers and artists working with photography can be seen been moving away from a criticism of image making, which tends to render the works socially and politically irrelevant, and can instead be found searching for and developing new strategies to maintain and expand possibilities of their work. Nathalie Herschdorfer explains how today many “photographers are looking for a new form of engagement, knowing that it is often impossible to document what is happening”. Leaving behind both the intention of representing events or situations or revealing the impossibility of so doing, artists and photographers are often found engaging themselves photographically in different ways in the spaces where conflicts, interactions and differences are played out, thereby maintaining the social and political and interpersonal relevance of their work. Such an engagement is as much as a sensory encounter as a

cognitive, and in relation to these works, I would argue that the gap in the theory of photography is more apparent than ever.

At the same time as many photographers are today are searching for new ways of engaging photographically in situations where globalized interactions and conflicts are played out, there is an unwillingness amongst many photographers to participate in the media spectacle within which many photographs are still produced and experienced today. The result is a trend within contemporary photography which readily takes on current and politically charged events, but which do so through a more observant and cautious perspective. For example, many photographers direct the camera towards a particular place once the event is over, when people have left the scene, such as in Frank Schweres' (b.1966) images of ash-covered buildings and objects in southern Manhattan in mid-September 2001, or in Pieter Hugo's' (b. 1976) series from 2004 which includes images of objects left behind ten years after the genocide in Rwanda. Other photographers direct their camera towards afflicted individuals years or even decades after a certain traumatic event took place. Steven Laxton (b.1977) and Guillaume Herbaut (b.1970), for example, document individuals and objects sixty years after the atrocities of the second world war. In relation to the financial situation of recent years, Chad Gerthss (b. 1975) series *Empty Lots* (2008) records empty lots left behind in the post-industrial society. In all of these works, the camera records individuals and objects affected by transformations and conflicts through a contemplative and concentrated gaze; the objects are depicted from a straightforward perspective and the people look straight into the camera. When individuals are depicted, the photographers as well as the subjects themselves, and eventually also the perceiver of the photograph are all well aware that this is a constructed image. There is no illusion of the image capturing a moment in time which would have passed by unseen had the photographer not been there to capture it. The expectation seems rather that the affective resonances of the physical places, the abandoned buildings, the left behind objects or the silent bodies will in themselves open up understandings of events, processes and phenomena in the world. Zarina Bhimji's (b. 1963) *Love series* from 1998-2006 presents abandoned spaces as well as run down buildings and left behind objects in the part of Uganda from which she and her family, together with thousands of others, were driven out during the rule of Idi Amin in 1972. Bhimji's series is not a representation of this past event but should rather be understood as the artist's own sensuous and emotional engagements with these places and objects as they appear to her today, an engagement which at the same time

resounds in affects and perceptions beyond her personal story and experience. Mitra Tabrizian, furthermore,

Like Linfield, Ariella Azoulay takes seriously the ethic of seeing. As Azoulay puts it “(it) is our historic responsibility, not only to produce photos, but to make them speak.”¹ For Azoulay as for Linfield, this involves not iconoclastically eschewing photographs but creatively, collaboratively and critically engaging with them and the differing ways in which they affect the perceiver. By conjuring sometimes unexpected emotions and sensations, they have the ability to carry our thoughts one step further than would the simple illustration of a fact. In this sense, the vagueness of the photograph as well as its ability to make the perceiver sense and feel, those qualities which have been most harshly attacked by critics, can also be seen as photography’s most important qualities.

¹ Azoulay, quoted by Linfield p.60