

Surfing an Archive : post-photography and posts

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Translated from French by Douglas Parsons

There never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident. Instead there are more or less powerful arrangements of forces out of which the capacities of an observer are possible.

– Jonathan Crary, *L'art de l'observateur : vision et modernité au XIXe siècle (Techniques of the Observer)*, 1990

Our tools have become a significant part of the process as we are able to see further, dig deeper, collect faster and see exponentially more.

– Thomas Eberwein & Marc Kremers, *as-found.net*, 2006

For almost twenty years now, we have had the tools necessary to fabricate digital images that have the appearance of traditional silver-based prints. Moreover, the concerted development of various technologies has allowed for other equally decisive transformations with regard to photographic practice, and to the generic schemes of the contemporary scopic regimen. Re-written by algorithmic sequences, the indexed trace ostensibly lost its purely designative status. In breaking through the mechanical objectivity of this “analogue perfection”, the digitized image is now openly reevaluated according to the vagaries of the arbitrary and the contingent. This shift, sometimes qualified as “post-photographic” (William J. Mitchell), has provoked the emergence of a number of debates regarding the nature of photographic realism.

This very text is a contribution to the perpetuating of such problematics, all the while insisting on the contemporaneity of the logic of the exchanges and the exhibitions resulting from this generalized sampling. What are the relays across which digital images travel ? Where are they kept ? How are they negotiated between users, and through which cultural or aesthetic codes ? These are questions that set the stage for a reflection on the characteristics of photographs, which are broadcast more and more often via web “posts”.

A floating constellation

The widespread use of sampling has resulted in benefits that largely surpass the nature and qualities of most artistic productions with regard to photography. Web pages are now substitute galleries, and have profoundly modified the aesthetic experience of photography. They function as waypoints for the discovery or receiving of work, and allow each user to deepen his or her knowledge about a certain artist, make contact with others, or exchange documents. These operations, facilitated by growing transfer speeds, have allowed for a unique sophistication of research and critiques in photography, while offering photographers new tools to manage their careers.

And yet these mediations have had a negligible influence on the criteria that define photography as an artistic discipline. From the forming of an idea to its realization and presentation in a physical space, the steps involved in creation and the processes of legitimization have remained fundamentally the same. This persistence can also be observed in the work exhibited by photographers on web pages. The pages are generally accompanied by such information as the name and web site of the artist, the title of the work or series, the year of production, the gallery name, etc. Such information explicitly communicates the attributes of the original. In the context of traditional artistic exchanges, the diverse functions offered by the internet consequently fill a purely mediating role, and it is still rare to find a project conceived specifically as a function of the medium itself.

Yet there exist a dizzying array of photographs that are not bound by such traditions. Reduced to acronyms, and signified with generic numbering systems, the photographs distributed by internet seem to have lost all specificity. They are remarkable notably by their semantic vacancy. These dematerialized images have become lighter and lighter, and have shed all constraints of copyright or stylistic imperatives ; they form a floating constellation whose nature is difficult to define. This tendency has accelerated with the rapid evolution of photo-sharing web sites. Google Images, Flickr, Picasa, MySpace and Facebook are accessible by anyone at anytime, and have profoundly modified the manipulations, and the exchange-value, of photographic works.

Archiving and semantic availability

We need to understand how photography works within everyday life in advanced industrial societies : the problem is one of materialist cultural history rather than art history.

– Allan Sekula, *Reading an Archive : Photography between labour and capital*, 2003

Allan Sekula's analysis on the subject of archives enables us to put into perspective a number of the procedures guiding the distribution and consumption of photographs on the internet. In his essay *Reading an Archive : Photography between labour and capital*, he notably points out the paradoxical role that archiving systems play in socio-cognitive processes. The various schemes put into place since the 19th century have exercised a major influence, both on methods of scientific demonstration, and on the establishment of common practices in the reading and understanding of photographs. According to Sekula, books and exhibitions are still indentured to methods that follow directly from taxonomic inventory and original categorical structures. It is in that spirit that archives have largely contributed to sustaining the conviction that there is a "photographic truth", all the while allowing for the consolidation of the power structures already in place.

However, archiving systems also reflect the fundamentally contradictory nature of photographs. In effect, as soon as they are inserted into the rigid structures of archiving, photographs lose their primary determinations, and become available to all kinds of uses. The photographic archive acts in this way as a kind of cleaning agent, that can erase, and at times annul, all original significance. This system of value exchange establishes a visual equivalence among photographs which, paradoxically, after having been catalogued, acquire a semantic availability. When one of them has been extracted in order to be considered in isolation, it can then be redefined according to totally arbitrary uses and ends.

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This dual – or even schizophrenic – character of photography took on a particular dimension with the rapid development of image banks accessible via the internet. Effectively, the

automatization of archiving procedures generalizes and accentuates the making of semantically available images. The conditions that work to codify an image at the moment of its production, as well as various initial uses, coexist with an infinity of potential meanings. Freed from their original moorings, and “decontextualized” with regard to concrete situations, the indexed digital documents in these image banks are understood as abstractions. This indetermination has already inspired a number of artistic practices, sometimes grouped under the banner of database aesthetics. In information technology, a database is defined as an accumulation of structured information. In digital art, the notion designates practices that apply the systematic organizational logic of databases to all operations of the collection, filtering, and visualization of information. This approach allows for the establishment of aesthetic and conceptual codes that could potentially reveal how processing systems contribute to organizing our knowledge and beliefs (Christine Paul, 2007).

On that note, the inter-subjective exchanges integrated into web surfing clubs form an interesting approach : a semantic construction. Benefiting from the potential offered by Web 2.0, informal collectives have progressively formed, with the express goal of investigating the discreet visual territories contained within the different archiving systems on the web. Nasty Nets, As-found, and Spirit Surfers are some examples. The function of these blogs are all quite similar : a group of web surfers, sharing a common interest for net-art, sets up a community blog with the goal of finding visual productions that respond to certain implicit aesthetic criteria. Although some images are re-touched, the gleaned material is generally submitted as-is, so as to preserve its vernacular quality as much as possible. These sites offer the dynamics of a quite original exchange : to detect and re-group some of the useless photographs that haunt cyberspace.

While there subsists a good deal of serendipity, these heuristic games are often the response to precise predefined ends. The formulating of a concept, the specifying of key-words and tags, and the defining of more targeted criteria with regard to place, persons, or style involved, marks the indetermination of this ensemble of “norms”, transforming excesses into artistic performances in and of themselves (Marisa Olson, 2008). The

selection criteria vary to a great degree from one blog or user to another, but the choices are generally centered around images presenting attributes or narrations that deviate from the dominant photographic norm. The initiators of the As-found project are concerned with presenting images that contain a “hidden perfection” that they wish to highlight through the use of this new exhibition space, regardless of who created the work. The images are always chosen with respect to criteria other than those prevailing at the time of their creation (Marc Kremers and Thomas Eberwein, 2006). Often the images are awkward graphic compositions or, in a number of cases, banal amateur images. The point seems to be to diverge from the standard clichés by submitting images liable to pique the curiosity of the group. Once posted, the images are then commented, and sometimes annotated, by the other members of the club. The dynamic of the blog is thus stimulated by a succession of visual proposals and responses, which act as challenges to be undertaken. By validating “imperfections” and patent signs of “bad taste”, web surfing clubs enact a subversive twist upon the aesthetic canons that govern our visual regimen.

A second glance at the vernacular

What we photograph today can have continued meaning in a time and place somewhere else, to someone else. What we then find is that we are all involved in every moment. We are all somehow included in what happens to all of us. We are collectively having lives, memories and futures. And we, in one way or another, are in almost every picture.

– Erik Kessels, *In Almost Every Picture*, 2001

Interest in the vernacular is in no way exclusive to the web ; numerous projects have favored an interpretation that perhaps only an enlightened observer could attribute to images that, at first glance, are not especially interesting. Some examples of works that have contributed to legitimizing the use of vernacular photographs are : the thesis work of Christian Boltanski, the historic recollections by Susan Meiselas, the typological publications by Hans-Peter Feldmann, the collecting of found images by Joachim Schmid, and editorial projects such as *Found Magazine*, *In Almost Every Picture*, *Anonymous*, and *Photos Trouvées*. These projects explore, in more or less

critical ways, the semantic malleability of heterogeneous photographic productions. These often banal images, recontextualized in the circles of contemporary art by an artist or editor, thus lose their primary signification in order to fit curatorial decisions. This second glance has already been thoroughly applied to a whole range of photographs.

The recycling of vernacular follows a different logic when it is applied to photographic documents shown on the pages of web surfing clubs. The evaluation criteria – unity, rarity, propriety, intentionality, collection, etc. – no longer apply with the same relevance. First off, since the search operations are not dependent on the same spatial-temporal constraints, it is possible at any given moment to access a potentially limitless range of photographs. In addition, the found images no longer necessarily possess physical equivalents, and so, by default, the posting itself stands in for the original. Moreover, the images are continually subject to very reactive viewing exchanges, from which a photograph acquires (or doesn't acquire) a certain added value.

Aesthetic negotiations

In a web surfing club, a particularly relevant post can have the effect of a chain-reaction. From a simple exclamation to a profound critique, the curious image is carefully dissected and picked-over. Consequently, as Marcin Ramocki points out, a post always implies a form of semiotic challenge. Integrated into such a dynamic system, photographs become concepts (Marcin Ramocki, 2008), that, once reduced to their constitutive elements, allow for the continual application of new syntagmatic structures. According to Marisa Olson, photographs used in this way follow a logic that differs considerably from the models of appropriation traditionally adopted with vernacular photographs, and such practices could be compared to techniques of collage, through which fragments, objects, and ideas are placed together in a “tissue of quotations” (Roland Barthes). Each image, considered separately, adds something which is greater than the sum of the parts. It becomes more of a dialectic process than a derivative process (Marisa Olson, 2008).

Through these interactions, blogs fill the role of connotative exchangers, that freeze furtive images inside a relatively

coherent iconic system. Using an analogy proposed by Allan Sekula, one might say that web surfing clubs constitute paradigmatic instances from which it is possible to formulate photographic statements. Halfway between a curatorial practice and a conceptual approach, this flurry of proposals nourishes original processes of aesthetic negotiations. The reflexive appropriation of this visual garbage allows for the formulation of the most audacious definitions, responding to the exponential growth of the internet. By collectively redefining the status of the rubbish of the virtual junkyard, this practice lays out certain forces that tend to redefine the accepted norms of aesthetic judgment.

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