

Power in Whose Palm?

The Digital Democratization of Photography

Monday, February 25, 2013

Photography: the engine of teaching

Jessica White

Nii Obodai moderated a complex field addressing the role of photography in education.

Eric Gottesman posed the question: “Rather than arguing whether digital itself is good or bad, we can think about visual listening, in the sense of who gets to speak and how does that affect what we see in the world?”

Wendy Ewald has collaborated on many photo literacy projects that deconstruct a singular authorship and instead facilitates multiple perspectives in their reading through participatory teaching and exhibition practices.

In “The Pictures Woke People Up”, a collaborative project between Gottesman and Ewald with the indigenous Innu people of Labrador, the project explores preservation, repatriation and the emerging practices of social collaboration. Wendy’s photos from 1969 were collected into an archive and exhibited in 2012 at the Addison art museum. They were also shown to the descendants of the original community and posted on Facebook. There was a photo of a shaman; the Innu community who had known him were posting personal amusing anecdotes such as, “He was such a player” “This guy was really magical and powerful”. To re-include their perspectives that had previously been excluded, Ewald and Gottesman printed out these photographs and comments, exhibiting them in the gallery, allowing multiple perspectives to flood into the exhibition space.

Enrico Bossan has a visual understanding of the world which is at an apex of “Social meets art, art meets social”. He emphasized that being a photographer is not about only developing a technical skill, nor it is not just about the pleasure of the image. Visual literacy is about deciding what is important to be documented and how it can be documented. He spoke sincerely how the young photographers of Fabrica had touched him for their courage in social subject matter, honesty of view-point but also artistic composition.



Bangladeshi photographer and social activist, Shahidul Alam

The photographer as advocate, awareness-raiser, activist

Louise Hallman

“I’m not a photographer,” Shahidul Alam told the audience of the panel ‘The Photographer as an Advocate, Awareness-Raiser and Activist’.

“I see myself as an activist who uses photography, not the other way around,” he clarified.

Photography has had a long history of being used for advocacy and activism. Moderator Emma Raynes of the Magnum Emergency Fund suggested that her grant-making body might be an advocacy organization as it funds photographers to cover under-reported social issues. However, she doesn’t decide or promote the issues to be covered – that’s the job of the photographer.

This issue Alam chose to cover in his “Crossfire” project was the extra-judicial killings carried out by Bangladesh’s notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

Challenged with how to engage a viewer desensitized to violence, instead of presenting gory images of dead bodies or bloody locales, Alam’s “constructed images use elements of real case studies to evoke stories that the government has denied.”

The controversial exhibition was shut down by the police; later iterations of the installation included photos of the police’s actions against it. 500 copies of the exhibition have now been made so activists can have “their own resistance” wherever they are.

Killings by the RAB have decreased since Crossfire first showed, only to be replaced by an increase in the “more sinister” disappearances – the focus of Alam’s new project.

Dealing with such controversial topics poses not only censorship issues for photographers but also financing.

As Claudia Hinterseer of the social justice-focused photo agency, NOOR, explained, accepting funding from politically neutral foundations such as Nikon makes it more likely to get published than by partnering with campaigning NGOs.

In a partnership with Danish newspaper *Information*, 50,000 copies of a Danish-English language edition were handed out to politicians arriving for the Copenhagen UN Climate Summit in 2009. NOOR’s photos showed the human consequences of climate change – much more effective than much-repeated images of melting icebergs.

NOOR also displays its climate change photos busy public spaces to get attention and raise awareness.

Besides activists, photographers now must also be writers – of their grant proposals.

But, “letting funding determine what you do is a dangerous position to be in,” warned Alam. His advice to avoid losing editorial control of your images is to assume you will get no funding and work from there. Perhaps easier said than done, but as the old Bangla song goes: “If there is no one to walk along with you, walk alone.”

Amateurs vs. professionals, streaming vs. the long view



Stephen Mayes and Manuel Toscano lead the conversation on 'From Memory to Experience'

Jessica White

How do we maintain a business when the ground is shifting beneath our feet? What does that mean on a daily basis? Looking at the volume of photography out there, most of it is not professional photography—it is mimicking photography using new tools. This raises the questions: where are we going and what do we need to do to get there? Opening the fireside discussion on the first night of the seminar “Power in Whose Palm? The Digital Democratization of Photography”, Stephan Mayes, the managing director of VII Photo Agency, Brooklyn, New York, in conversation with Manuel Toscano, Principal at Zago, New York, spoke of the transformation from memory to experience.

With so many people taking pictures on their cell phones nowadays, there are a variety of factors that are already starkly different from traditional photography. Portability; you are no longer separate from the people that you are photographing. You are physically much closer, but also there is the perception that you are closer. You are a publisher, you are actively publishing. You are freer as well; you can choose your tone of voice and your audience.

One major difference of cell phone photography is time. Photography is composed over a period of time. It becomes just a moment that was referred to that day and you don't go back to that picture to see that picture, you go back to see what is next. Like a referencing

and index point to events in a streaming environment. A few days later and the image has disappeared completely.

David Hockney captured the time aspect in photography before the advent of cell phone capturing by splitting the image into a series of smaller images to be pieced together. This enabled time to be a factor in the comprehension of the image. This time factor is ubiquitous with cell phone photography. That is the fundamental shift.

Mayes spoke of a “quantum shift” in photography. The old fashioned photograph was a fixed document. The very structure of image, was a fixed object. Now no point is fixed, now it is polysemic. The image has moved from being a fixed record to being multiple and contradictory all at the same time. We are living in a streaming environment. A photo essay in Life magazine had a beginning, middle and end. In a streaming environment there is no beginning, middle and end. Photography is a medium that is deeply interwoven with the changes that happen around us.

With the phenomenal popularity of the social media photo platform Instagram, people have been talking about how wonderfully nostalgic the images are whilst forging their way into digital age. There is a process of layering what we understand from yesterday onto the contemporary process today.

Toscano steered the conversation to questions about authorship and value of

the image itself and democratization. Mayes unraveled the different elements, saying that these issues are being defined by the users not the professionals. There is an increased responsibility on the viewer to understand what they are seeing. Examples can be seen from Syria and throughout the Arab world that images drive and greatly influence revolution—but on the other hand we are being manipulated by contradictory images. Thus the viewing process becomes a process of education and is increasingly political. What stance do professional photographers take in this environment? Whatever that stance is, actually starts to become political.

With break-out questions from the audience, concerns were raised regarding Photoshop and how it is used in an amateur manner and bringing about gross misrepresentation. Mayes clarified that unfortunately misrepresentation cannot be stopped but we can respond and answer it. With the increase of abuse of media imagery, so too comes the ability to respond to it or to question and reflect.

With an increasingly sharing landscape there is a rejection of authority. The public becomes curators and authority is fractured, which is a good thing in the same way that cubism broke up the singular perspective. There is a desire not to hear from Time Warner—users want to hear from someone that they know and trust. This flows into the power of citizen journalism.

However, citizen journalists are not trained story tellers, whereas the professional photographers are. They are not about what they see, but more about ‘what does this mean?’. Thus there is still a role for everyone to coexist in this visual rich landscape, where there are now more opportunities to receive multiple perspectives, but the ways in which these perspectives are consumed are different. There is the streaming side, accenting a moment that is quickly looking round for what next, and there is the reflective element which is the realm of professional photographers.

Often professional photographers find themselves caught up in the speedy streaming landscape and then there are questions that are raised, such as, “Can I trust this image?, because I haven't got time to review it because if I don't post it now the moment will be gone.” However, this can only be a good thing, as it asks of professional photographers to be more of a reflective practitioner on every level.

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Searching for and presenting authenticity in the post-Facebook age

Louise Hallman

When it first launched in 2004, Facebook allowed its users to have one photo. That profile picture was expected to remain static, similar to the printed college facebook upon which the site had been modelled. Realizing that users were updating their profile photo on an extremely frequent basis, reflecting the user's mood, location, and current relationship, Facebook developers launched its photo-sharing feature in 2005.

Today, Facebook is the biggest photo archive on the web, with 300,000,000 images uploaded every day. What does this say about our relationship with images and their importance to our daily lives?

Whilst photography is often touted as art and admired for its aesthetic and/or activist qualities, this isn't the case for all images, suggested George Oates, former lead designer with another photo sharing service, Flickr. Some images are more important for their social and personal connections, she explained.

Launched nine years ago, Flickr photos can be explained in four layers, said Oates: you, people you know, your interests and then everything else. The former are likely to be kept private or remain within the immediate social circle, with the latter layers of photos being shared more publicly.

However, one thing that breaks through all of these layers is news, and there have been many newsworthy photos uploaded to Flickr, from the now ubiquitous 7/7 photos on the London subway to photos of Paris riots and Boston snow ploughs. Flickr's various licensing arrangements mean that individuals' photos can be picked up for use by worldwide news publications.

The vast array of (easily searchable) photos taken on and around various



Panelists Toscano, Munthe, Linder and Oates discuss the democratization of photography

incidents gives rise to contextual photography around the event – rather than one image from one agency's photographer, you can find many different images, from many different view points, both physical and ideological.

But despite some high profile news images, Flickr is still primarily full of photos of "kittens, babies, flowers and sunsets."

Not so for citizen photojournalism platform Demotix. Launched in early 2009 in the midst of a siege of Gaza, Turi Munthe's site has always sought out those "very hard news images" rather than simply sharing personal interest photos. Set up to fill the void left by the decline of foreign bureaus and aiming to engage more people in journalism and free speech, Demotix unlike Flickr, that simply encourages the sharing of photos, is a business: selling on images and sharing the spoils 50/50 with the photographers.

By June 2009, as foreign and local media was being hounded out of the country or into silence in the wake of the failed Green Revolution in Iran, Demotix got its first image on the front page of the New York Times – an image that would not have been available without such an agency.

Demotix makes efforts to verify all of the images it sells on to news outlets.

Authenticity and trust are key to its success.

These two aspects are valuable to others too, such as politicians – politicians who are now turning to social media, such as Facebook and Twitter to better connect with their voters. Whereas official portraits may show a stern, serious side to a leader, on Facebook he or she can show themselves with their sleeves rolled up and with their family (or quite commonly with his dog, as with George W. Bush), allowing voters to see a different, more human side.

Instead of ignoring or even quashing such phenomena as the internet meme, politicians are increasingly embracing them. Most worthy of note are Hillary Clinton and Marco Rubio, jumping on their respective "Texts from Hillary" and water gulping bandwagons.

But as politicians and celebrities strive to appear more authentic by peeling back the curtain, we the consumer, voter and viewer should still ask ourselves: what have they left out? What are they still not showing us? What public image are they trying to present?

Just as there are issues in verifying the deluge of mobile phone footage appearing online covering incidents like the current Syrian civil war, more images available does not necessarily mean more authenticity.



Fellows Elizabeth Linder, Susan Moeller, Lara Baradi and Io Paschou consider images on display at the Salzburg Fotohof

The ethics, laws and freedoms in using citizen photographers and citizen subjects

Jessica White

What ethical, editorial and intellectual property challenges are arising as a result of new technologies? How are photo editors, photographers, web platform managers and society as a whole dealing with these complex issues?

Within this key debate, there is a balancing act of human rights with copyright/moral rights (right to property). Photographers have control over the reproduction of their work, but it has only been recently that subjects have had the rights to prevent the publication of private images.

The right to own an image is a hot topic in contemporary times, especially given the speed with which images can be spread, often with little care to attribute the original owner, leading to heavy law suits. Many of these lawsuits aren't about the big media suing individuals for sharing their images, but the reverse.

In 2010 when the earthquake struck in Haiti, freelance photographer Dan Morel, created a twitter account to upload his photos of the disaster. He was surprised to see that the following day one of those photos had been used and circulated by European press Agence France-Presse, without his permission.

The law case went on for two years. He argues he had given permission to Twitter, but not to everyone else to download that

image and use it without his permission. The final decision was that AFP was liable for copyright infringement. So the photograph is free to circulate within the Twittersphere, but once it goes outside the Twitter pearly gates, dangers ensue.

Arguably as a result, there has been a lot more caution towards photographers and citizen journalists operating within social networks. When a snap-shot of a burning helicopter that crashed in London emerged on Twitter long before any professional journalist got to the scene, the citizen journalist then received a flurry of comments, ranging from representation in the negotiation of that same image with the media, to potential offers, as well as direct messages via Twitter from the journalists themselves that recognized the photo's news value. Despite the number of people encouraging him to make a profit from his photo, the citizen photographer declined – he did not wish to profit from the fatal crash, choosing his ethics over legal action.

Legal action or the threat thereof has for some, celebrities in particular, led to the "Streisand Effect." In requesting photos to be removed, either on grounds of breach of privacy or even for simply being unflattering, as both Barbara Streisand and Beyoncé found out to their detriment, the images became much more popular than before the action was taken.

These examples raised questions about freedom of expression, and how the notion

differs in prominence vis-à-vis privacy law from country to country. But the global media is acting in a certain way that sometimes has a lot more influence than a single country. If billion-user Facebook decides to act in a certain way, undeniably there are large ramifications across the public sphere.

Sarah Parsons brought to light complex issues surrounding photography and privacy, which arose with the emergence of the hand held camera in the late 19th Century.

Working more closely with subjects using a hand held camera became a large part of getting interesting and sometimes, iconic photos. But what rights do and should the subjects of these iconic images, such as Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' have, especially when someone other than the subject is benefiting from the image?

Photographer Nan Golding has often referred to her photos as "an open love letter" but do these images remain such when the naked subjects are sold at Christie's for a high price? Or does the meaning change and just become equivalent to porn? How important are these ethical considerations in photography?

Some photographers admit to now practicing self-censorship when they take photographs, based on how people may respond. Is the digitization of photography putting limitations on our practice of photography? Time will tell.