

A Note on the Form

The Impossibility and Delight of the Photo Essay

The photo essay is impossible, a contradiction in terms. This very impossibility, however, can be a delight in itself, not least because it provides an opportunity for delicacy.

I have no desire, this morning, to attempt a theory of signification here, beyond saying that telling and showing signify in different ways. Not only is this not a pipe, it is not a pipe in the way of language (the writing in the painting), and in the way of an image (of a pipe).

For an essayist, not to say a lawyer, photography is marvelously suggestive, even seductive, offering loose association in lieu of rigorous argument. At the same time, a great deal of thought went into these compositions, and I hope the viewer feels the pressure, the weight, even as they do their own thinking. I could write an essay on virtually every image, in part because I know the context in which the images were taken, and in greater part because the images are there because they fit into the skein of my research and reflections. And there would be more to say about the order of images, and things not shown. It would require writing a book, but I could tell the viewer what these compositions mean to me, and what further meanings are evoked, which one might mistake for how these compositions “should” be read. At this point, we might dispense with the photographs altogether, just tell and give up on showing.

As an alternative, were I essentially a photographer, I could present the images without comment, not even a title, and in no particular order. Or in an order that changed, perhaps, from time to time. Formal self-sufficiency is more evident in music, which may be the soul’s own speech, as a sampler on my grandmother’s wall said, but the meanings are usually pretty hazy. Or, as John Cage said, “I have nothing to say and I’m saying it.” By the same token, we might simply enjoy the shapes and colors of things. At least in my opinion, some of the images in these compositions would work – be interesting – alone, without reference to any implicit “concerns” about the nature of modernity or the self or representation or That is, sonic or graphic form need not do much in the world of ideas, “showing” need not trend toward “telling.”

But those are ends of a continuum, which one might abstract in rather Teutonic fashion as a polarity between thought and aesthetics. More subtly, we’ve suggested a tension between the sovereignty of the artist and that of the audience over “meaning.” Suppose, however, we meet in the middle, as in song, and for that matter, as in teaching? One might take a collection of images and give them a sequence, and some interesting juxtapositions, a title, the odd snippet of text, maybe a caption here and there, so that the images do not just show, but tell, mumble a message to be puzzled over. “Mumble” is important. Too much clarity can ruin the experience, for roughly the same reason jokes don’t come with explanations. More generally, as creators should we not both make and try to convey, to give, but also leave a substantial degree of freedom to those who receive, even at the cost of their being wrong or just simple? That’s what the photo essay tries to do.

Why would we want to meet in the middle (why am I making photo essays)? For the essayist, the image comes to embody the idea, to make it here and now, to connect it with the world at that moment and so make it real. For the photographer, the image gains power by association with ideas and relations not pictured, comes to mean more, much as religious art relies upon knowledge of the faith. In either case, one hopes that the gift is interesting enough to be received, finds an audience. An artist needs an audience like a teacher needs students. Only connect.

And yet the idea is always limited by its visual embodiment, essentially Plato's objection to the poets. Conversely, the image, and even that which it represents, is somewhat diminished by the imposition of exogenous "meaning," somebody else's intention, even if the artist's. The image is no longer a thing in itself, in the world, to be confronted by the viewer in wonder – one of the concerns in "Pictures Without Subjects."

Such questions can only be re-asked, not answered. Hence the impossibility of getting it "right," but also the possibility of delicacy, and just sometimes, good work.

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