

A Note on Composition

“Vivid, Fragile, Global” vis-à-vis “Pictures Without Subjects”

The years between the onset of the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 Pandemic (2008-2020) constituted a particular era of globalization. Those days, evidently, have passed. The time that was, however, afforded, almost demanded, a certain kind of consciousness, of subjectivity, more than a mood. Such psychic demands were made upon me, and I believe of others of my class. “Vivid, Fragile, Global: 2008-2020” and “Pictures Without Subjects” explore different aspects of that subjectivity, and can be understood in dialogue with one another.

To reset the stage: the optimism (sometimes triumphalism) of '89 and the years shortly thereafter was gone. For a long moment after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the integration of China and the end of the Cold War, one might be forgiven for having believed that the world simply must, in some Darwinian sense, become “modern” in ways we approved. That optimism was shaken by 9/11 and related incidents, and then by the Global Financial Crisis (both of which helped me professionally).

Yet, and still, there was so much opportunity. So much travel. So much color. “Vivid.” So much money. So much, for want of a better word, freedom to realize some ideal of oneself, a profoundly capitalist sentiment. These were “years of wealth, movement and an inchoate sense of vulnerability, of dangers unforeseen until articulated by the event. Everything was connected, everything was at risk.”

Some risks were big, obvious external threats. Terrorism, horrible politics, economic collapse, environmental collapse – the world could change on you, and then where would you be? But as suggested by “global” (i.e., everywhere, not situated, abstract), the individual was lost long before any such dramatic disaster made fashionable dining impossible. The problem of situation, and so the orientation of the self, was integral to the times. Business class is virtually identical from one place to the next; one’s location is relatively unimportant. No doubt it was the scale, or the speed, or the sheer plethora afforded to some people at this moment of history that made so many beauties seem insignificant, perhaps to be traded for the next location, experience, person? It is difficult not to think of divorce, the exchange of one for another. One is, one must rationally fear, relatively unimportant. In what friend Schlegel calls an impatient capitalism, everyone waits for the next (“innovation” as invocation), a better model to appear. Redundant, disposable, should circumstances even suggest, much less dictate. Thank you for your platinum status. Can I get you another glass of champagne with your alienation?

Photography itself – the infinite reproducibility of images – is part of the problem, as Benjamin began to think some generations ago. He thought the reproduction of images would affect the quality of experience occasioned by the encounter with individual works of art, meaning painting. More to say, but not here, because a much broader problem has emerged, which affects us all: photography, and then more digital imagery, has affected the quality of space itself, and hence our orientation, and hence our sense of our own selves, who are fated to exist in physical spaces, metaverses notwithstanding. This morning, waiting on news from Ukraine, it is worth

considering how old fashion television collapses, trivializes, and re-distances, to say nothing of “social” digital media.

The sea of images in which we swim perversely calls forth still more images, advertisements for ourselves, somewhat pathetic efforts to establish one’s location in time and space, at least virtual time and space. Such efforts are not always complete failures. Photography can, just sometimes, help to resituate the individual, in a set of spaces at some time, even if only airworld during a short period of history, with its beauties and its loneliness and its anxiety. We may (perhaps risibly) insist on *this* time, place, moment, human, and even state of mind. Or so I, using a smartphone, have attempted in “Vivid, Fragile, Global: 2008-2020.” I am guilty, pathos embraced, martini in hand, guns locked away. Kidding.

Strangely, maybe, one of the ways to help reestablish particularity, and so the subject, is to remove the subject from the frame, and thereby encourage the viewer (including the photographer, naturally) to focus on the world, and indeed, to wonder about the absent subject. (Herein, the kernel of a critique of therapy, and much of our culture.) In “Pictures Without Subjects,” I explore the possibility of reestablishing the self, and perhaps the power of representing the world (once the honor of photography), by making images that ask the viewer to think through looking, rather than merely recognizing and moving on.

For a long time, the materials that ultimately became these two photo essays wanted to be a single work, probably because they expressed efforts of a single mind, mine, to respond to the privileged, precarious, and strangely surreal context through which I had just lived. After much mucking about with at best middling results, the meanings latent in these pictures sorted themselves into two dominant sets of concerns. First, what gave this moment of globalization, that we have just left, its specific character? What can we say about the era? And second, how can we rediscover the world and so ourselves, under those and perhaps our current, somewhat different, circumstances? After a while, these concerns seemed too distant from one another to be contained within a single vessel, a strawberry soufflé and a tuna steak, though they might make a nice meal. As crucially, the first set of concerns were expressed by vivid images, with saturated colors and sharp edges, often bright sunlight and blue skies. The second set of concerns spoke in grays and browns, often wintry or rainy, and sometimes blurry images. The palettes were discordant, and not in a good way.

Therefore, I made two pieces, each with its own flavor.

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