

STATEMENT

In what is arguably its most rudimentary function, photography fixes the object in the photograph for contemplation by the observer; it renders the object static and determinate so that it may, in turn, be held up as an object “of interest”. Photography invites the observer of the object, as concretized by the photograph, to see it, simply, as interesting – as an object of worthy of contemplation.

Now, suppose a given photograph fails to be “interesting”. This may be the consequence of some failure on the part of the photographer, but not necessarily. It may, equally, reflect a failure on the part of the photo viewer. After all, while the photographer is responsible for presenting the object, through his/her photographic art and technique, in a manner that induces inquisitiveness in the viewer, the viewer nevertheless retains responsibility for the range of his/her own imagination, passion and capacity for enjoyment. The photographer cannot impress the viewer who remains unprepared to be enchanted by the world around us. The photographer must invite the viewer, with utmost eloquence, to contemplate the photographer’s chosen object of interest – the object that the photographer has brought to the viewer through the fixing-action of photograph-taking. But the viewer must remain open to the invitation – he/she must be prepared to find the object, as fastened for presentation in the photograph, compelling, worthy of interest no matter how mundane it may otherwise, and superficially, appear to be.

In any event, whether or not the interaction between photographer and viewer is successful, whether or not a given photograph fails to be “interesting”, the *object* of the photograph, in and of itself, cannot be said to sustain any responsibility for the outcome. The object itself is aesthetically inert, just as the material universe, the sheer “stuff” of the surrounding world, is strictly speaking morally barren. It is up to us, together, as photographer-artist and photograph-observer, to imbue the object with aesthetic value. Whereas the ancients may have been able to say that beauty (or aesthetic or moral value) resides within the object itself, we inhabit a “disenchanted” world, and are therefore forced to seek out the beauty in things via contrivances of the mind.

How, then, do we *find* beauty in things? This question, if the above claims are at all plausible, translates into asking how it is that we *make* beauty in things? My experience with photography has led me to believe that much depends on our choice of methodology, our practical approach to engendering a photographic work of art. Here, “aesthetic formalism” furnishes an answer. Not as a theory in the arts – for, as a theory, aesthetic formalism has been doubted – but rather as a *practice*, as an approach to photograph-taking. Put simply, aesthetic formalism states that the aesthetic value of an artwork is not derived from or dependent upon anything outside the artwork itself. Rather, what matters is the work’s internal, compositional, *formal* structure. Formalism does not place emphasis on the artist’s intentions, nor on the context of the work’s genesis, nor on the substantive elements of the work. Instead, emphasis is placed on the manner in which the work’s elements are composed – how they are arranged, juxtaposed and organized (or for that matter, disorganized) vis-à-vis each other.

Simply put, where photography is concerned, what matters is how the photograph *looks*, not what it is a photograph of, or what story it tells, or if it has historical significance, and so on. In this vein, the work produced, say, by the documentary photographers of the Magnum agency are not practitioners of aesthetic formalism, for the interest of their work depends heavily on its *substance*, on

what the photographs are *of* (usually “exotic” looking people, in “exotic” looking places). On the other hand, some of the “abstract” work of, say, Minor White is interesting not because of any obvious and immediate interest-value in the photographic objects themselves (for example, peeling paint), but rather because of the manner in which the work is put and held together, its manner of construction ... its internal, intra-photographic architecture, as it were. From the standpoint of aesthetic formalism, it should, in principle, be possible to produce an “interesting” photograph even when the photographer is presented with the most mundane materials. (I have to note that aesthetic formalism suits me well, as it happens, for other reasons: being a non-professional photographer, I cannot afford to travel to exotic locations in search of exotic peoples and/or things. What I encounter, daily, for the most part makes for mundane material for photographic imagery, and so I cannot help but turn necessity into a virtue ... if I am stuck within the confines of my house for days on end, I had better find a way to turn my stucco ceilings into photographic imagery “of interest”.)

Aesthetic formalism cannot, of course, be taken too seriously, nor should form/substance be treated as a kind of absolute dichotomy. For, some photographers achieve a truly incredible balance between formal composition and substantive weight in their image making – foremost among our contemporaries is Edward Burtinsky, who, in terms of this kind of balancing feat, is in my view a true and unsurpassed master.

In my own photographic practice I tend to adapt a more formalist stance. However, I am by no means a puritan in this regard, since that, ultimately, is quite impossible. And so, if an observer were to ask me, “Why should I look at this? What is of interest here?”, I would have to point to something more than internal formal structure of my images. To the extent that I am able to offer any kind of authoritative comment on my own photographic work (which is always doubtful), the objects that I choose to present to the viewer through photographic production, the fixing action of photography, are objects of interest because they, the objects, are simultaneously products of human choice-making (artefacts) *and* of nature/chance (non-artefacts).

Take, for example, an abandoned Olympic sized swimming pool: at one point, the contours of the object took shape in the exact manner in which they did as a consequence of human labour, i.e., through a process of deliberate decision making, indeed through an innumerable series of choices, both on a large-scale (e.g., design) and at the micro-level (e.g., paint application). And yet, over time, nature intervened, dissolving those artificial contours. The end result – which is to say, more correctly, the point at which the photograph is taken – is an object with a strange kind of beauty, and thus a photographic image-object worthy of contemplation. At least, the hope is that some measure of that strange beauty found in the object by the photographer has been successfully captured and translated into the photographic image, through careful attention to formal composition.

But note, further: this interplay between human creations (the “artificial”) and the mechanics of nature (the “natural”) need not be represented so bluntly as in a photograph of a derelict, decaying swimming pool. Take a building put up against the sky by an architect, a “skyscraper”. The architect challenges the sky, seeking to impose the architect’s “vision” of how this particular bit of space (*this* segment of our visual spectrum) should appear. And yet, the sky responds in turn, by refusing to stand perfectly still as the building’s backdrop, for it has its own, ever-changing moods (its weather, among other variations) that continually illuminate and re-illuminate the building’s façade, thus varying its image, its appearance-to-us. Likewise, the electrician criss-crosses our urban skies with wiring, and yet

the sky somehow overwhelms these cuts. And, likewise again, the construction worker, supported by a colossal infrastructure of machinery and labour-power, hoists massive steel beams up over one paved expressway to create another atop, which in turn solidifies and strengthens the intricate latticework of the very infrastructure that made each expressway possible. And yet, very quickly, the constructor's steel beams and concrete slabs themselves become covered by a latticework of rust and mildew. Again, I think there is a peculiar kind of beauty to be found (made?) here.

Of course, the photographer's goal (my goal) is not always or necessarily to capture and exhibit the beauty of this interplay between artifice and nature (whether seen as a conflict or a harmony of sorts). Alas, moments of beauty are exceedingly rare, and our capacity to make them determinate through the fixing action of photograph-taking is quite limited. The photographer's more humble vocation, thus, is simply follow through on his/her inquisitiveness about the objects that surround us, then to invite the observer to a moment of contemplation (of the object fastened within the photograph, as chosen by the photographer), and only then, perhaps, to induce and to foster an experience, a perception, of beauty. Some few photographers go beyond even this, and somehow manage to present us with images that approach the sublime.

But how does photography, *photography* in particular, manage to achieve this? In contrast, that is, to all other art forms. I think it must have something to do with this: the nature and mechanics of photography are such that the photographer is highly constrained in the range of choices he/she is able to make in producing the photographic image. This is because the photographic image is itself highly constrained by the captured object, indeed by the external world as a whole.* The sculptor, the painter, the musician, and even less the author, let alone the poet – each of them do not have such constraints as the photographer. (Consider this: the author-poets' boundaries are, ultimately, only those of imagination and language itself ... what a vast resource!)

The essence of photography *is* this limitedness, both in terms of the source material for image-making and, thus, the photographer's capacity for choice. This is also the greatness, the "genius", of photography: the photographer is, ultimately, severely constrained as to how the object will present itself through the fixing-action of the photographic image. (Hence my personal tendency to avoid extensive digital manipulation, which otherwise greatly expands the photographer's possibilities; my lament, here, is that the digital age, by vastly extending the photographer's decision making range, has made non-manipulation a choice in itself, a deliberate decision *not* to manipulate, and has therefore undermined what, in my view, is the core characteristic of photography.) Again, consider this: the photographer aims to achieve within the bounds of a (typically) square frame what the novelist may explore within the expanse of the book binds. For the photographer, the object will almost always exceed the boundaries of the photographic frame, whether that object is a mere physical thing (as in

* To the extent that I presuppose that photography remains an essentially "representational" medium, my views here are rather orthodox. I realize that contemporary theories of art (or at least certain branches thereof) have sought to dissolve and eventually overcome certain familiar dichotomies – in the main instance, between subject and object, the internal and external, or the observer and the (thing) observed, and so on. Nevertheless, I personally find it difficult to think clearly about photography without resorting to some such dichotomies, and so proceed as if they are not inherently problematic, knowing full well they may be.

formalistically oriented photography that focuses on composition) or an emotion (as in the substantive photography of the documentary mode, or portraiture).

What is remarkable, and what makes for truly astonishing art in the photographic form, is that some few photographers are able to capture and encapsulate the object, as a whole in itself, *despite* the otherwise severe constraints of photography. They are thus able to hold the object up for us to contemplate *as* a true object of beauty and, very seldom, the sublime.

Naturally, I don't count myself among them. But anyhow, I dare to present you, the observer, with my (always provisional) efforts ... do please enjoy.

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