Ten Things to Take: A community education project to re-image space place & memory using digital photography

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Based within the context of community learning projects this paper will investigate using digital photography as a tool for enquiring into the relationship between people and place. The study is ongoing and is part of a PhD research project entitled: Representing communities and the post-industrial landscape in the shadow of the “Cornish Alps” currently in its second year. This research aims to establish whether representations of the landscape impact on the community living in it. The focus is to identify whether a process of representation alters the relationship between people and place. Through community based digital photography workshops, courses and photographic assignments participants have presented images of their memories, their lives and the places where they live. “Ten things” refers to the projects they produced and the personal responses they have given when presenting their work. Through their digital photographs, the research examines how participants developed and modified their vision of the world and seeks to identify how the practice of digital photography can be used as a research tool and whether arts practice can have a transformative impact on the relationship between a subject and its representation. It also seeks to establish how the nature of digital photography as an instant, democratic and creative tool can be used in community based projects to quickly encourage, amongst other things, cohesion, debate and discussion.

Participatory. Photography. Digital.

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud speaks about “artists proposing artworks as moments of sociability and objects producing sociability” (Bourriaud, 2009). This proposition can be interpreted, through a lineage commencing with Benjamin and Brecht, as an initiation of a collaborative and potentially politically aware work. Work, which as Guattari has suggested, may not necessarily achieve a step-by-step transformation of society but may through small, incremental, community based interactions be sufficient enough to modify awareness toward the political. Within a project to re-image space place and memory using digital photography, the approach toward creating artworks of sociability may enable a modified vision of the world that will encourage cohesion, debate and discussion. In the introduction to her book *Participation*, Clare Bishop (2006) suggests that the motivations for many attempts within arts based practice to encourage participation are concerned

restoring social bonds and addressing the perceived effects of alienation and isolation in modern society. Participatory projects therefore concern themselves with a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility.

When writing in 1979 in *Photograph/Politics: One*, Allan Sekulla suggested “a didactic and critical representation is a necessary but insufficient condition for the transformation of society. A larger, encompassing praxis is necessary” (Sekulla, 1979). Such a practice is arguably still absent from the world of photographic representation. By using the camera to simply illustrate or document a subject there is, as Brecht would put it, little or no attempt to understand the conditions that create it. As Liz Wells (2011) states photographs are indicators of both change and continuities but they do not *account* for social issues. While the digital image itself may not necessarily be operating in anything other than a mode of illustration or documentation, it is produced and consumed in a larger and more

encompassing space, that of digital technology. This technology (which includes the phone camera, the compact digital camera and digital SLR cameras) has facilitated photographic (and many other) practices and enabled more people to take more photographs. It is not only the updated hardware that has contributed to a different form of practice, the means to publish and share imagery, most notably via the web, has also played its part. The digital photograph, which is connected through a moment of sociability or through a network may be better able to take account for social issues and may facilitate a deeper sense of collective responsibility and personal understanding. The relatively low financial and time cost of producing an image, compared with that of a silver based print has meant that more people are producing more (with an estimated average of 60 photos per second being uploaded to Instagram and over 60 billion photographs already hosted on Facebook). It is via the digital image that actual and virtual connections form and may become meaningful. The image as a digital object producing sociability, conversation, narrative and story telling has a chance of contributing to greater engagement, cohesion, debate and discussion. A person taking photographs is of course nothing new. People taking photographs and talking about them isn't either. But lots of people, in small or large groups, taking lots of photographs is somewhat different. Added to which the ease with which the digital image is created and shared and the properties of its digital form, results in the image being less a precious printed artefact and more of an act of note-taking, of marking, of observation and referencing. This modified usage of the image forms the basis of this paper, which attempts to suggest that the potential of the image remains in what it enables us to see but there may also a different use for the image, which is as an image "producing sociability." To use the image in this way is not to be concerned with the photographs that are created so much as to be interested in what it is in ourselves that is revealed by the photographs we *may* take and share.

"Ten things to take" is the title of an assignment given to participants on a community based digital imaging workshop. The aim of the workshop was to explore whether photography could be re-conceptualised and what form this would take. The need to carry out such analysis comes from the new modes of representation suggested by the digital image and as stated earlier, the desire to configure a participatory project that addressed community and collective responsibility. Before examining the workshops it is probably necessary to outline the relationship between photography, representation and the digital image.

2. PHOTOGRAPHY, REPRESENTATION AND THE DIGITAL IMAGE

For photography, the shift from film to digital can be understood as especially significant. Not because of the new medium onto which the image is recorded. Since photography's invention the support onto which light is captured has often changed. Calotype, Daguerreotype, wet-plate collodion, film and digital have all produced images from cameras. However the ease with which a digital process provides for producing (and reproducing) images is perhaps slightly less important as the virtual connection between images and their distribution via the Internet, which the digital process has enabled. So while the digital may encourage argument that suggests that photography is radically different from its analogue descendant this is to confuse the medium of photography with the basic conditions of 'the photographic'. "Traditional photography begins with the chemistry of fixing an image, formed by a camera, in a light-sensitive substrate. These together yield a picture of the world beyond the aperture in the form of a positive or negative film. This in turn is used to produce an opaque print, or a transparency that may either be backlit or projected. Digital photography offers some technical substitutions ... but without fundamentally altering the basic conditions" (Burgin, 2007). Within the digital space the number and type of encounters that we have with photography are increased and our response to photography has potentially undergone some modification but to reassert Burgin the *fundamental* conditions remain unchanged.

In the digital world that Fred Ritchen (2009) describes in *After Photography*, we "are also changed, turned into potential image ..." He quotes the Marshall McLuhan remark "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water", concluding that: "they do not know that the water is wet because they have no experience of dry. Once immersed in the media despite all its images and sounds and words, how can we know what it is doing to us?" The distinction between subject and spectator is less clearly articulated as a consequence of digital immersion. To be immersed within the digital may also be considered to be participating or contributing either knowingly or unknowingly. Within a participatory practice the digital camera and its product the digital image may be considered as objects of social encounters and that to be digital is also to be social, to be connected and engaged. For photography the move from film to digital was to move into a practice that transformed the image and the world as seen through the image. Burgin has suggested that photography has always been "a complex of fragmentary and often contradictory

representation[s] – archival, fictional, psychical, and so on” (Burgin, 2012). Photography, he argues, could and can never show an event or its subject as it was or appeared, as it never really was any one particular thing. This aptly applies to an analogue version of photography however the digital image, with its inherent connection to the virtual, expands the idea of a subject that may not have been one particular thing. Deleuze, via Bergson, defines the ‘virtual’ image as being neither a material entity nor optical event but a complex psychological process. With the virtual image we are more comfortable with the notion that the subject may not have been anything at all. This increasingly acceptable idea of the computer generated image that may be based on ideas rather than things is likely to suggest that any image may have always been a form of deception.

As well as being credited as the inventor of photography, Daguerre is also known for perfecting the diorama. “The diorama – like most illusionism, and particularly like photography – is a demonstration of a technical power to transform the material of the world into representation” (Slater, 1995). The diorama was a device that employed illusion to recreate the world and transport its audience or participants through time or to another place. Slater identifies two senses of wonder invoked by the diorama: the wonder of the experience which transports its audience into a fully realised, but at the same time unreal world; and the wonder the audience has at how it has come into being, at the technology which sits behind it and which makes the unreal possible. We may apply both these senses, in part, to the experience of looking at photographs, especially those digital images that allow so much doubt in their veracity.

Derrida used the term ‘logocentrism’ to describe the way in which representations were understood by referring them to a single founding, presence. This presence is perceived to be ‘behind’ representations and contributes to the explanation of them. Derrida indicated that logocentrism was present throughout Western philosophy and was founded on granting authority to speech over writing. It is our voice, the words we use that attempt to articulate our thoughts and feelings. They uncover something about us by the very suggestion that they are coming from within us. However, if they are written down or removed from their authorial voice they become subject to an interpretation by the reader. They lose their guarantee of meaning and any sense of authenticity. Nevertheless it is the illusion of language, which suggests that meaning is present at all. So it is with the image, the representation, once it is subject to interpretation there is no longer a guarantee of meaning or authenticity.

While individual interpretation *may* be a useful mechanism for reading images it generally brings with it a multiplicity of individual meanings alongside some more fixed social and culturally lead explanations. In his book *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time*, Damian Sutton suggests that the interpretation of images is an easy process at first glance (Sutton, 2009). Sutton’s following analysis of the work of Cindy Sherman serves to demonstrate that the process is not quite as easy as we may first imagine. At almost every level of image analysis, the meaning of an image, without any supporting context, will fail to be convincing or to satisfy completely. Two recurring phrases that coincide with attempting to understand certain photographs are: “the need to understand the context” and “it is open to individual interpretation”. Though semiotics may have offered some tools for understand the meaning of photographic representations as Simon Watney noted, as an approach, it has a “tendency to think of photographs as if they were weak or failed propositional linguistic utterances” (Watney, 2006).

During the Renaissance period resemblance was the structuring principle of knowledge, “the reproduction of three-dimensional space (of optical depth) was involved in the valorization of painting” (Rancière, 2011). Subsequently signs become pure representation, an arbitrary system in which meaning is articulated through differences and the taxonomy of classes. Classical poets “established a relationship of correspondence at a distance between speech and painting, between the sayable and the visible, which gave imitation its own specific space” (Rancière, 2011). Modernity sets out language as the framework for meaning. Its discourse “presents the revolution of pictorial abstraction as painting’s discovery of its own proper ‘medium’: two-dimensional surface.” (Rancière, 2011). Rancière continues, suggesting that Modernity was constructed to hide the “the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience.” He describes two discourses of Modernity, one constructing the autonomy of art (expressed by the capabilities of the medium) and a second discourse that associated art with acts specific to modernity. The specific project of modernist photography is described by Steve Edwards as being “a dialectic of surface and representation, in which a complex fracturing broke with an art of resemblance in order to depict those experiences and contradictions which could not be pictured as homogenous surface” (Edwards, 2010). Edwards sees one strand of modernist practice, associated with film-based photography, as being an art of juxtaposition that attempted to make it difficult to passively look at images. While another strand of modernist photography was also associated with

photographic realism. Of course the debate as to what photography is, is well documented. As I have stated, if digital photography can be or needs to be significantly differentiated from film then that difference is most likely to be in the space in which representation now operates; that of the digital. In a post-film, digital age, photography is fundamentally about representation. Adding to this Sarah Pink (2011) has suggested that when re-thinking the meaning and values of the image we should not only take into account sensory qualities but also include concepts of movement and place. This approach brings an interesting angle to 'recording perspective' through the lens since for Pink the photograph is produced and consumed as we move through environments. Her argument emerges through Tim Ingold's critique of the anthropology of the senses and network theory claiming to undermine the supposed dominance of the visual, placing images into the realm of an experience of environments and proposing them as interwoven in "everyday movement, perceiving and meaning making." By relocating the image into an environmental experience it may be possible to use images in a different way, one that is focused on restoring social bonds and addressing isolation and alienation as outlined by Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Pink is primarily concerned with the image as forming part of the world, a world that is always moving forward. While the direction of travel might be open to question the notion that the image plays a part in our individual movements and therefore our sense of "being-here" is significant. It is with this in mind that participatory photography projects may be used to create an environment of social experience, which is focused on making images.

3. PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Participatory photography and photo elicitation techniques all contribute to and add to a discourse of individual and group representation. In terms of a research project the use of visual methods as part of a process of qualitative research is becoming much more common place (Holm, 2008a). The role of photography within social science research is to supplement the data, to provide a tool for subjects to image themselves or the world as they see it. Collier and Collier (1986) offer the standard account of using photography within the social sciences and include not only photography but also film making as tools for ethnographic research. The conventional use of visual images in ethnography was as illustrations. "The photographer needs to master the skill of representational recording of the peaks and key points of particular activity. The whole view can only be observed and recorded in the form of a responsible, selective composite." (Collier & Collier, 1986) they continue "The most

beautiful and technically superb photograph is useless in research if it does not conform to the needs of systematized observation." Therefore to use the images for analysis in themselves was considered to be too subjective. Although, as Holm outlines, opinion is still divided around the use of visual methods researchers continue to adapt the use of the photograph to supplement research.

Sarah Pink has more recently added to the discussions around visual ethnography and has developed an approach, which encompasses reflexivity and a negotiated version of reality (Pink, 2007). Collier and Collier do offer a two-part question: "What do I see?" and "How do I know?" or better "What can be seen and identified in the visual record that gives that impression?" (Collier & Collier, 1986). But the question itself is based around the researcher as photographer and interpreter of the image. In the case of participatory photography specifically, a visual method of empowerment through photography, Prins argues that, "drawing on Foucault's analysis of surveillance and power, photography is a technology with contradictory potential for social control and surveillance, and for the recovery of marginalized groups' subjugated knowledge" (Prins, 2010). This potential to both empower and to exercise social control is enhanced by the digital photograph and its ability to connect and be connected. The digital world is, as Rancière (2007) suggested is a "place where there is no longer any reality, only images." It must therefore also be a place where the contradictory potential of photography is imbued everywhere. Within the digital world we are subjects, producers and publishers of the images of ourselves. It is perhaps possible, through participatory photographic practice to peel back the visual image and reveal something about how it functions and visually and socially.

The costs associated with traditional film photography have significantly reduced and the digital camera in its many forms is now ubiquitous.

Participatory workshops were organised for a range of groups in different locations and run on single sessions over a varied number of weeks. Recruitment of participants was generally through word of mouth and the Adult Education advertising. Participants for this project were people who lived in Cornwall, who had cameras and who had an interest in photography. Their interest was usually no more than one of finding out how their cameras work. They did not consider themselves to be established artists or professional photographers. At best one or two might have described themselves as keen amateurs with a higher level of expertise than the majority of participants.

In a survey to establish what effect digital technology had on the take up of photography it was noted that, compared with film, the speed with which the digital camera provided a confirmation visual image contributed significantly to improving technique and accounted for the interest in photography by all respondents. The lower costs of image production (again compared with film) and the number of 'throw-away' images, which can be taken at almost zero cost, also contributed to the interest in photography by people with no previous experience of it as a practice or hobby. Participants were usually from a mixed background of age and social grouping.

The format of the workshops consisted primarily of looking at a range of images, group discussion followed by a single group assignment. The participants would then meet again to show their work and discuss and evaluate their process, their thinking and the resulting images.

When asked to 'visually represent their environment' participants produced a range of imagery and without exception their work indicated the same concerns, anxieties and issues. They also articulated these emotions in similar and predictable ways. These types of outcomes are also supported in part by Holm, (2008b) where she employed a photographic method using doctoral research students as participants, to look at "how one learns to collect visual data by using photography as well as what happens when doctoral students study their own lives as doctoral students using photography". The results were divided into two parts. Firstly, the images of students performing being stressed and their symbolic use of photography, Secondly, the analysis of the teaching and learning to use visual methods. She noted that her project showed photographs that "... are the students' performance of their own lives as doctoral students. In other words, the photographs do not show us "the truth," but interpretations of being a doctoral student in the U.S."

Within the context of the workshops photography appeared to be a process that reproduced a priori ideas or representations, things that were already there in the participants' mind before they photographed anything. Digital technology facilitated the fast production of images. But it did little to help produce images that were outside of an unspoken formula of what a good photograph should look like. While not necessarily a surprising outcome it was evident that in order for the photograph to contribute more than simply becoming a visual illustration other forms of practice would need to be engaged. For some, though, photography was a process of testing to see if a previously seen image could be matched

and there is little doubt that digital technology facilitated this.

Within the workshops, the discussion and evaluation of images contributed a significantly to the experience. The majority of the time spent in the session was devoted to discussing work and evaluating work. Over the weeks, this process began to contribute to the making this a social experience and the dialogue *about* the images became more important to the participants than the images themselves.

There was a transition over time in which the workshop gave way to "moments of sociability" where the practice was less significant than the conversations and connections that the photographs initiated. This new practice of sociability appeared to remove the burden of simply adding to the abundance of digital images already in existence. It facilitated a transformation of the formulaic imagery into photographs, requiring stories, and descriptions, which initiated performances, concerns, jokes and memories. The images in themselves were little more than references to other things, things that were not visible, things that were better spoken about.

Participatory photography, in these workshops, evolved into a practice that was less photography and more about the participatory. It was concerned with the taking part rather than the taking of images. However, without the images the prompts for discussion would have been removed; even the stories and events surrounding the taking of the images would not have happened. The photographs were needed but they had become less important in the social process of discussing what they indicated.

4. TEN THINGS TO TAKE

For the "Ten things to Take" assignment, participants were asked to imagine that they were leaving the planet and could only take with them ten images to remind themselves of their time on earth. Due to an imposed 'filter' they could not take any photographs, which featured faces. Therefore the challenge was to photograph things, which represented their life experiences and that which was significant to them.

The project produced a range of subject matter including: sunsets, holding hands and favourite books. It was, however the presentation of this work and specifically the participants' emotional responses to certain images, which appeared to account for, support the photograph's connection to memory and emotion. It is the relationship of this spoken, virtual, psychical, thought based image to

the digital image presented on the screen that may provoke a deeper, ontological question relating to photography. The ease with which the digital image can be produced, the ready access to cameras and imaging devices, means that for participants image creation was also note taking or journaling of their experience. While it may not be possible to suggest anyone felt empowerment simply by taking digital images with their camera the research has recorded that participants felt that by passing through their environment with a camera their knowledge of it was modified. As has been stated the reflective process was equally important, facilitating a range of discussions that took on topics such as solar farms versus wind farms and their relative visual impacts. The documenting of the environment using the camera did not set out to create citizen journalists or activists but it did enable discussion to be framed in more than emotive terms. It also allowed for a gentle critique that could consider not just the social impacts but also photography, art and technique.

What may be taken from the photograph are the stories that surround them, the stories that connect them together in a social space and thread lives, memories and moments from the weave of the image. It is an image that is as multiple and incidental as it is digital and infinite. Roger Scruton argued that, in comparison to painting, the photograph was not a representation since the intentionality of the photographic image was mechanical and already determined by what was there in front of the lens.

In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Costello writes, that: "the question concerning photography would be whether the role of mind in the formation of photographic pictures is sufficiently distinctive to distinguish photographs in kind from other forms of depiction" (Costello, 2012). Costello constructs a Heideggerian argument to ask whether photography can 'hold out the prospect for decisive confrontation with technology of the kind that Heidegger sought from authentic art?' Through an argument indirectly against Roger Scruton's position in *Photography and Representation* (Scruton, 1981) and loosely confirming part of Heidegger he concludes that: "photographic art resists technology to the extent that it is mind-dependent" (Costello, 2012, p112). Costello could appear to be supporting the modified usage of the image that was stated earlier in this paper. He may also be connecting the photograph to a mental or virtual image and the role of the mind within the process. Though the distinguishing feature of practice that produces digital photographic pictures may well be the greater insistence on relationships that those images suggest everyone consider through their interconnectivity. As a research tool the camera is useful to articulate ideas, thoughts

and viewpoints and can be deployed in a similar way to the use of collage in market research. But for the data to be useful the intentionality of the photographer needs to be considered as part of the analysis.

The modernist artefact is replaced at a time of digital media by a relationship of image-to-image, image-to-story, connection-to-connection, an always virtual, digital imaging. The digital photograph is contained in a space, in an environment that is social and connected. To create images as part of a participatory practice is to perform the connections and articulate the stories, which connect photographs. Through a practice of participation we may slip away from the medium, from the photograph, to appear on the other side of it. As participants we may even discard the image completely so that it becomes merely a verbal description. In this way the photograph and its description takes on a similar relationship to retelling a dream, in that through this process we come to understand how little or how much we are actually able to describe.

5. REFERENCES

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