

Constructing the Photograph

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“Now, one November evening shortly after my mother’s death, I was going through some photographs...”

And here the essential question first appeared: did I recognise her?”

Barthes (1981)

Introduction

For the past seven years, Mark Roxburgh and I have been involved in a series of discussions about the nature of his photographic work. He has been interested in the photograph that is not of (something): in removing the subject of the photograph from the realm of representation. We have discussed a way of looking at the world that allows photographs to be—rather than to be of—and yet to be valued. This piece emphasises this way of looking.

It is a cliché that photography used to be thought of as objective and correct, and we still generally see it as a representational art in which we can glimpse some object in a real world that each photograph is a photograph of, no matter how strangely modified, or how unfamiliar the glimpse captured.

Yet the presumption of the real world object is no longer so obviously tenable as we used to believe it was. For instance, the crucial point Jean Piaget (1955) makes is that we need to account for the way children come to terms with a world by constructing constants and objectifications from their experiences.¹ Children don’t have objects: they have experience. We have developed a tradition in which we come to believe this experience comes from objects in a real world. Now, in the light of Piaget’s insight, that logic seems perverse. If we have experiences first, for us in our experiencing, the objects must come from this experience, and not vice versa. This, of course, remains equally so for adults. In this view, our objects, regardless of whether they exist in some Mind Independent Reality or not, are constructions from experience.

In other words, if these objects are constructed by us, they may or may not correspond to objects that (may) exist independently of our constructing: and this we cannot know. So what photographs are photographs of may be a problem. (Note, I am not denying any correspondence: but I am not supporting it, either: in this way of understanding I simply do not and cannot know. I am agnostic.)

¹ This, rather than the stages in cognitive development, is what I consider Piaget’s great contribution to be.

This way of understanding has been named, by Ernst von Glasersfeld (1990), “Radical Constructivism”. It is radical because it takes construction as a root activity and it goes back to the root (radix) of construction. It does not consider construction as leading to failure and inadequacy (illusion, partiality of view, etc.), but as a condition of being human.

However, it is not my intention here to argue against the more traditional ways of seeing the world. My wish is to consider how, taking this type of constructivist position, we might make an understanding of the world. You may agree or not with the position: that is your prerogative. Your agreement (or disagreement) makes no difference to the value of my argument within this framework.

But if come to believe that Mark Roxburgh’s photographs are well accounted for in and/or through this argument, and if you find the photos interesting and to have value, you may wish to reconsider any objections you have to the position I propose.

I know it is a difficult argument. It is difficult to make, it is difficult to grasp, it is difficult to learn and take on board and it is difficult to live by. I believe it is difficult because we have grown up in the strong, even exclusive, promotion of a different view (the realist view that our experience stems from a world that exists regardless of us but which we can somehow come to know), even without our being aware of this set of assumptions, and it is difficult for us to be alert to the assumption of deep assumptions and the presumption of presumed truths. These difficulties do not, however, make my argument wrong.

Text

I

I take it that, in the final count, all I have is experience (which I restate as what I experience). Everything else comes from this. How it comes from this is not only through acts of observation: we also reflect on our experiences, specially on how we treat these experiences.

I cannot enjoy any experience without being a participant. To talk of experience independently of the experiencer is a sophism. To distinguish that the experiencer is present and active in all experience, I shall henceforth use the term experiencing, rather than experience.

I can talk of how I gain experience through the notion of observing. I observe: the actuality of my observing is my experiencing.

From these experiencings, I can make knowings. It is, equally, a sophism to talk of observing and of knowing without an active agent to observe, to know.

We know what we come to call the world from our experiencing. Thus, our world is always made from our experience. We construct it.

This world we construct can never be independent of our constructing. In the sense that we call it reality, this reality is constructed by us and is, uniquely, ours.

Thus, the reality this world talks of cannot be a Mind Independent Reality.

II

To assert that the worlds we construct from our experience form our realities is not to deny there may be a Mind Independent Reality. It is only to say that, whether there is such a thing or not, we cannot know. We are always—and structurally—present in our knowing, our observing, our experiencing.

However, we do, and we should, continue to test our constructions for their viability: they are not solipsist dreams, but working hypotheses.

Taking this position, where the world is constructed, we assert neither that there is a Mind Independent Reality, nor that there is not.

In contrast with the main stream of Western thought, we do not attempt to resolve this uncertainty by arguing for one side or the other. We maintain the uncertainty as central to our understanding: we accept the certainty of uncertainty.²

In constructing this world we are constructivists. In constructing it without taking sides, we are radical constructivists, for we return to our roots of and in construction.

Not to take sides is to sit on the fence, to hedge our bets. We are neither objectivist nor subjectivist (but are both): we are neither realist nor idealist (but are neither). We can chose to be one or the other for a moment, and then remake our choice. We sit on the fence.

III

Photography has been considered the art of the objective: it, it has been supposed, objectively records reality, through (delightfully) its objective. Although this position is no longer generally held, it lurks in the background, an idea past its prime but hard to completely forget. It is built into the undergrowth of our subconscious.

(One aspect that argues against the assumption of quasi-objectivity is the recognisability of the photographer in his work: if the photograph were truly an objective record, the person who made the photograph would be indistinguishable.)

² This position is in contradistinction to what I call constructionist positions. In essence, these consider there is an external (mind independent) reality, but that, through our shortcomings, we cannot fully or properly access it. An example of this view, well hidden, is in visual illusion, where we promote the notion that our visualising (for instance) is in error, presuming that we can somehow access that which we suppose we visualise in spite of this error!

Can a radical constructivist position illuminate photography?

Each experiencer will observe each photograph, insofar as we are happy to accept it as a common source of different experiencings and observings (which Radical Constructivism does not deny), in our own construction.³

Our construction will be unique because we are unique. We may develop ways to share our experiences (which cannot be the topic of this short piece), but these experiences nevertheless remain unique and different, as we are unique and different.

In this understanding, it is implicit that each act of interpretation is individual, and that each meaning experienced and constructed is individual. Every object we believe we experience (that we construct from our experience) is uniquely ours and different from every other.

We do not refer to an objective reality, but to a reality we construct from our experience, that may or may not result from a sharing between us and some (always putative) externally real object (a Mind Independent Reality).

IV

An artist might want to move beyond the implicit to the explicit.

The question an artist (in the case of photographs, a photographer) might ask is: how can I make this lack of direct reference to an objective external reality explicit in a photo? How can I remove the notion of representation (of) from my photographs?

An answer would be to make images that are abstract, in which we find it difficult to construct those clues that allow us to behave as if the photograph were of some object existing independently in some Mind Independent Reality. That lack recognisability. One word for this is “ambiguous”. The explicitly ambiguous teases us to make our own senses. (I refer, here, to the sense in which, after the event, we can see the object as ambiguous. Of course, abstract art objects do not represent any separate object, but how we understand them explicitly may be accounted for as what I call ambiguous.)

Photographs made in this manner would not allow us easily to point to other experiences that we have already objectified. We would see them without recognisably referential form. They would exist as images in their own right, not as images of anything.

V

I believe this is one way of considering what Roxburgh is beginning to attempt in his photographs: to deny photographic objectivity by returning to the viewer the explicit obligation to construct.

³ The purpose of the “Objects” I designed in my PhD was to provide a structure that permitted just this (Glanville 1975).

References

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