

Photography(s) and Cultural Invisibility: Symptoms and Strategies

Michael J. Emme

What does it mean to be visible? We cross paths and we see each other. Simple. Why bother asking the question? The fact that artists and cultural theorists have for the past decade or more been energetically pursuing precisely this question of visibility is one of the dominant features of the visual arts today. At the heart of this collective inquiry is a concern to discover the social nature of both vision and pictures. This concern rises out of the almost common-sense realization that much of what we “know” about the world we know because of pictures and that despite much rhetoric to the contrary, we generally believe that what we see is true. Or at least we act that way. We are transported through pictures to believe the stories that they tell.

Vision (the stimulation of optic sense organs) is not the same thing as perception which includes the mental ordering and ultimately the attribution of significance to visual sensation. The art historian, Jonathan Crary (1992) traces changes in both the art and science of the early 19th

century that reflect a shift from the idea that visual perception is like a camera obscura (direct and true) to the idea that vision and perception are constructs of both the observer's mind and the social conditions surrounding a visual experience. The stereo camera and its illusion of 3-dimensionality is offered as a symptom of this new understanding of visual perception. Cray expands on the constructed nature of visual perception by exploring the separation of vision from the other senses and, ultimately, from the need for a connection between visual perception and the "real" objects reproduced in a picture (pp. 67-96). Essentially Cray argues that developing lens technologies and early work by researchers such as Müller and Fechner into the physiology of perception lay important groundwork for the behaviorist assumptions of both the mass-media and early psychology (pp. 137-150).

Two important ideas serve as foundational components of postmodernity. First, vision "works" even when the viewer is separated from direct physical contact with a seen object. The second idea is that, at least to some extent, visual sensations can be measured and managed. The entire film industry and its elaborate visual apparatus is one manifestation of this. The capacity of lens images to be erotic is clear evidence of their 'spectacular' impact. Since images are mass-produced, visibility, and its opposite, invisibility, become social conditions. Media specialists use lens technologies to represent a world that is capable of serving the ends of those who control the production and distribution of those images.

As Benjamin (1985) pointed out, photography is potent both because of the kind of image it can produce and because those images can be reproduced. Mass-media imagery represents the bulk of information about the world for many people. Therefore, those people whose lifestyles are somehow undesirable, are not represented in the mass-media, and are in a very significant way, invisible. This results from the "postmodern" dependence on simulacrum to anchor "reality." Pamela Anderson and Ellen DeGeneris come to signify different aspects of female, Johnny Depp and Wesley Snipes becomes signifiers of what it means to be male, as our own experiences of gender (or race, or age, or culture) become increasingly irrelevant.

Symptoms

Martin Heidegger once called this “The Age of the World Picture.” To him “the fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.” Nothing in the world, he contended, exists any longer except in and through representation. (Jussim, 1989, p. 10)

More recently, Victor Burgin describes “a picture of a new subject for the new society of information technology—a subject (like the subject known to psycho-analysis) radically ‘decentered,’ [a subject formed] in the wake of the signifier” (Burgin, 1986, p. 168). The signifiers Burgin mentions are the traces of bio/graphic and economic data scattered throughout institutional computer banks which, when they are gathered together, represent the “decentered”¹ individual’s existence in society more powerfully than does her or his body.

In the essay *Through the Narrative Portal* (Kozloff, 1987), critic Max Kozloff explores the dynamics of simulacral² experience by looking at a black and white ad typical of those pioneered by Bruce Weber for Calvin Klein designer jeans and cotton underwear.

The scene illustrates a possible sexual contretemps that has been calculated to appeal to both genders. Asking us to speculate on the fascinating pass to which the couple has been brought, the image switches its narrative lure to an object display that conveys, in fact, the real story message. Ours not so much to wonder about the history of this tense, mysterious pair, as to acknowledge that wearers of Calvins

¹The Freudian concept of being ‘decentered’ is used here to describe not only a psychological but also a social condition resulting from the individual’s experience of self and other through the many apparatus of mass-representation. In various texts Barbara Maria Stafford (1993, 1994, 1996) traces the beginnings of the technology of decentering and visibility to Enlightenment efforts to stabilize knowledge. See also Harlan (1995, pp. 114-124) for an extended discussion of the media representation of first nations’ women and contemporary artists’ strategies of re-presentation.

²Burgin’s use of “simulacrum” represents a fairly extreme understanding of a slippery term. Simulacrum can mean anything from simply a representational image to something akin to and as dangerous as a mirage. (See also Krauss, 1980.) In choosing to use this term I am consciously introducing a sliding scale of potential meanings which, in the context of visibility I have termed “Lens Meaning” (Emme, 1989).

are likely to have such a history. Suitably denimed, we, too . . . can embark on the sensual and other adventures of the role reversal. (Kozloff, 1987, p. 93)

The advertising industry has taken the psychoanalytic notion of identification to heart and is providing imagery like that described by Kozloff for both the consumer's conscious and unconscious mind. Because the mass-media are subsidized by business institutions that expect sales to result from their support, it is not surprising that "desirable" lifestyles dominate mass-media imagery. Because the styles of life represented in the media's lens imagery exist only as simulacra, the viewing subject is brought to desire some "thing" that for all practical purposes doesn't exist. Even if the viewer of a media-generated lifestyle image could buy all the objects and re-enact the uses represented in the image, that viewer could not reproduce the hermetic seal of photographic idealization. Burgin (1986) claims "in a (Platonic) word, upon which Jean Baudrillard has elaborated, we are a society of the simulacrum" (p. 169). Our place in society and our notions of what is real are defined in large part by databases and mass-media imagery.

In describing the lens as a prosthetic device, Rosalind Krauss (1985) draws attention to a key complication to the concept of visibility. Our technologies allow us to see around the world, to see both the macro and the micro, and to see both slowly and quickly. These views of the world transcend our original sensual capacities. To the extent that we have come to depend on these same technologies to bring us a "complete experience of the world," they serve to define the visible. Existence has become a product of the mass-media. Our visual perceptions seem to provide us with an ever expanding opportunity to know the world, but this postmodern vision relies less and less on direct physical experience of people or actual objects. Much of our world is ink on paper or illuminated screens.

The many technological and social apparatuses that order vision in postmodern society (Eleftheriotis, 1995), as dominant modes of representation, are more central to our visibility than are an individual's own work or visual literacy. To be fully engaged in our visibility as individuals and as participants in our own culture(s), we must engage with the business of representation. If we are not picture makers, or at least vigorous critics of pictures, then we are passive viewers of a culture that others define.

Strategies

The discussion among photographers concerning the relative merits of straight (realist) and pictorialist (expressive) photography established a polarity that contemporary critics question. These (perhaps false) polarities of objective and subjective meaning are contained within a larger cultural context, with the result that

the study of “visual art”—for so long confined within artificially narrow intellectual and institutional limits—now ranges across the broader spectrum of what [Victor Burgin has] called the “integrated specular regime” of our “mass-media” society. “Art theory,” understood as those interdependent forms of art history, aesthetics, and criticism, which began in the Enlightenment and culminated in the recent period of “high modernism,” is now at an end. In our present so-called “postmodern” era the end of art theory now is identical with the objectives of theories of representations in general: a critical understanding of the modes and means of symbolic articulation of our critical forms of sociality and subjectivity must be contextualized. (Burgin, 1986, p. 204)

In many ways, traditional critical and economic practices still dominate the artworld. But photography, as a popular art, is not as restricted by these fine art institutions. “Photography is too multiple, too useful to other discourses, ever to be wholly contained within the traditional definitions of art. Photography will always exceed the institution of art, always participate in non-art practices, always threaten the insularity of art discourse” (Underhill, 1989, p. 25).

One result of [this] situation is that photography has been more readily accepted as a starting point for an interdisciplinary study that, following the logic of its methods, is [potentially] able to move out into a radical dismantling of social relations without having to bring these discoveries back as nothing more than meanings for the hallowed [artworld] series. (Rifkin, 1988, pp. 162-163)

Lopes (1996) uses the term “demotic pictures” to refer to mundane,

as opposed to art, images (p. 6). "Pictures share language's burden in representing the world and our thoughts about it. And this function of pictures is at the forefront in the demotic rather than the aesthetic" (Lopes, 1996, p. 7). Within this context of photography as a radically accessible and popular practice on the one hand, and a convention-bound institutional practice on the other, I would like to give further examples of work that attempts to reclaim visibility.

Jo Spence (Dennett & Spence, 1982) and Judith Golden (Grundberg & Gauss, 1987) are among those who have used photography to explore the invisibility of being old, plain, female, and sick. Golden's imagery includes somewhat comical self-portraits where parts of her face peer through holes torn in the faces of media celebrities depicted on the cover of *People* magazine (Grundberg & Gauss, 1987). Spence practices a personal form of phototherapy through explicit documentary photographs of the fleshy impact of her own and her mother's surgery (Hoy, 1987). She and a male friend and collaborator presented childhood fantasies about their fathers in family photo album form (Spence, 1987, pp. 24-5). Spence produced an autobiographical text and guidebook designed to document her explorations and to suggest how others might do the same (Spence, 1986). Spence's images are "theoretical" (McGrath, 1987, p. 71), in the same sense that Burgin (1986) used the term with reference to painting.

An expansion of the concept of "conceptual," as it was used to describe that art in the 70s that de-emphasized individual objects in favor of ideas played out through social interaction and technological mechanism, can help us to understand a viewer's emotional response to photographs at a symbolic level. Spence's work is to be taken as Art, but these images of the "unspeakable and invisible" are not only offered as challenging aesthetic objects in the traditional sense (Spence, 1986, p. 71). Spence "suggests that the task at hand for any radical photographic practice is both to unpick the apparently seamless photographic web and simultaneously to weave new meanings" (1986, p. 71). There is a pointed irony in Spence's work being collected in the form of a photographic how-to manual for the invisible. The text acts as a powerful antidote to the multitude of soft-porn photographic manuals on the market, such as *How to Photograph Women—Beautifully* (O'Rourke, 1986), with its amply illustrated selection of poses, costumes, lighting, and make-up tips. It functions as a visual dictionary for creating photographic simulacra.

The historical oppositions of objective and subjective in photography are complicated and made more relevant by Abigail Solomon-Godeau's concern with the politics of representation. In her concluding essay for *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (Neumaier, 1995), Solomon-Godeau introduces a third dimension to representation which she calls "subaltern postmodernism" (Solomon-Godeau, p.304). She describes the projects of photographic artists such as Renee Green, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, or Cindy Sherman, each of whom incorporate aspects of seemingly realist photographic portraiture-of-self in their work. Solomon-Godeau tentatively argues that subaltern postmodernist artists "deploy a form of self-representation that exceeds the personal, [and] can even be considered impersonal" (p. 304). These images challenge existing mass-mediated representations. She suggests that:

If indeed the project of representing women remains an important project for feminism, it must be with the awareness that the women who represent, and the subject of their representations, must navigate on the one hand the legacy of bourgeois individualism that exalts the individual producer, and on the other, the risk of a totalizing or universalizing assumption that the category "woman" is equivalent to the plurality of difference that constitutes the category "women." (p. 310)

The technical and economic accessibility of photography explains, in part, the medium's popularity as an avenue for oppositional cultural practice. It is still true, however, that we tend only to see the work of those (young, feminist, gay, or lesbian) among the invisible who have gained access to the artworld. One of the great fallacies that has grown out of the age of mechanical reproduction is that the value or import of an image somehow inevitably corresponds to the size of its viewing audience. This assumes that the mass production of images, with the distance this puts between an original image (if it exists) and the viewing audience, unavoidably frees that audience from a kind of "false consciousness" implicit in the extreme value placed on the uniqueness of the original art object. Walter Benjamin suggested in 1935 that mechanically reproduced art, "instead of being based on ritual, begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin, 1985, p. 681). This capacity of photography to move the viewer to some form of internal or external "action" depends on its marketability in a

fickled artworld. When Marcel Duchamp complained that "I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty" (Richter, 1966, pp. 207-208), he pinpointed the artworld's capacity to undermine opposition by co-opting it into the institutional fold. The "business" of symbol making is a precarious one that involves mounting effective social criticism within an institutional artworld that will either deny you access to an audience or market you as an "Artist." Economist and former Canada Council Director of Research Harry Hillman-Chartrand has suggested that the artworld today is, in effect, the research and development arm of the advertising industry (Hillman-Chartrand, 1989). Richard Bolton's article, *Enlightened Self Interest: The Avant-Garde in the '80s* (Bolton, 1989, pp. 12-18) with its images of feminist photo-artists Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger as cover-girls for *ARTnews* and any number of ads depicting the desirability of the artworld lifestyle, is explicit evidence of Hillman-Chartrand's claim. Clearly the issue is more complex than this. The use of lens media to produce representations from within specific cultures does not require mass distribution or artworld recognition. However, any advertiser will tell you that you have to get your message out, somehow.

Cultures in Contention (Kahn & Neumaier, 1985) is a good example of a selection of cultural works (some using photography and other lens media) which generally side-step the artworld in favor of representing people and issues that have otherwise been absent from the mainstream media. Much of this work has used the formal presentation and context of advertising or journalistic photography to inject oppositional imagery into the mass-media. In the *SuperBowl* bus ad project (Sisco, 1987), three artists produced photographic poster ads for display on the outside of San Diego city buses. The images drew attention to San Diego's dependence on an impoverished workforce of illegal aliens during the time that the city hosted the *SuperBowl* and was especially sensitive about its image. Fred Lonidier's work with unions involved producing documentary photographs combined with written text that were presented to the union workers as a kind of mirror (Lonidier, 1985). The work of Hans Haacke has used the billboard for explicitly political purposes in an artworld context (Haacke, 1985). The *Guerrilla Girls* have used the full vocabulary of the advertising industry (including, but not limited to photography) to take issues of injustice both within and beyond the artworld "to the streets" (G. Girls, 1995).

Organizations have explored alternative venues for their art work like *Group Material* which have produced a black and white newspaper insert that contained imagery ranging from the traditionally artistic to the overtly political (Group Materials, 1988). These efforts comprise a kind of counter-acculturation that attempts to encourage viewers outside of the artworld to question appearances. They also promote change.

Concerning the imaged world of children, the bulk of images, whether they are framed as advertising, education, entertainment or art, (Corkin, 1990) are the product of an adult vision of childhood. It is reasonable to argue that children are completely invisible in our society because none of the images we see of them are self-produced. Fortunately, there are examples of organizations or individuals trying to give, whether for altruistic or commercial reasons, the apparatus of representation to children. Visible programs, such as *Shooting Back* (Hubbard, 1991, 1994), allow homeless children to document their experiences. Commercially, *The Polaroid Education Project* has moved from its origins in grants to individual innovative teachers/ artists such as Wendy Ewald (1985) and her work with Appalachian children, to a national network that clearly mixes kid-based photography, with more mainstream educational strategies. But if textbooks, teaching resources, and the mass-media in general are an appropriate indicator, children are virtually invisible in our society.

Certainly at some level the goal of self-representation is a foundational assumption of most art education, but the transition from image consumer to critically grounded, effective image producer will require much work. Students need to become visually fluent in the forms of the mass-media and to develop an awareness of the connection between the social and the personal that is embedded in every media image. Art educators must make the transition, as Lopes (1996) has done, from unquestioning acceptance of canonical images to a recognition of the importance of "demotic" or everyday images (p. 5). John Berger (1974) described the importance of photography.

We think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as news items. Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us. (Berger, 1974, p. 294)

The Lens Media's potential for allowing popular input into cultural production, as well as its key role in the mass production of commercial imagery, makes understanding the many uses of the lens media of central importance to the individual's critical participation in contemporary society.

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